

Paul and the Corinthians

Exploring 1 Corinthians

These studies are based on Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. In fact, it is not his first letter to the Corinthians, but the first one which has survived. He had quite a correspondence with them. In 1 Cor 5:9 we read: "I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral persons". We also read a little later of a letter which they had sent to Paul: "Now concerning the matters about which you wrote ..." (1 Cor 7:1). He had also received reports from people who had visited him from Corinth and so writes in 1 Cor 1:11, "For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters".

There is more. We have 2 Corinthians, but in it he mentions another letter, sent between 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians. Instead of making a planned visit, he wrote another letter, referred to in 2 Cor 2:1–3 and again in 7:8–9. He explains it in 2 Cor 2:4, "For I wrote to you out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain, but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you." He finally wrote 2 Corinthians. I treat it as a single letter, but others have suggested it might be mixture, including that its final four chapters (2 Cor 10–13) may have originally belonged to that painful letter or even belong to a letter written after 2 Cor 1–9.

Putting all this together along with the mention of his founding visit to Corinth in the Book of Acts we have a sequence of events:

- Paul founds the church at Corinth (Acts 18), where he wrote 1 Thessalonians and met Aquila and Priscilla who with other Jews had been expelled from Rome by Emperor Claudius in 49 CE.
- He stayed there for 18 months (Acts 18:11) and appeared before the proconsul Gallio, who we know from an inscription took up office around mid 51 CE.
- Paul left Corinth returning to Jerusalem and embarked on a third missionary journey during which he spent 2 years and 3 months in Ephesus, 53–55 CE (Acts 19:8–41). He received the Corinthians' letter and reports from Chloe's people while he was there and in response wrote 1 Corinthians.
- He had planned a second visit after visiting Macedonia (1 Cor 16:4), but instead made an unscheduled visit from Ephesus and told the Corinthians then that he would visit them again twice on the way to and on the way back from Macedonia (2 Cor 1:16) but chose to abandon both visits because his unscheduled visit had been a painful experience (2 Cor 2:1), so instead, he sent Titus to Corinth with a confronting letter (2 Cor 2:4; 7:6–8), and set off by land to Macedonia via Troas where he hope to rendezvous with Titus on his return.
- Titus returned, but not till Paul was already in Macedonia (2 Cor 7:6). Paul wrote 2 Corinthians in response to what must have been concerning reports from Corinth, perhaps then even worse ones while he was writing it, accounting for the heightened concern evident in the final four chapters. Apparently, it had a positive effect and so made it comfortable for him to return as planned to Corinth for his third visit (2 Cor 12:14) and to write Romans from there.

Paul had trouble with the Corinthians. Fortunately for us, it meant he needed to try to set them back on the right track and in doing so he has helped us see what does and does not matter in relation to faith and being the church.

There are six sessions:

1. Corinthians, Grow Up! (1 Corinthians 1–4) – 1 Cor 1:10–31
2. Sexual Ethics (1 Corinthians 5–7) – 1 Cor 5:1–2; 6:9–20; 7:1–16
3. Flexibility not Fundamentalism (1 Corinthians 8–10) – 1 Cor 9
4. Together in Worship (1 Corinthians 11) – 1 Cor 11
5. Marks of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12–14) – 1 Cor 12:1–11; 13:1–13
6. Earthing the Future (1 Corinthians 15–16) – 1 Cor 15:1–28, 50–58; 16:1–3

1 Corinthians is a rather long letter so we shall not be focusing on everything that is said. It will be useful to read all the chapters identified for each session, but in the group to read only the selections to which the study will give more attention.

Thus, each study asks you to read a passage or passages from 1 Corinthians, offers you a commentary which brings today's thinking into dialogue with the text, and includes some open-ended questions for you to use as springboards for your own discussion and action. The questions are deliberately very open, so you can have space to bring your own experience and questions to the text and take it where you need to go, which may differ from group to group.

If you are coming together as a group, make sure

- everyone can see everyone else
- everyone is included and is encouraged to participate as they would like
- there is room for people to agree, differ, be clear or confused, and be accepted
- people are encouraged to value each other's input, to listen without using that time to work out what you are going to say and without interrupting, and, when discussing a question, to keep the focus on the question

You will need at least one Bible translation. NRSV is probably best, but others might include NIV or some other new translation. The sessions are designed to last around 60 minutes and encourage you to explore not only what the texts meant on the basis of the latest historical research but also what they might mean for living today.

Making these studies work for you and your group.

Adapt them to suit your group and its preferences. For instance, you can read the passage and the commentary and then look at the questions. Or you could first read the passage and note anything which popped out for you and then read the commentary, section by section, stopping to talk about anything that arises, before going right through to the end and looking at the questions. Or you could start with a general question on the topic before doing one of the above. Or you may want to circulate the studies in advance, so that people have already read the passage and commentary before they come. Then go through it when you come together in one of the ways mentioned above. ... whatever makes the studies work best for you!

For further information on the Revised Common Lectionary see weekly commentaries:

<https://billloader.com/lectionaryindex.html>

These studies are prepared by Emeritus Professor William (Bill) Loader FAHA, a Uniting Church Minister and New Testament researcher and teacher. Photos are his own.

