

Corinthians – Summary from Session Two

1 Corinthians 1:10–4:21: Divisiveness & Unity – Steps 1 through 5

We began session two with some background on Corinth and the people who lived there. Some of Paul's converts in Corinth were Roman citizens, some were native Greeks, some, like Paul, had a Jewish heritage, and some were former slaves. A highly cosmopolitan city, Corinth was located in Greece, about half way between the ancient cities of Athens and Sparta. The Corinth that Paul found in 50 c.e. was quite different than the city that gave its name to the "League of Corinth" when Philip II rallied all the Greek city-states into a federation for the first time to wage war against Persia (336 b.c.e.). But just as the Greeks had conquered Persia, so had Rome later conquered Greece.

Rome built its empire over several centuries of conquest. The Romans fought a war against the ancient Greek city of Corinth in 146 b.c.e. They sacked and burned the city, slaughtered all the men and sold the women and children into slavery.

Over the centuries, the Romans brought massive numbers of slaves into Rome from conquered lands. The slaves worked on large estates that were built by forcing Roman peasants (many of whom had served in the Roman legions) off their land. Peasants had piled up debt while serving in the legions. So, we had displaced Roman peasants and some freed slaves that made up a large number of urban poor in Rome.

In 44 b.c.e, about a hundred years after Rome had burned the city of Corinth, the Romans reestablished a colony there. They moved many of the urban poor of Rome to Corinth. This included many army veterans (legionnaires) to whom Rome had promised land. Many were also freed slaves (also often veteran soldiers.). There were also descendants of the original Greek population still living there. This colony was part of Rome's structure to insure imperial Roman control of Greece. Paul first visited Corinth about ninety years after the colony had been established by the Romans – so, the original colonizers were mostly dead by this time. The official language was Latin, but Corinth had become somewhat Hellenized by the time Paul arrived and much of the Greek language and Greek culture had also crept back in.

Politically, the power structure was largely based on patronage. Rich freed men could hold public office. Networks of power & influence were headed by elite/wealthy families. Representations of the emperor, honors for the emperor and worship of the emperor pervaded the whole context of public life. Temples, shrines, statues, etc. were everywhere.

Traditional Greek religion was also a factor in colonies like Corinth. The Roman emperor was god, but there were many Greek gods as well. Claudius (Roman emperor) has restored Achaia as a senatorial province in 44 c.e. Corinth was the capital of the Roman province Achaia. It was probably the first Hellenistic city Paul went to that was fully assimilated into the Roman imperial order. He spent 18 months in Corinth from the spring of 50 to the late summer or early fall of 51.

Paul probably preached in several household assemblies in Corinth, as opposed to one big church. Prisca and her husband Aquila, probably had an assembly in their house, as did Stephanas and Gaius, and several others. The letters to the Corinthians were letters from a third-world missionary to a new community of marginalized people in a cosmopolitan city of the Roman Empire – nearly two thousand years ago. Other missionaries had visited during Paul's absence, teaching different ideas. We only hear Paul's half of the story. In his letters he uses innuendo, plays on words, and sarcasm. Paul and his readers often seem not to understand each other. We have to guess what the rival missionaries had been saying and where their source of information was.

We also recognize that the movement Paul was attempting to organize was not a religion. The communities he was writing to were not so much churches as assemblies – similar to political assemblies. His task was monumental. Paul was in the big city extolling the virtues of an apparently failed third world prophet who had been executed by the government as a criminal.

When we read through these two letters of Paul to the Corinthians, we should keep in mind that scholars have estimated that there were actually between five and nine letters from Paul to the community at Corinth – not just the two included in our *New Testaments*. Two of the letters have been lost. Scholars most commonly agree on three other letters, one consisting of *1 Corinthians*; one is a portion of *2 Corinthians*; and one consisting of the balance of *2 Corinthians*. Scholars do not all agree on *how 2 Corinthians* should be divided, but one common convention is indicated below.

Paul's five letters to the Corinthians:

1. The Lost Previous Letter
2. 1 Corinthians
3. The Lost Painful Letter
4. 2 Corinthians 1 – 9
5. 2 Corinthians 10 - 13

Paul's letters are an exercise in problem solving. The arguments he crafts in trying to influence the assemblies in Corinth (and other assemblies he has founded) eventually become the foundation for much of Christian theology. We don't know how successful Paul was in Corinth. We do know that they kept the letters. We also know that the letters have been extremely influential in shaping the Christianity as a largely Gentile religion that grew steadily in the Roman empire for the next 250

years until its growth exploded after the Roman Emperor Constantine became a Christian.

Paul's arguments are often very long and some involve several long complex verses. To understand the arguments, we will attempt to cover an entire argument in a single session, but sometimes they will carry over to a second session.

