

Ugly beautiful

1 Corinthians (chapters 1-16)

Leaders' notes and 26 sample studies

Barneys Broadway

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Background notes

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The Ancient City of Corinth

Geography and Population: Ancient Corinth was situated on a narrow *isthmus* (a strip of land connecting two larger areas with water on either side) linking northern and southern Achaia (modern day Greece). Corinth was the largest city that Paul had encountered with a population of around 250,000 people.

Importance: Corinth was an important center of trade and commerce flanked by two seaports on either side of the isthmus. Ships, instead of sailing the treacherous waters around the southern part of Achaia, would unload their cargo and march 200 miles across the isthmus. Corinth also held the Isthmian Games, which were second in importance only to the Olympic Games.

Culture: Corinth's commercial prosperity created a melting pot of culture, language, and religion. As such, Corinth was deeply beset by pagan idolatry and philosophy. A number of prominent temples dedicated to Greek deities were in Corinth, the most important being the temples of Aphrodite (goddess of love), Apollo (god of the sun and music), and Asklepios (god of healing). Sexual immorality was pervasive throughout Corinth's temples and its port-city life.

Paul in Corinth

Paul was in Corinth for about a year and half (from c.50 AD), before journeying on to Ephesus on his third missionary journey (c.52-57 AD). It was in Ephesus that Paul began to hear word of problems arising in the Corinthian church and consequently wrote them a series of letters. 1 Corinthians (c.54 AD) is the first of two *canonical* letters written to the church in Corinth.

The Church in Corinth

After Paul left Corinth, a number of problems emerged in the Church. Failure to distinguish between worldly and Godly wisdom led to divisions, and Paul's authority as an apostle was questioned. Doubts arose concerning the resurrection of Christ and the future resurrection of the dead. This led to worldliness, individualism and a pre-occupation with spiritual gifts among the Corinthian Christians. Numerous public scandals: sexual immorality, law suits

amongst believers, factions in the Lord's Supper, and chaos in meetings, marred the reputation of the Church. The Corinthian believers were called to be a holy people. Instead, they acted like the world around them, and at times did worse! Paul addresses all these issues in 1 Corinthians, reminding the church that they have been 'sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people' (1 Corinthians 1:2b).

In a Nutshell... Paul urges the Corinthian church to put away division, immorality, worldliness and disorder. Instead, they should strive for unity by building each other up, remembering that both the individual and the church is the dwelling place of God's Spirit.

How these sample studies work

- The first couple of questions in *Introduction* raise some general issues to think about.
- *Observation* is about getting the detail – reading the passage and seeing what it is about. *Interpretation* aims to take you to some issues in and behind the passage – to help us to think at a little more depth. Sometimes *Observation* and *Interpretation* are combined in the form of interviews, role plays, questions, charts, etc.
- *Application / Implications* seeks to help us think about applying this section of Scripture.
- Each study finishes with suggestions for prayer.

These grey boxes will provide additional context to aid you in your preparation.

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Study 1. 1Cor 1:1-9

Mike Paget

Big idea: the church is both ugly and beautiful all at once – it is beautiful in Christ, and that makes it possible for it to become beautiful, too.

How would you like to be described by those who know you?

Paul's letter to the church in Corinth is a mash-up of genres. For the first 3 verses it follows the standard Graeco-Roman model: from (v.1), to (v.2) and greetings (v.3). In vv.4-9, though, it becomes very Hebrew, full of thanksgiving for and reflection upon the work of God. Let's start at the beginning.

Observation and interpretation

The author of this letter is Paul (v.1). What do you know about him?

Have a look at the following passages to fill this out:

Acts 7:54-8:1; 9:1-31; 11:25-30; 16:37-38; 22:3

Phil 3:1-6

2 Cor 11:21-12:10

Paul describes himself as an 'apostle', which literally means 'one sent out', and implies a special commission and message. Who made Paul an apostle?

Read the following and note down what else the New Testament says about the role of apostle.

1 Cor 4:9

1 Cor 12:28

2 Cor 12:12

1 Thess 2:6

1 Tim 2:7

What is the difference between a local church pastor and an apostle?

Read Acts 18:1-18. What is the connection between Paul and the church in Corinth?

Notice that the name 'Sosthenes' appears in both Acts 18:17 and 1 Cor 1:2. It is quite likely that they refer to the same person: Paul usually only mentions names in his letters if they are familiar to the recipients. Sosthenes may have been converted during Paul's ministry in Corinth, and then accompanied him onwards as a secretary or scribe.