“Corinthians, Grow Up!” (1 Corinthians 1–4)

1 Corinthians 1:10–31

The first four chapters of 1 Corinthians are a puzzle. After his complimentary opening in which he hails the wisdom and gifts of the Corinthians (1:4–7), issues which later appear problematic, Paul launches straight into a major problem. Chloe’s people visiting him from Corinth have reported that there are divisions among the Corinthians (1:11). He explains: “What I mean is that each of you says, ‘I belong to Paul’, or ‘I belong to Apollos’, or ‘I belong to Cephas’, or ‘I belong to Christ’” (1:12). It remains the focus across the four chapters. In 3:4 we find it again: “For when one says, ‘I belong to Paul’, and another, ‘I belong to Apollos’, are you not merely human?” and in 4:6, “I have applied all this to Apollos and myself for your benefit.”

What was going on? Why the divisiveness? Paul founded the church in Corinth and after he left Apollos arrived. In Acts, Luke describes him in the following terms: “Now there came to Ephesus a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria. He was an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures” (18:24) and reports how he then moved to Corinth. Nothing Paul says in these chapters criticises Apollos or his ministry. The problem appears to be those saying, “I belong to Apollos”. Similarly, the problem appears to be those saying, “I am of Cephas (Peter).”



The bridge across to Corinth

There was not one church, let alone a church building in Corinth. There were groups who met in people’s houses, the normal pattern for the first few hundred years of the church. There is no indication that the division was between different house churches, like between denominations. What was going on?

Sometimes, leaders develop their own personality cult, reflecting their own inner sense of inadequacy for which they compensate by seeking admiration from others. Sometimes, they have no such needs, but their followers make heroes or idols of them. The focus of their loyalty is their leader. Instead of seeing their leader as someone who points to God, they give their leader god-like status. People do that with the Bible and declare it to be literally God’s words. Instead of being witnesses to God and God’s word, the biblical writings, themselves, are treated as infallible, as though they are extensions of God. Similar slips in thinking have occurred when people inspired by their pope have gone on to declare the pope infallible or deeply nourished by Holy Communion have gone on to claim its elements magically turn into Christ’s actual body and blood. Valid experiences can lead to invalid explanations.

One can imagine that those who idolised Peter did so because he was a leader, perhaps even the leader, among the first disciples. Paul saw him as very fallible and confronted his behaviour in Antioch, as he tells us in Gal 2:11–14. For when Peter stopped having regular fellowship with non-Jewish believers in Antioch, Paul saw that as a betrayal of the open message of Jesus. That debate

was probably still having an impact among believers in Corinth as it was in Rome to which Paul hoped to go and for which he wrote Romans explaining his position.

Most of the first four chapters is taken up not with Peter but with Apollos and how people saw him. This makes it very likely that Apollos was an impressive speaker with an impressive presence. His fans hailed his wisdom and clever rhetoric. Public speaking was so important in their world. Great people made great speeches and wowed their audiences. Paul makes it very clear that he could not compete. "I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. ⁴My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom" (1 Cor 2:3–4). Here and elsewhere, for instance in 2 Corinthians, he acknowledges that he fell far short of expectations of those looking for dazzling wisdom. His impact was at a different level.

So, this is very personal for Paul as well as being much more profound. Paul not only cannot play the game of rhetorical finesse well. He also sees it as a serious distraction. Against such endeavours at excellence, he sets its opposite, not an achievement of dazzling fame, but the cross. The cross was the very opposite of glory. It was a wretched and cruel form of shaming and ridiculing people. For Paul, the cross represented lowliness and love poured out, a revelation of God's love and God's being. That is how Jesus was. That is how God is. That, he argues, is the power that matters, and so his words cited above, "My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom" continue: "but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God" (1 Cor 2:4–5).

Paul turns the human obsessions with glory upside down. At one level his gospel is weak and absurd. He writes in 1:22 of "Jews" (not as a racial slur – he's one, himself) as representing those who wanted to see God only in glorious signs and wonders. Similarly, he writes of "Greeks" (not of Greeks by race) as representing those in Greco-Roman culture wedded to winning fame by claims to be wise and great orators. In contrast, he declares: "we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor 1:24–25).



Paul has a different value system from those whom he confronts. He is not on an ego trip, delighting that some say, "I belong to Paul". What gave Paul profound joy was being one with Christ and this he saw as the basis also of unity. We are the body of Christ, called to embody the compassion and vulnerability shown in its extreme in Jesus' going all the way in love and compassion, even to death on a cross.

His challenge to these Corinthians who pride themselves on their wisdom and status and on being so advanced in their wisdom and knowledge is: Grow up! “He (God) is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1:30).

The Corinthians are forerunners of all those who twist the Christian gospel to serve their own ends, to justify their wealth and greed, their exclusivity and discrimination, their abuse of power inside the church and beyond it, or their egotism and self-aggrandisement. They are also forerunners of those who make miracle magic and spellbinding oratory the heart of their gospel and not love. Paul in his own way was making clear what is the message we see at the heart of the gospel, such as we find it also on the lips of Jesus according to Mark: “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and give his life a ransom for many” (10:45).

When people make themselves the centre and become obsessed with glory, they make God in that image and then use God as their model for their selfishness. In Christ we see that model of God subverted: God was self-giving in creation, reaching out in compassion in Christ, and showing us that the fruit of the divine Spirit is indeed not power but love.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. What was behind the divisiveness among the Corinthians?
3. In what ways do you see similar issues troubling the church today and how can we best deal with them?

