

CORINTHIANS – Summary from Session Three

1 Corinthians 5:1–6:20: Exhortation About Relations with the Larger Society and Argument Against Immorality

Session three began with a review of Paul’s five step arguments on divisiveness and unity found in the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians. We also included a discussion of the “spirit-people”, who they were, where they came from and why modern New Testament scholars identify the “spirit-people” as a primary source of the problems that Paul was attempting to resolve in this letter.

In the first four chapters Paul seemed to be concerned about divisions in the community created by a group of people who felt they had acquired “wisdom” (*Sophia* in Greek) which put them on a higher level than others in the community. They thought of themselves as filled with the ‘spirit’, wise strong, and honored. Professor Horsley and Professor Murphy-O’Connor both see a clear pattern of parallels between the descriptions used in First Corinthians and Philo’s distinctions between the heavenly man and the earthly man.

Philo of Alexandria (20 b.c.e. – 50 c.e.), a contemporary of Paul, was a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher who lived in Alexandria in the Roman province of Egypt. It has been argued that Philo was influenced by the *Wisdom of Solomon*, a Jewish work written in late first century b.c.e. or early first century c.e. The *Wisdom of Solomon* was written in Greek, probably in Alexandria, and was included in the *Septuagint* (an early Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) and subsequently included in the *Apocrypha*. Alexandria was also presumed to be the home of the grandson of Ben Sira. Ben Sira wrote another book of the *Apocrypha*, *Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach* early in the second century b.c.e. The grandson completed the translation of Ben Sira’s work from Hebrew into Greek in Alexandria in about 117 b.c.e. (Nearly all of the original Hebrew version of this work has been lost.) There is a rich heritage of Jewish Greek wisdom literature emanating from Alexandria in the two hundred years prior to Paul’s letters to the Corinthians.

As was common among Jews in Alexandria at this time, Philo studied both traditional Jewish literature and Greek philosophy. He was more fluent in Greek than in Hebrew and read the Jewish Scriptures from the *Septuagint*. Philo’s understanding of the heavenly and earthly man seemed to form part of the religious outlook of the spirit-people. The body was a point of conflict between the heavenly (spirit-filled) and earthly man. The wisdom of the heavenly man revealed to him that “the body is evil by nature and treacherous to the soul”. Earthly man is a “body lover”. For the spirit-people, the body is always a dead thing, so death would be liberation from the weight and defilement of the body. To recover a body after death would be meaningless, so it is not likely that the spirit-people understood Paul’s preaching of the resurrected Christ in the sense that he intended. They would have seen a purely spiritual Christ as ‘Lord of Glory’ but have had no real concept of Jesus.

Philo combined belittling of the body with his proclamation, “only the wise man is free ... he has the power to do anything and to live as he wishes.” This is quite consistent with the Corinthian spirit-people’s slogans, “all things are lawful to me” and “every sin which a man commits is outside the body”. Since the body was morally irrelevant, indulging in sex or eating whatever they wanted didn’t seem to be a problem to them.

For Philo, possession of the prophetic spirit expressed itself in extasy, madness, and inspired frenzy, since “the mind is evicted at the arrival of the divine spirit”. Paul specifically mentions “frenzy” and inactivity of the mind when he downplays the value of speaking in tongues in chapter 14.

One likely link between the philosophy of Philo and the Corinthians would have been Apollos. Apollos was a member of the Christ movement who had been preaching in Corinth after Paul left. Apollos was also Jewish and from Alexandria, where it is quite likely he had exposure to Philo’s philosophy. There is no mention of Philo in Paul’s letter, so all of this is conjecture. But it is certainly plausible that Apollos could have been the one who introduced Philo’s concept of heavenly man versus earthly man to the Corinthians who became the spirit-people Paul was so concerned about. There is no reason to think that Apollos intentionally subverted Paul’s ministry. Murphy-O’Connor points out, “What (Apollos) said, however, and what his followers understood were not necessarily identical. If they mistook Paul’s meaning so badly, it is improbable that they understood Apollos adequately.”

The issues that Paul responds to throughout this letter are consistent with the assumption that some of the members of the Corinthian community had been exposed to some portions of Philo’s philosophy and had begun to apply what they learned to their lives in the community.

In chapters five and six, Paul began his response to particular Corinthian principles and actions that he viewed as causes of the community divisions. These are based on things that have been reported to him. They are not things he has heard from the Corinthians themselves. Paul dealt with three separate problem areas in this section: expelling one of the members of the community, handling disputes within the community, and immorality. Ultimately, we will find common threads that tie all of these together.