Paul's letters were meant to be read aloud to the assembly and they usually utilized a standard format:

- Address, greeting and opening thanksgiving.
- Body of the letter including his arguments and instructions.
- Closing exhortation, greetings, and grace.

Paul had been thrown out of Achaia by Gallio and had moved on to Ephesus. *1 Corinthians* was probably written at least two years after he left Corinth, likely in the spring or early summer of 54. He had written one previous letter (called by scholars, *the lost Previous Letter*). The Corinthians had written him at least one letter. He had also gotten reports about them from "Chloe's people", and from a delegation who had visited him.

Paul began the body of the letter with the first step in his argument for unity (1 Corinthians 1:10–17). He asks that the Corinthians stop fighting among themselves. His concerns about divisions in the assembly seem to be related to slogans attached to each rival group's favorite "guru" – perhaps the evangelist who baptized that group. There is a reference to "Chloe's people" in this section. We don't know who Chloe is – though we can guess that she probably is a businesswoman who has a house assembly, quite possibly in Ephesus, but not Corinth. Chloe's people likely had traveled to Corinth on business and returned with a report to Paul.

We also don't know that followers of Cephas (Peter) have been in Corinth. Apollos seems to be the main concern, but Paul may not know who all has been there, so he just throws Cephas' name into the mix to be all inclusive. There were certainly Jews in Corinth and perhaps their expressed concern about diet issues contributed to the division in the community. Baptism, in of itself, was not a problem for Paul. By claiming only to have baptized a few people in Corinth, Paul is not devaluing baptism; he is just saying that his primary role in Corinth was to preach, not to baptize.

A primary objective seems to be to distance himself from the Greek concept of wisdom (Sophia). In the end of this section Paul says "Christ didn't send me to preach the good news with clever words ..." This is a reference to "*wisdom*". Eloquent or clever speech was often associated with wisdom in the Hellenistic culture – tied to benefits of a personal relationship with *sophia or wisdom*. He thinks *wisdom* is getting in the way and creating the division in the community.

The second step in Paul's argument for unity (1 Corinthians 1:18–25) is an attempt to counter the *wisdom (sophia)* that he sees lying behind the divisiveness with the foolishness of the gospel that features the crucified Christ. He quotes *Isaiah 29:14*, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and I will reject the intelligence of the intelligent." He then follows with numerous plays on the word "wisdom", using the word "wisdom" or "wise" nine times in this passage. Paul tells us the Jews ask for signs and the Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified. Christ is God's power and God's wisdom.

Why is the Christ crucified foolishness?

Crucifixion was a Roman form of torture reserved for the lower classes. It was intended as a means of social control. To the well-off "wise" Greeks, it would have been foolish to proclaim and organize a movement around a crucified political criminal as a central symbol. Christ crucified was a "stumbling block to the Jews" because for Jews a true Messiah would not have been crucified. The very idea would have been ridiculous.

In part 2 of the second step (1 Corinthians 1: 26–31) Paul tells his readers that God has overturned the established order. He has shamed the wealthy and powerful aristocracy. Paul also warned about boasting – a standard feature in public oratory closely related with eloquent (wisdom) speech. *Wisdom of Solomon* told us that *Lady Wisdom* confers on pious souls a kingdom, riches, noble birth, and being "wise". Paul however, argued that *Wisdom (Sophia)* is not the way to know God. Paul seems to believe that the excitement of the high spiritual status some members of the assembly attained through their attachment to *Sophia* is a major source of division in the assembly.

Paul concluded this part of the argument (I Corinthians 2: 1 – 5) by describing his own preaching without persuasive wisdom, but with the Spirit and power of Christ. He claims not to have used eloquence (implying that some Corinthians value it highly).

Paul began the third step in his argument for unity (I Corinthians 2:6 – 9) by appearing to change directions – admitting he does speak "wisdom" among the elite. Normal folks cannot understand – but mature (sophisticated Christians) can understand this wisdom. Here he writes in Jewish apocalyptic language (i.e. like that found in *Daniel*) He speaks of mystery that everyone doesn't understand. The leaders who crucified Christ would not have done so if they had truly understood. As he moves through this argument (1 Corinthians 2:10 – 16), we can detect a hint of sarcasm. The style changes and the Corinthians would have been able to identify with the language and concepts he introduces. He seems to say there are two groups of spiritual (1) the merely psychic, and (2) the truly spiritual. The Corinthians can grasp this idea, as they have identified themselves with the mature spiritual group. Only the spiritual people like us can understand this wisdom of the Spirit. They must be the ones who truly understand. But in verse 16, Paul turns on

the Corinthians by asking a rhetorical question from Isaiah, “Who has directed the spirit of the Lord, or as his counselor has instructed him?” Can the Corinthians say they truly understand the mind of God?