Sexual Ethics (1 Corinthians 5–7)

1 Corinthians 5:1–2; 6:9–20; 7:1–16

There were not only divisions among the believers in Corinth. People were also going off the rails, especially in relation to sexual matters.

Paul addresses one instance already in 5:1–2. A man was sleeping with his father’s wife, his stepmother. How could this happen? Given the common pattern of marriage in both the Jewish and Greco-Roman world, this was bound to happen on occasions. The common pattern was that marriages were arranged between a man around the age of 30 – not insignificantly the age when Jesus chose not to marry – and a woman, a girl, as soon as possible after she began menstruation, so usually around half his age. Fathers feared their daughters’ getting pregnant.

This inequality of age at marriage had widespread implications. One was that men saw their wives as inferior. Obviously, they were inferior in life experience, but then men went on to conclude that they were also inferior by nature, having less control of their emotions and so being more easily seduced and seductive. They needed to be covered up and confined to household management and should normally not engage in public roles. Philosophers and Bible translations and interpreters like Paul backed up these assumptions about women. We can see that such assumptions were based on flawed logic, but we are still having to contend with male assumptions about their superiority.

The instance which Paul addresses reflects the pattern. The young man, child of his father’s first marriage, finds himself living in the same house as his father’s second wife, who is probably about his own age. They begin to sleep together. Such behaviour was unacceptable, even in the Greco-Roman world, and certainly not acceptable in the church community and so had to be confronted. Paul is careful to define this as an issue of church discipline – we still need discipline committees. In the process he clears up a misunderstanding which had apparently arisen from an earlier letter of his. “I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral persons— ¹⁰not at all meaning the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, or idolaters, since you would then need to go out of the world” (1 Cor 5:9–10). Reaching out to such sinners was to be a core concern, but they should never tolerate such behaviour in the church community.

In what follows in 5:3–6:8, Paul urges the groups of believers to rethink their approach to ethics. Their sense of freedom should never tolerate believers engaging in acts of wrongdoing nor should they be fractious and take each other to court. They ought to be able to sort out differences with love and understanding. Paul, then, sums up his message with a list of such acts of wrongdoing: “Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! The sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, those engaged in homosexual acts passively or actively, ¹⁰thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God” (6:9–10).

I have slightly modified the NRSV translation I cite. I replace “fornicators”, a quaint term, with “the sexually immoral” and the somewhat inaccurate translation “male prostitutes, sodomites” with an explanatory paraphrase: “those engaged in homosexual acts passively or actively”. The word translated “male prostitutes” simply means “softies/effeminate” and need not refer to prostitution and the word translated “sodomites” means literally: “male-bedders”, that is, men who take other

men to bed. Paul classes all such action as sinful because he operates with the widespread assumption among fellow Jews of his time that all people are heterosexual and so any homosexual responses must be sinful. We now recognise that this assumption is incorrect. Some people are genuinely homosexual, so that a blanket condemnation is inappropriate.

Next, Paul returns to the theme of freedom which some were apparently using as a justification for wrongdoing. Paul agrees: "All things are lawful for me" (1 Cor 6:12). He may even be citing something he wrote in his letter being quoted back to him, but for Paul, love, not freedom, is the ultimate value. That includes self-love. So he adds: "but not all things are beneficial" and "but I will not be dominated by anything" (1 Cor 6:12). Letting yourself be dominated is not good self-care.

In what follows Paul argues against becoming "one flesh" (citing Gen 2:24) with an "immoral woman", most likely, a "prostitute", given the comment in 6:20 about payment. Paul assumes that the act of sexual intercourse is about more than genital exchange; it affects the whole person. We might even say that the most important sexual organ is the brain. People, he argues, therefore wrong themselves when they allow themselves to become involved with a prostitute in this way. He is writing about men as the main culprits. Paul thinks about systems and networks. You can't be in the Christ network and be networked to a prostitute at the same time.



Paul begins chapter 7 by responding to an issue raised by the Corinthians in their letter. "Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: 'It is well for a man not to touch a woman'." Was he quoting their letter or was their letter quoting him? The latter is perhaps more likely, given his positive response. What did it mean? It is about sexual engagement. Is he saying (to men) that it is bad to have sexual relations? That would not make sense in the light of what he goes on to say, where in some instances he encourages people to marry.

Rather, Paul assumed that Christ would return during his lifetime and that the age to come would be of a different nature where sex would have no place, probably because it would be a sacred place, a heavenly temple. Sex was never allowed in sacred places, in temples. Possibly he assumed also that people would have different, asexual, natures. Mark has Jesus declare: "When they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven" (Mark 12:25). In the light of this, Paul's conclusion was that it is best to forget about marriage and sex. Time is too short and, in any case, in the next life that will have no place. That is why he remained celibate, and chose to live now as he would then. John the Baptist and Jesus did the same.

It appears, however, that some in Corinth went much further and decided that all should live now as they would then, and so should abandon sex and even leave their marriages. Paul's response is: no way! With a touch of realism, he claimed that this might lead to disaster, such as men not coping and so going to prostitutes, for which Corinth had quite a name. Instead, he affirms marriage and not only from the man's point of view. He insists that each partner needs to honour the other (7:2-4). When he writes of "rights", this is not about claiming rights such as in marital rape. He is firmly against the idea that one partner rule over the other. He encourages sexual relations. Interestingly,

in 7:5–6 he makes a concession when they want to devote some days to prayer. This reflects the widespread view that the world of the holy needs to be sexless. But then insists that they return to normal sexual relations. They shouldn't put their marriages under stress.