The first specific issue that Paul wrote about in this letter (I Corinthians 5:1 – 5) was a man sleeping with his father’s wife. (i.e. his stepmother, not his mother.) By law, what the man had done was immoral, yet the relationship was not a secret and apparently some in the community approved. (We can assume the man’s father is dead and the stepmother may be the same age or younger than the man.) Paul’s recommendation was to expel the man from the community.

Today, we might see this arrangement (a man having sex with his stepmother) as unusual, strange, weird, or maybe even creepy – but in most states in the U.S. it is not illegal for a man to marry his stepmother. It was often okay for male Jews to marry a dead brother’s widow. At times, that was even encouraged or required. But in Corinth, at the time this letter was written, it was illegal and was considered incest under both Jewish and Roman law for a man to marry his widowed stepmother.

Paul has already judged – said that he would expel the man. But here he left it up to the community to decide what to do. For Paul, this was a change in strategy from a similar situation earlier in Thessalonica where he *required* the church to expel a member of the community. In Corinth, he saw the need for local control – autonomy of the local assembly. He is only giving advice.

Paul also saw Satan as a tool of God to destroy the man's human weakness once he was expelled from the assembly. He hasn't given up on the man yet. He just wanted him out of the community.

As an aside, Paul's statement here about "destruction of the flesh so that his spirit might be saved" has been used by the established church to justify the torture and burning of "sinners", "heretics", and "witches". This illustrates the danger of religious or political leaders assigning themselves the power of community discipline to suppress dissent and social difference. Paul was not advocating torture or burning here. He never advocated doing Satan's work. He hoped for the best for the man but wanted him out of the community. He left the details of what would happen to him up to Satan (and God).

For Paul, the members of the assembly are the people of God and must maintain a rigorous communal discipline (1 Corinthians 5:6 – 8). They must expel the man for their own sake. Paul used imagery from the Jewish Passover ("A little yeast ruins the whole loaf"). Paul would have previously used the Passover story in his preaching so the Corinthians would be familiar with the story and would have understood this metaphor. Paul then shifts to the metaphor of paschal lamb – the lamb sacrificed at Passover. Here he refers to Christ as the "paschal lamb". Paul was concerned about guilt by association and he wanted the community to remain pure if possible.

In the next few verses (1 Corinthians 5:9 – 13) Paul mentioned the "Previous Letter". We don't know what else was in that letter, but apparently, the Corinthians had misread or disregarded what he said about not associating with immoral people. Paul added other immoral groups to his list, perhaps indicating that the man sleeping with his stepmother fit one or more of these groups as well (thieves, greedy, swindler). The man in question may also have been someone of economic means – important to the community, which would help explain the assembly's reluctance to expel him.

For Paul there was a clear distinction between community and the world. Paul doesn't say to avoid all contact with the outside world. That would not be possible. The assembly cannot control the world, but they can control who is included in their community and who should be kicked out.

Professor Horsley introduced an interesting question: "It is possible that both the community and discipline of the community may have existed only in Paul's mind until this point?"

Perhaps these people did not think of themselves as a community. We tend to think of church as a community. But consider attending a very large church where no one seems to really know anyone else. Consider watching a worship service on television. Do these examples constitute communities?

Paul's intent was to create assemblies of followers of the Christ movement, but it is possible that the individuals who made up these assemblies, thought of themselves simply as "individual followers of the Christ movement." Paul may have had an elaborate vision about assemblies throughout Asia Minor and Macedonia that would be prepared when Jesus' *Parousia* occurred and the new world order set in – an event he thought to be imminent. But if the vision, so intuitively obvious to him, had never been fully articulated, maybe no one else really understood. Maybe others saw a group of followers of Christ, where Paul alone saw "community". If there was no community, there would be little need for community discipline.

Paul's primary message was that of eschatological fulfillment – the imminent second coming of Christ and the new world order that would result. The message itself may have contributed to the Corinthians belief that traditional rules and norms had been suspended – that the old morality, including sanctions against sleeping with your stepmother – for example, no longer applied. If this is the end of the world, what difference do the “old rules” make?

In any event, Paul had decided the community needed some structure and discipline that seemed not yet to exist. His hope, through this letter, was to develop some of that structure and discipline.