In v.4, Paul begins by thanking God for the Corinthian church. This can be a little surprising, once you've gone on to read their problems as a church. Have a quick look over the following passages and see what they are:

1 Cor 1:10-11

1 Cor 3:1-4

1 Cor 4:8-14

1 Cor 4:18-21

1 Cor 5:1-2

1 Cor 6:1-8

1 Cor 6:15-18

1 Cor 7:1-2

1 Cor 8:1

1 Cor 8:7-13

1 Cor 10:14-15

1 Cor 11:17-22

1 Cor 14:20-23

1 Cor 15:12

1 Cor 15:33-34

The city of Corinth was wealthy, proud, sophisticated, international and sexually promiscuous. A lot like Sydney, really. How do you think the problems above are connected with being a church in a big city?

Application / Implications

Let's come back, then, to v.2.

It is almost certain that there were a number of house churches in Corinth. In light of what you have read, why do you think that Paul calls them 'church', in the singular?

Paul also reminds the Corinthians that there are many others who call who call on the name of Jesus. What does it mean to be part of a bigger family? What are the consequences for us of forgetting this? How do you think we might learn from our brothers and sisters around the world?

Paul describes the Corinthian church as both 'sanctified in Christ Jesus' and 'called to be his holy people'. Even though they are very different words in English, they share the same root in Greek. You might like to read 'sanctified' as "holified". The word holy means 'set apart for God's special purpose and use.' So Paul first describes the Corinthian church as already having been made holy (even though they don't look very holy at all!), and then secondly, called to become holy.

How do you think both can be true at the same time (see also Heb 10:10,14)?

If you had to choose, would you be more likely to describe yourself as 'holy' or 'becoming holy'? What difference do you think that this makes for how you think about yourself? What difference does it make in how you live? How do you think that holding the two together would change you?

Unless you come to believe that Christ has made you holy, special to God, you will never begin to become holy. Instead, you will live in fear and anxiety. It is love that produces change. So a change to more holy living is always built on a growing confidence in Christ as our holy standing. Or, in other words, our sanctification always rests on our trust in justification by faith. Here is what the Belgic Confession (1561) says: 'We believe that this true faith being wrought in man by the hearing of the Word of God, and the operation of

the Holy Ghost, does regenerate and make him a new man, causing him to live a new life, and freeing him from the bondage of sin. Therefore it is so far from being true, that this justifying faith makes men remiss in a pious and holy life, that on the contrary without it they would never do anything out of love to God, but only out of self-love or fear of damnation.'

Prayer ideas

Pray that your group will come to see themselves as those truly holy before God.

Pray that each member of your group will strive to become more holy. Perhaps share an area where you need help to change.

Study 2. 1Cor 1:10-2:5

Mike Paget

Big idea: we are called to be united in the gospel, not by our culture

What are some examples of people 'united' in a cause or community? What are the positives and negatives or your examples?

Do you feel united at Barneys? By what? What does this look like?

Observation and interpretation

Paul 'appeals' to the church in Corinth for 'unity'. This is strong and earnest language. His plea is 'that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought' (v.10).

What do you think is going on amongst the Corinthians (vv.11-12)?

This passage has a lot to say about wisdom, and how real wisdom brings unity. Here is how A.W. Tozer and J.I. Packer define wisdom:

"In the Holy Scriptures wisdom, when used of God and good men, always carries a strong moral connotation. It is conceived as being pure, loving, and good.... Wisdom, among other things, is the ability to devise perfect ends and to achieve those ends by the most perfect means. It sees the end from the beginning, so there can be no need to guess or conjecture. Wisdom sees everything in focus, each in proper relation to all, and is thus able to work toward predestined goals with flawless precision."

- A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, p. 66.

"Wisdom is the power to see, and the inclination to choose, the best and highest goal, together with the surest means of attaining it. Wisdom is, in fact, the practical side of moral goodness. As such, it is found in its fulness only in God. He alone is naturally and entirely and invariable wise."

- J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 80.

One of the problems seems to be that different subcultures within the church have found each found a teacher, with his particular style and emphasis, that resonates with that culture - that appears 'wise'. What is the

problem with trying to find a way of telling the gospel that seems wise to our culture (or to us!)? (1 Cor 1:20-25)

What do we learn about the Corinthian church? (1 Cor 1:26-27) How is it similar/different to Barneys?

How has God chosen the foolish, weak and lowly things, and the things that aren't, to shame the wise, noble and strong things, and the things that are (hint: it has to do with Jesus, not us!)? (1 Cor 1:28-30) How is this encouraging? How is it a warning?

Paul says that instead of the false wisdom of the world, we should go with God's wisdom: Jesus. What does it mean for Jesus to become 'wisdom from God' (v.30)?

What does it mean to boast in the Lord (1:31)? How does it compare to the more usual boasting of our culture?

Application / Implications

Not all unity is good, and not all division is bad.