He is very straight about his own preference for celibacy (7:7) but makes it clear that this is not everyone's calling. A similar point is made on the same issue in Matt 19:10–12. Clearly Paul needs to encourage the Corinthians not to deny the place of marriage. It is part of God's creation. It's better, he thinks, to remain single, but he keeps repeating that being sexually attracted and so finding fulfilment in marriage is not sin (7:28, 36). So, they should not divorce. Here he can quote a saying of Jesus to that effect (7:10–11), but then he adapts it to the new situation. He doesn't treat the saying the way a fundamentalist would. Yes, he says, divorce has to be acceptable when you are married to an unbelieving partner and he or she wants out (7:12–16). Otherwise, he suggests, stay together because God's presence through you will have a positive impact, at least on your children.

Paul makes his preference clear: better to stay single, but he is flexible. In 1 Corinthians 7 he touches on a range of situations: the unmarried, the engaged, fathers with daughters facing the issues of arranging their marriages, widows and widowers. Preferably, don't go ahead, but, if you do, this is acceptable, is his view. It is not sin. In the light of his assumptions about the impending advent of Jesus, his general advice is: don't try to change things. He applies this also to getting circumcised or not or to being a slave with the issue of freedom (7:17–24).

Obviously, we cannot share all of Paul's assumptions after 2000 years. This world's history did not come to end during his lifetime. We can also see how celibacy later found less healthy reasons for its existence, such as that sexual desire was sin and that women were dangerous. Our recognition and respect towards both women and men as equals is very recent and still has a long way to go. Paul sought to ward off the conclusion, based on their view of the world to come, that sex was something bad or unspiritual. His success was limited, but his affirmation of freedom with care for self and others and of sexuality as in itself good and part of God's creation remains.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. Why did Paul and others choose to be celibate?
3. Our world is different from Paul's and our assumptions also differ. What do you see as still of abiding significance and what do you see as no longer able to be assumed?

Flexibility not Fundamentalism (1 Corinthians 8–10)

1 Corinthians 9

In these chapters Paul continues to respond to issues which the Corinthians will have raised in their letter. Again, as in the previous study, we cannot be sure if the words “All of us possess knowledge” (8:1) are theirs or their quoting Paul. As back in chapter 6, Paul does not disagree, but qualifies what is said. Indeed, in 10:23 he repeats what he quoted in 6:12, “All things are lawful”.

In the chapters on either side of 1 Corinthians 9, the chapter to which we give most attention in this study, the issue is how best to deal with the problem of food and idols. His stance is consistent throughout. Yes, “all of us possess knowledge” and so we know, he means, that there is only one God and idols are not gods. That, however, is not enough. We need to go beyond just getting our ideas right. We need to get our relationships right or in other words: the highest priority must always be love and concern for others. Accordingly, Paul suggests, we need to be prepared to forego our rights and avoid causing unnecessary problems for people still struggling with their beliefs in such things.

Similarly, after citing “All things are lawful”, he reminds the Corinthians: “but not all things build up. ²⁴Do not seek your own advantage, but that of others” (10:23). Yes, meat sold in the markets will usually have been slaughtered in one of the pagan temples, but it is just meat, so there is nothing wrong with eating it. However, Paul suggests, there may be situations where it is best not to eat such meat, especially when you are with someone who thinks it is somehow connected to a god or goddess. Love matters most. Love means being flexible.

You should avoid being in any way caught up in the systems and values of popular pagan cults. That would have been difficult for Corinthians used to attending events where honouring such gods was part of the procedure. Paul challenges them to think about it and not be so arrogant as to believe that they are above falling under such influence, just because they have been baptised or have their ideas right. He plays with the story of Israel: just because they escaped Egypt does not mean they escaped sin (10:1–5)!

In chapter 9 Paul addresses criticism launched against himself. Apparently, some had been saying that he showed lack of faith by working part time to support himself instead of letting himself be supported by the church communities. Why does he have to do that? Why doesn't he trust God? His critics could go even further. They and he knew that Jesus sent disciples out two by two and told them to take nothing with them and expect to be provided with all their needs by the households of faith that received them. “The Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel” (9:14). How could Paul ignore Jesus' instructions!



The oldest painting of Paul in a cave in Ephesus from the third century

Paul was well aware of such rules and outlines the rationale for them in some detail, only to say: I chose not to follow this path. He uses the language of “boasting”, which seems a little strange. He does not mean that he wants to boast to others about how good he is. He means rather his sense of what is rewarding, knowing he is doing the right thing. It matters to Paul to have this self-assurance: I’m doing the right thing. The right thing for Paul is: My priority is caring for others. I set aside any claims or right I might have because for me love matters most.

This gives Paul a flexibility to live and act in harmony with what he sees is at the heart of God and is the heart of the gospel. He does not take a fundamentalist approach to scripture or even to the words of Jesus. Love means assessing each new situation in the light of its needs and acting accordingly. It was why most of them had reached the decision not to impose the clear biblical command that non-Jews joining God’s people be circumcised.