Continuing with his shocked tone that included sarcasm, accusation, and threat, Paul went on to discuss handling disputes within the community (I Corinthians 6: 1 – 8). He asked rhetorical questions. He sarcastically mocked the Corinthian spirit-people about being “wise”. When the new order comes, they are going to judge the world, but they now are unable to judge the members of their own community?

In wisdom philosophy, the wise person cannot be harmed by insult or injury. So, seeking redress is, of itself, admission of being harmed – already a defeat. Why then, Paul wonders, would one member of the community sue another. The “wise” person would rather be wronged than wrong.

Paul clearly distinguishes between the community and outsiders (1 Corinthians 6:9 – 11). He wants the movement to be open to outsiders, but they are to conduct their internal affairs in separation from the world. For the most part, in most of the west, we have separation of religion and politics (church and state). That was not the case in first century Rome. Paul was pushing to make that distinction. Conversely today, some religious groups want to push their agenda on the political state – sometimes successfully, sometimes not. Paul's primary interest is in separating his assemblies from the corruption of the outside world, not convincing the outside world to follow the rules of the assembly. He reminds the community that some of them used to be like the thieves, greedy and drunks of the outside world.

At this point in the letter Paul began to introduce each new area of concern by quoting “Corinthian principles”. A Corinthian principle is a core saying or slogan that Paul understood to be a fundamental principle guiding the lives of the new spirit-people in Corinth. Paul quoted a Corinthian Principle based on the new freedom brought about by the spirit-people, “All things are lawful for me”, but added his own corollary, “not all things are beneficial” (1 Corinthians 6:12 – 17). “Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach is meant for food” was another Corinthian principle, meaning they can eat whatever they want. It doesn't matter. The Corinthian principle goes on, “and God will destroy both one and the other.” Paul adds his own corollary as counterpoint, “... and the body is meant for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord and will also raise us...”

When Paul wrote this letter, he did not yet have all the conceptual tools which the Corinthian situation forced him to develop. Spirit-people and the baggage they carry were not part of his plan. Perhaps he had anticipated preaching to those who had previously worshiped Greek or Roman gods, but he was not prepared and probably did not completely understand the direction the spirit-people were taking his assembly. His first instinct had been to use sarcasm to mock and ridicule the spirit-people (see again 1 Corinthians 2:6 – 16, or 6:1 – 11), an effort that would ultimately backfire as he appeared to have alienated this group. He seemed to develop an understanding of the complexity of the problem though as he responded to specific issues. His arguments needed to address the situation within the community, as well as to be internally consistent with his vision and the direction he had been given from the Lord. He worked his way

through the problem step by step, attempting to address each issue in the context of his overall vision for the community.

The discussion of food and the body in this chapter serves to lead Paul to his main point in this section – things the body is not to be used for: e.g. fornication (sexual intercourse between people who are not married). He begins his discussion of immorality in 13c. He explains 13c with verse 15 and explains verse 15 in verse 16 & 17.

In 1 Corinthians 6:15, the reference to “Christ” does not mean Jesus Christ, but the community. Paul uses this technique four times in the early part of this letter. Paul means that the community is the physical presence of Jesus Christ in the world. Paul wanted that community to be unified and wanted to rid his assemblies of distractions that got in the way of that unity. Murphy-O’Connor tells us, “The most fundamental ministry of the church is to be the antithesis of a world which is characterized above all by divisions. Within the framework of hostile blocks, individuals are separated from one another by barriers of fear and suspicion. The role of the church is to liberate the captives by revealing the opportunities of freedom in dependence on others.” Paul saw his role, in part, was one of laying the foundation to support that mutual dependence within his communities. He was building a new society (assembly/community) and fornication was a bodily associated function that was not allowed.

Here we are given a glimpse of a significant source of division tied to an ethical aspect of ‘spiritual transcendence’ (1 Corinthians 6:18 – 20). In the Hellenistic-Jewish (e.g. – Philo’s) worldview the soul is separate from the body – body and its needs became a different level of life. Sin was outside the body. Some of the Corinthians think of the body as belonging to a separate inferior level of existence from the true self (the soul or spirit).

For Paul, the self was part of the body and life was fundamentally social, relational, and historical. Salvation consisted in the fulfillment of history effected by God in the Christ event. Fornication is sin against the body. If a member of the community is a part of Christ’s body, and the member sins through fornication that converts the members of Christ into members of a prostitute. The members of the community are not to forget their history – that they have been bought (redeemed) through Christ’s crucifixion.

Next Week: *1 Corinthians 7:1 – 40 (Concerning Marriage and Sexual Relations)*