The sarcasm bites more deeply in the next few verses (1 Corinthians 3:1–4). The Corinthians apparently considered themselves “spiritual people”, where spiritual is associated with mature, and mature in this culture is traditionally associated with aristocratic, rich, powerful or of noble birth (those good things one aspires to). Paul tells them they certainly have not achieved maturity on the spiritual scale. Their fighting among themselves is evidence of this spiritual immaturity.

This section has not always been understood as sarcasm. Some interpreters have seen Paul’s emphasis on the wisdom of God in this section and Paul’s discussion of a higher spiritual teaching for a Christian elite as providing a link between the crucified Christ and wisdom. That is, it has been suggested that Paul was trying to replace wisdom (*Sophia*) with the “Crucified Christ” which led some within the Hellenistic culture to identify Christ as *Wisdom*. Earlier Jewish writing (e.g. *Wisdom of Solomon*, or *Ecclesiasticus/Sirach*) identified Wisdom as being present at God’s creation. Later Christian writing made the same claim for Christ being present at creation, hence the identification of Christ with Wisdom.

Professor Horsley sees this section as sarcasm. Paul does not, in fact, associate Christ with preexistent Wisdom.

In the fourth step in Paul’s argument for unity (I Corinthians 3:5–9) Paul addresses the Corinthian’s understanding of himself and Apollos and their relationship. It starts with agricultural metaphor – Paul as the planter of the seed and Apollos watering the seed. Both are servants, but it is God that gets the credit for making the seed grow.

Paul considers himself a servant, a preacher of the gospel and supervisor of assemblies of the movement. Paul also considers Apollos to be the same type of servant. Others, including women (e.g. Phoebe) could be servants as well. We should note that Paul also considered himself to be an apostle – a more authoritative role. He never refers to Apollos as an apostle in any of his letters.

Paul moved on with another metaphor, this one about building (I Corinthians 3:10 – 17) which included a warning about building on someone else’s foundation:

- A According to the grace of God given to me,
like a skilled master builder, I laid a foundation
- B and someone else is building on it.
- B’ Each builder must choose with care how to build on it.
- A’ For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid;
That foundation is Jesus Christ.

It is clear from the structure of this argument that Paul is convinced that he has laid a proper foundation (i.e. – one directed by God and based on Jesus Christ). He is not so sure about what Apollos has built upon it. The warning here could certainly apply to the Corinthians themselves as well as Apollos.

Paul has been consistent in this formula. He sees his role as an apostle to the Gentiles in Asia Minor and Macedonia and would not pretend to encroach on Peter's territory – the Jews in and around Judea or Galilee. In his letter to the *Romans*, Paul reiterates that he would not build on someone else's foundation.

Apollos was not a stranger to Paul. He was in Ephesus with Paul at the time Paul wrote this letter (1 Corinthians 16:12). Apollos was Jewish, probably from Alexandria where he perhaps studied with the Jewish scholar Philo. He was more skilled at Greek style oratory than Paul – a more eloquent speaker. He may have been more adept at articulating a coherent theology than Paul could. His exposure to the Christ movement, however, may have been more limited. Paul had been preaching throughout Asia Minor for at least fifteen years. Apollos may have been much newer to the movement.

Paul closes his argument in the fourth step by summarizing his whole argument so far (1 Corinthians 3:18–23).

The fifth step in Paul's argument for unity is a defense of his role as an apostle. He begins with a discussion of himself and Apollos as servants (1 Corinthians 4:1–5). He is not concerned with being judged by the Corinthian community. He will be judged by God alone. If the so-called spirituals in the group have been criticizing him, he knows his commission came from Christ himself and it is Christ who will determine if he has done as he was required to do.

Next, in the fifth and final step in his argument for unity, (1 Corinthians 4:6–13) Paul begins with a series of rhetorical questions to denounce what he sees as the Corinthian's inflation of their spiritual attainment. He sarcastically mocks this presumed spiritual high spiritual status by contrasting it with the suffering he has undergone as an apostle. Finally (1 Corinthians 4:14–21), he reminds the Corinthians that he is their father in Christ. He has sent Timothy (who may have arrived before the letter does) to teach and admonish them. To reestablish his paternal authority, he promises to return soon himself.

Primary Source: *1 Corinthians (Abingdon New Testament Commentaries)*, by Richard A. Horsley, Abingdon Press, 1998.

Secondary Source: *Paul: A Critical Life*, by Jerome Murphy-O'Connor OP, Oxford University Press, New York, 1996

Next Week: *1 Corinthians 5:1 – 11:16 (Argument Against Immorality; Concerning Marriage and Sexual Relations; Argument Concerning Food Offered to Idols; Argument Concerning Hairstyles)*