It is also why over time we have had to reassess what were previously seen as norms and treated sometimes as absolutes. The long list of rules revisited include allowing women to exercise leadership in ministry, allowing divorce as the most caring option in some circumstances, affirming that some people are gay and so have rights, and much more. Interestingly, we still have the ancient tradition of paying ministers a stipend, a living allowance, not an earned wage. Normally the stipend is at the same level for all, however many years they have served and whatever their skills and qualifications. Here, too, we have the flexibility for other models, including the so-called “worker priest” model, where they may be employed for wages in normal secular employment in order to be able to minister only part-time.

Paul makes love central in the way he handles his faith tradition. It frees him to act sensitively in new situations: to respect cultural norms instead of riding roughshod over people’s expectations because of his freedom to do what his beliefs tell him he has the right to do. “My personal freedom” is not at the centre of his approach; love is. In Jewish contexts he conforms to acceptable norms. In non-Jewish contexts he does the same. In neither does he compromise the gospel or put his rights ahead of the flexibility to be sensitive and responsive.

Paul’s exposition of love is not shallow – do as you like and please everyone. He ends the chapter with an illustration which points to the opposite. Like an athlete running a race, he has a clear goal. What is rewarding for him is being faithful to that goal. That requires thought and discipline. Tough training, punishingly tough at times, as he puts it, belongs to the preparation of those who want to succeed. Taking faith and love seriously requires the same dedication.

For Paul this was all the more difficult because there were groups within the early church who were quick to dismiss him. Already in the first study we saw that some did not find him impressive as a speaker. Later attacks made out that his collection of funds to help the poor in Judea was really about getting money for himself. Some felt that he gave up too much when he welcomed non-Jews without circumcising them, let alone when he shared fellowship with them regularly. That had put him offside with Peter. Some saw him betraying his own people and dismissing Israel as God’s people altogether, to which he would respond in Romans 9–11.

“Am I not an apostle?” (9:1). Eventually the church said: Yes! “Am I not free?” (9:1). Yes, but free for what? To love. It was a rocky road for Paul. Insisting that love matters most often is.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. Why did Paul face such criticism?
3. What is your experience of situations where flexibility has to be the priority and where personal freedom needs to give way to love?

Together in Worship (1 Corinthians 11)

1 Corinthians 11

Do you remember when it was expected that women wear hats in church? That rule was based on our passage. With sensible flexibility of the kind Paul has been illustrating, we have abandoned that requirement. Paul was, however, also a person of his time, sharing the assumptions and norms of his time and some of them he did not question.

As a middle eastern man, he shared the cultural expectations of his time about dress. Women, especially married women, should cover their hair with a veil. Those traditions are present with us these days not in having women wear hats in church but in fellow citizens of Islamic faith maintaining the ancient tradition of veiling, and sometimes, indeed, going beyond that to complete covering. Paul would feel quite at home with them, at least with veiling of hair as a norm.

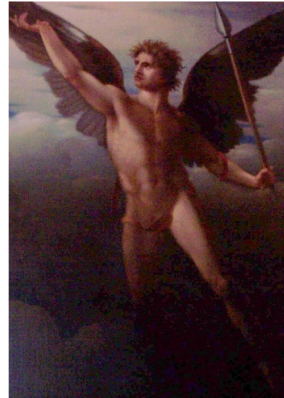
Paul is not happy that some women were asserting their freedom (“all things are lawful for me” again!) and abandoning their veils when they came together for worship. You don’t normally keep your veil on at home. Should you do so in the gathering in someone else’s home as a house church? Paul asserts the norm and seeks to justify it using biblical texts.

He draws on the Genesis creation stories as they had been translated into Greek, the version he was using. That translation makes a closer connection between Gen 1:26–27, seen as the creation of the man, Adam, in God’s image and the creation of the woman described in Gen 2:18–25. It does so by using the same language in translating the two passages in a way that is not present in the original Hebrew. This includes using the language of likeness in both and not just in the former. It also includes using the words, “Let us make” in both, whereas the original Hebrew of 2:18 read, “I shall make”. In the original Hebrew the word *adam* meant a human being as well as a man’s name, Adam. Greek had no equivalent word meaning both human being and a man’s name, so mostly translated *adam* simply by Adam. By doing so it enhanced what was already implied in Genesis 2, namely that the first human being was a male.

As a result of the translation, especially the parallel established between the creation of the man and the creation of the woman, it was possible to read Genesis as implying: the man, the male, was made in the image of God; the woman was made in the image of the man. Paul certainly read it that way. “Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife, and God is the head of Christ” (11:3). “For a man ought not to have his head veiled, since he is the image and reflection of God; but woman is the reflection of man” (11:7). She is under the man’s authority.

Like many of his time, Paul assumed a hierarchy. Women are inferior to men. At the same time, however, he insists that they should be equally loved. Thus, with a touch of humour he reminds men that, yes, the woman was made from the man in Genesis, but all men came from women! (“For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman” 11:12). He nevertheless assumes that standards of dress are part of creation’s natural order as he sees it: “Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is degrading to him, ¹⁵but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory?” (11:14).

He supplements his argument further by adding at one point that women should be veiled “because of the angels” (11:10). He is alluding to the myth according to which some angels found human women attractive, slept with them, and they gave birth to giants, who, in turn, spawned the half human half divine evil spirits which plague humanity with afflictions and illnesses, like personalised viruses. There are traces of this myth in Gen 6:1–4, and by Paul’s time it had been extensively elaborated and much loved and very influential.



Much has had to be undone of what Paul said. You don’t really need to wear hats in church! This is not the case, however, with what follows, where he makes a close connection between Holy Communion and social justice. The tradition he cites in 11:23–25, shows that originally the bread was broken at the beginning of a meal – a standard Jewish way in which the father said grace – and that at the end of the meal (the quaint “after supper” of NRSV means “after the meal”) wine was shared. According to this tradition, Jesus adapted this normal practice by identifying himself and his fate with each act, the breaking at the beginning and the sharing at the end.

At Corinth the practice had developed of doing both the bread breaking and the wine sharing after the meal. We have now cut it loose from the meal setting altogether. The impact of distancing these acts from the meal setting has been that people have focussed on the elements more than on the actions, leading to all kinds of speculation of what “This is my body” and “This is my blood” (not yet the form in Paul’s tradition, but in the gospel versions: e.g. Mark 14:24) meant.



Are they magically transformed somehow into being actually Christ’s body and blood? It is not hard to imagine why outsiders hearing of such gatherings alleged that Christians engaged in cannibalism. When Christians called their gatherings “love feasts”, outsiders’ imaginations went wild. Cannibalism and debauchery!



The Last Meal scene from St Catherine’s monastery, Arequipa, Peru, shows participants as Spanish – alas, except for Judas, pictured as an Inca

To discern or understand the body and what Holy Communion means is essential if it is not to become some kind of magical event unrelated to reality, as perhaps had been happening in Corinth. Taking the bread and sharing the cup meant opening oneself to the impact of Jesus and in that sense to the sphere of his love and power. Elsewhere Paul speaks of entering this sphere as entering Christ’s living body. Already in 10:16–17 he wrote: “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?”¹⁷Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.” In chapter 12 he says more. History shows, alas, that communion has too often divided believers.

It made no sense to celebrate this oneness, however, when some members at Corinth were hungry, turned up late because of their work, and received only the bread and wine and nothing more, whereas the well-to-do had shared a meal together beforehand. They should wait for the poor members, Paul argues, and, if they must, let them eat something at home before coming. These are serious divisions and abuses which concern Paul (11:18). While they may be having communion, Paul alleges that they are not really celebrating communion at all but its opposite.

When Jesus identified himself and his life with these acts, he was doing so within what was in reality a celebration of hope. That hope, shared also by others, such as the Pharisees, was that one day God would bring all together in a great feast. Some envisioned that as exclusive and something only for their group. Jesus, by contrast, saw it as something to which all, the worthy and the so-called unworthy, were welcome. It was his favourite image of hope and the vision which he made his life agenda, for which he lived and died. Paul understood well that to share that meal was to share that vision and that agenda. It has not always been easy to remain in touch with what this sacrament really means.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. How could Paul affirm God's love for women and yet see them as inferior to men?
3. Holy Communion – what does it mean for you and your church? What do you think survives of its meaning and what is lost? Does it matter?

Marks of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12–14)

1 Corinthians 12:1–11; 13:1–13

“Concerning spiritual gifts” – perhaps this was another issue raised in the letter from the Corinthians. It would seem to be hardly necessary to state “that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says ‘Let Jesus be cursed!’” (12:3). Obviously! But Paul’s comment has a sharp edge. In effect, he will say, that is what you are doing by the way you have been behaving. Just before saying that he mentions how they used to be carried away in their former religious practices. Can they equally be carried away with spiritual gifts? Paul would say: yes, indeed.

As in the previous chapters, his concern here is with unity. Whatever gifts one may have which differ from the gifts others have, there is one Spirit, one Lord, one God. Gifts are “for the common good” (12:7), not for spiritual self-indulgence, let alone competition or disregard of others. Paul understands gifts not in terms of a person’s natural attributes (a good speaker, singer, etc.), but in terms of what people are inspired and empowered to do because of their openness to God and God’s Spirit. It may sound like he thinks that these abilities are distributed randomly by God, but this is almost certainly not so.

His list of gifts includes elements which seem very straightforward. Some will be inspired to teach and lead with wisdom and discernment. He includes acts of healing, which we might view differently with different explanations, but which they would have seen as brought about by touch or spoken word inspired by the Spirit.

Speaking in tongues was the phenomenon of people uttering sounds spontaneously, often as a form of release or as an act of openness. People did so in response to their sense of God’s presence, as they also did in other religions of the time and some still do. It was a form of behaviour with which we are largely unfamiliar. I have had conversations with people who could choose to make such utterances to report what they heard someone else doing. They could speak in tongues at will, by way of illustration. In other words it is a behaviour very much under the control of the person choosing to use it. Paul will go on to say that you can even commit sin by speaking in tongues. Paul is not against it as a form of expression of his day and some today still find it a way of expressing themselves before God.

Paul goes on to speak of what it means to be community by using a popular image of his time used in this context: the human body and its diverse parts belonging together. He connects it to his understanding of faith as bringing us into the sphere of Christ’s influence, understood as a body. The focus is union. All are baptised into that one body and so together become that body. Those open to Christ and the Spirit embody God’s life. In Galatians 3:28 he has a fuller expression: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

With a touch of humour Paul points out that it makes no sense to discriminate between body parts, as though some are not needed, or some are better than others. All belong. Paul stresses solidarity: “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together

with it" (12:26). He then goes on to list particular roles within the church: "first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues."

While not declaring a hierarchy, Paul nevertheless sees some gifted roles as more important than others and urges the Corinthians: "strive for the greater gifts". The phenomenon of speaking in tongues comes low on the list. He then points to what he describes as "a still more excellent way", careful not to denigrate any of those gifts and experiences but to put them in proper perspective. Not handled appropriately they could lead to getting carried away and effectively cursing rather than honouring Jesus, the danger to which he drew attention in 12:1-3.

Paul's famous love chapter puts things in perspective as it seeks to identify the true mark of the Spirit, of God's presence in people's lives. In Galatians in describing the fruit of the Spirit he puts love first and then adds what are really variations on love: "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control" (Gal 2:22-23).



For all its beauty as a statement, Paul's declaration about love is very confronting and geared to address what was happening in Corinth. Speaking in tongues is just noise without love. The same applies to other so-called gifts and spiritual achievements. As in Galatians, Paul spells out what love means in practice, exhibiting his rhetorical skills. The neat linkages in 13:7 ("it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things") are not saying one should believe everything one is told. They are a rhetorical way of saying: be open!

Paul is spelling out what is fundamental for his faith and theology. God is loving. Christ showed that. The Spirit inspires that. To be the community of faith means first and foremost being a place where such love is celebrated and practiced. That has not been happening at Corinth. This has been Paul's way of saying: God is love. That is the main substance of his belief and mainstay of hope.

In chapter 14 Paul treads carefully as he seeks to put speaking in tongues in its place. He does not oppose it but clearly sees actions which build up the community and which make sense to potential outsiders coming in as having higher priority. Paul encourages the Corinthians to think about what they are doing and not simply behave without realising the impact of what they do. Claiming they can do as they like as the Spirit moves them makes no sense. Paul brings them down to earth: "The spirits of prophets are subject to the prophets" (14:32). That applies to all who claim inspiration.

In 14:33-36 Paul puts women in their place – as he sees it. Conforming to the norms of the time – like with wearing veils in chapter 11 – Paul insists that women should normally remain silent in church gatherings. Engaging in public discourse was not normally acceptable in their world. Those praying or making prophetic utterances whom he mentions in chapter 11 are to be seen as exceptions, as are the women in leadership whom he mentions in Romans 16. Such were the norms of his time about how to do things "decently and in order" (14:39). It would take time, centuries, for such assumptions to be questioned and for the contexts which informed them to change. Paul was a

man of his time offering us therefore highs and lows.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. What is the best evidence for the movement of God's Spirit according to Paul? What were the alternative views?
3. How relevant are Paul's observations for Christian community today and what would you want to add?

Earthing the Future (1 Corinthians 15–16)

1 Corinthians 15:1–28, 50–58; 16:1–3

“Faith, hope, and love; but the greatest of these is love” – so ends 1 Corinthians 13, but this does not mean that faith and hope do not matter. In chapter 15 Paul addresses hope on the basis of faith. As in earlier chapters, he is addressing issues which had arisen in Corinth. We see that in 15:12, “Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?”

What were these people saying? It was most unlikely that they were denying life after death. Immortality of the soul was a widely held belief. Some saw that as enough and had no place in their thinking for having that soul fit back into a body. They probably saw the body as like a cage in which the soul was trapped. Some philosophers of the time spoke of the body as like a tomb. Even worse, some decried the body as a constant source of pain and discomfort, perhaps even as evil. That is not hard to imagine given some people’s experiences. Some later movements claiming secret knowledge (called *gnosis* and so giving the name Gnosticism to their movement) saw the body, indeed the material world, as the creation of demonic forces designed to trap the divine light present in each person.

There is no indication that these Corinthians had gone that far, but it does seem clear that they envisaged future hope as not encumbered by a body. At an earlier point in the letter Paul wrote: “Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Quite apart from us you have become kings! Indeed, I wish that you had become kings, so that we might be kings with you!” (1 Cor 4:8). It seems that some felt they had arrived, elevated to a spiritual level, no longer needing to be concerned with earthly matters, ready to drop off their bodies like an encumbrance. Paul tries to bring them down to earth.

Paul had very different ideas about the future. He shared a common view among Jews of the period that people cannot really exist without a body. His Jewish tradition had taught that one day God would bring everyone back to life and make them face a day of judgement. Being brought back to life meant being embodied again, a resurrection of the dead. Embodiment meant also community and togetherness, something lost when people thought only of their own souls.

Future hope entails a deal of imagination. Some imagined souls being held in containers until that last day, a kind of half-life, like just a flicker of light as with a pilot light. They called the realm of the dead Sheol. Souls in Sheol are not really alive. As Psalm 6 puts it, “In death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who can give you praise?” (Ps 6:5). In Greco-Roman culture the abode of the dead was called Hades, literally the place of not seeing. In both Jewish and Greco-Roman cultures views varied somewhat, from those seeing the dead as semi-existing shades to those seeing such souls as having a level of consciousness.



When Paul, himself, contemplates in Philippians the possibility that he might die before the last day, he speaks of going to “depart and be with Christ” as something very positive, clearly assuming a level of consciousness (1:23). When he writes 1 Corinthians and earlier, 1 Thessalonians, he still clearly assumes that the day of resurrection and judgement would occur in his lifetime.

In 1 Thessalonians 4 he writes: “For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. ¹⁶For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord for ever” (4:15–17).

In 1 Corinthians 15 he writes similarly: “Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, ⁵²in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.”

We must not press the details as if to reconstruct a future historical event. Paul was using common imagery. This is more like abstract art than a photograph of the future, but the margins between reality and imagination were not always clear. These statements just cited tell us important information about how Paul and others imagined the last day.

Paul assumed two events: “the dead will be raised” and of those still alive: “we will be changed”. Those still alive will be transformed in an instant. As he explains earlier in chapter 15, Paul does not envisage the resurrection body as a resuscitation of the physical body of those who had died. It is raised not as a physical body but a spiritual body: “It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body” (15:44). Some Jewish writers could envisage those with a spiritual body looking down onto earth at their physical bodies. Most saw it differently. They envisaged that the body was transformed, metamorphosed, so that it became a spiritual body – without remainder, no flesh and bones leftover. This makes sense of Paul’s saying that those who would be still alive on the last day would also undergo such a transformation. They, too, will be “changed”.

This is also how he and his fellow believers understood Jesus’ resurrection. Hence the stories of his appearing and disappearing and his tomb being empty. It had to be, if he had been raised from the dead in the way they understood it. We see this understanding also in the highly symbolic story of Jesus’ transfiguration, which depicts what people saw would be a future reality. Thus, Jesus is seen as “changed”, having a transfigured, transformed, shiny body, his resurrection body.

The Easter stories in Luke make this body as real as possible, with artistic licence, even having Jesus eat, but retain the fundamental idea that Jesus could suddenly materialise and dematerialise again. Luke’s artistry developed a symbolic timeline which had Jesus bring his set of appearances to an end with his ascension on the 40th day. Nowhere else, however, is such a timeline assumed. Paul claims that the risen Jesus met him on the road to Damascus, a story, even Luke knows, which happened much later.

Paul argues against the view of some at Corinth that there will be no resurrection from the dead. He suggests that that would make no sense of their quaint practice of performing baptisms on behalf of dead people (15:29). He does so, above all, however, by appealing to the tradition handed onto him

about Jesus' resurrection in 15:3–5. It is our earliest reference to Jesus' resurrection. It not only reports Jesus' resurrection but cites the evidence, beginning with an appearance to Simon Peter (Cephas). Peter appears to be crucial. We find him cited as the first witness to Jesus' resurrection also in Luke 24:34 and behind Mark 16:7, which assumes the appearance took place in Galilee. The story of Peter spawned other stories and may well lie behind the traditions which saw him as the church's foundation.

Paul mentions other appearances – to the twelve, over 500, James, the apostles, and finally himself. No mention of the women at the empty tomb, but an empty tomb will have been assumed and the tradition about the women and Mary Magdalene appears to have developed early, from Mark's account where an angel spoke to them and they failed to pass the message on (Mark 16:7–8) to John's gospel which makes Mary Magdalene a first witness (John 20:11–18).

Why did Jesus' resurrection matter? It was not that suddenly people came to the belief that there would be a future resurrection of the dead. Jesus and his first followers shared belief in the day of resurrection with many of their fellow Jews already. The unique claim about Jesus was that he was already raised – in advance! That was major affirmation from God: Jesus really was acting on God's behalf. It will also have persuaded his first followers that they were in the last days and that very soon Jesus would return, and the day of resurrection and judgement would begin. That is why they flocked to Jerusalem because that was where traditional expectation held that God would launch the event. Resurrection was about community, the good news of the reign of God, of justice and peace, of the great feast. It was about to happen!

The intense expectation of being in the last days persisted for some time. Paul expected to see it in his lifetime. It faded over time and from 2000 years later we see it in its context and have to reinterpret its meaning and symbolism. The increased focus on eternal life as sharing God's life now and beyond death, especially as developed in the Gospel according to John's creative retelling of Jesus' message, tended to relegate beliefs about Jesus' return, the day of judgement and resurrection to an appendix which would add little. Sometimes along with that, the focus moved away from being primarily on community and towards individual salvation and individualism.

We continue to affirm resurrection as symbolising God's yes to Jesus. We continue to affirm that hope entails the security that our future lies in the hands of God. We continue to affirm the human body as not something evil but essential to our being (we *are* our body!) and so also as essential to any hope of future existence with God, even if we have no way of defining how that may be. Resurrection faith has less to do in that sense with imagining the future than with affirming that in the end there is God and God loves and we have no need to fear. In that sense, if God is love is the only detail which we can be sure of, that is more than enough. The rest is imagery and imagination.

Paul's final chapter brings us back to earth with greetings and practical matters, not least the sense of community. These include collecting money for the poor faced with famine in Judea. Paul's spirituality was grounded in the reality of real human need. The Corinthians' flights of fantasy into the spiritual and denial of human embodiment and human need have no place. Oneness with God in real love matters most and that faith is the ground of hope here and beyond.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?

2. Why did resurrection from the dead matter to Paul? Why not just believe in the individual's immortal soul?
3. How do you think about hope – and why? What has Jesus got to do with it?