There is unity that is godly. Jesus prayed for it: "that they may be one as we are one" (John 17:11, 22).

There is unity that is ungodly. The tower-builders of Genesis sought it: "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth" (Gen 11:4).

There is division that is godly. The one who prayed, "that they may be one" also said, "Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division" (Luke 12:51).

There is division that is ungodly. Paul warned us, "watch out for those who cause divisions" (Rom 16:17).

- John Woodhouse, 'When to unite and when to divide'

Being united in God's wisdom - rather than our culture etc - means we aren't just united in an ideology, but in a person (1 Cor 2:1-4). What difference does this make?

Being united to Christ has some pretty big pastoral implications, both individual and corporate. Rory Shiner describes one individual implication:

Imagine yourself at the airport, about to board a plane. The plane is on its way to sunny Melbourne, and Melbourne is where you want to be. What relationship do you need to have with the plane at this point?

Would it help to be under the plane, to submit yourself to the plane's eminent authority in the whole flying-to-Melbourne thing? Or would it help to be inspired by the plane? To watch it fly off and whisper "One day, I hope to do that too". What about following the plane? You know the plane is going to Melbourne, and so it stands to reason that if you take note of the direction it goes and pursue it then you too will end up there.

Of course, the key relationship you need with the plane is not to be under it, behind it, or inspired by it. You need to be in it. Why? Because, by being in the plane, what happens to the plane will also happen to you. The question "Did you get to Melbourne?" will be part of a larger question: "Did the plane get to Melbourne?" If the answer to the second question is yes, and if you were in the plane, then what happened to the plane will also have happened to you.

I think, at heart, the biblical idea of being in Christ is something like that. According to the New Testament, to be in Christ is to say that, by union with him, whatever is true of him is now true of us. He died, we died. He is raised, we are (and will be) raised. He is vindicated, we are vindicated. He is loved, we are loved. And so on, all because we are in him....

Now, if your mental image of your relationship to God through Christ is that of a lover-relationship, a friendship, or of following God, then the language of 'closer' or 'far away' makes sense. But not if you are united to Christ.

Grasping the nature of our union with Christ challenges our very language of 'getting close to God'. We say, "I want to get closer to God". And union with Christ says: "Really? How close to God do you want to get? How do you intend to pull that off? To which part of the universe do you plan to move to secure this 'closer to God' status?"

If you know yourself to be in Christ, then surely you are now, presently, in all your brokenness, as close to God as it is possible for any person to be— because you are in Christ. And, if you are in Christ, united to Christ, then the answer to the question "How close am I to God?" is subsumed by the larger question "How close is Christ to God?" If Jesus Christ is as close to God as the only Son of the Father, the beloved of God, the object of the affections of the heart of the Father, and if you are in Christ, then the language of getting closer to God needs re-thinking.

- Rory Shiner, *Union with Christ*, pp.13-15

How are not living as if this is true for you?

Being united in Christ, we are united with each other in Christ. How can we prize the 'wisdom' of our world so that it becomes a barrier to this kind of unity?

Are there some ways in which you think we should be united, but aren't?

Are there some ways in which you should be divided from others, but aren't?

What could you do to change this? What would this look like inside the church? What would it look like from outside?

Prayer ideas

Confess areas where you have been a source of disunity

Pray for churches in the local area that share in the unity of the gospel

Study 3. 1Cor 1:26-2:5

Erica Hamence

The upside-down nature of the cross – what is considered wise is actually foolish, and what is considered powerful is actually weak, and vice versa - is demonstrated in both the church members' experiences and Paul's ministry amongst them.

This passage contrasts two views of wisdom and power, and foolishness and weakness. To help you get into these themes, consider the cultural context of Corinth. It had been a wealthy and significant city in Greece, and a centre of philosophy. You can imagine then, that the citizens would have valued power and the intellect. The majority of the Christians in the church in Corinth would have come from pagan backgrounds, being shaped by these values. At the same time, however, according to Paul in this section most of them were 'ordinary' - perhaps tradespeople and workers - rather than rich and powerful. In this context, it appears that there were others in the church who exploited their relative power, and those who dismissed the gospel message as 'foolishness' and 'weakness', preaching instead a more sophisticated-sounding message. How were these Christians to understand their position before God, when what they believed seemed ridiculous to those outside and even within their church?

Observation and interpretation

Read vv26-31.

According to Paul, where would the Christians in the Corinthian church have sat in a social hierarchy?

Why do you think Paul is reminding them of this?

- See the passage immediately preceding, especially v. 25.

In verses 27 - 29 Paul says 'God chose' three times.

Why do you think he is emphasising God's choice? (What did God choose, and why?)

What kind of weakness and foolishness is Paul talking about here?

What kind of wisdom and power is Paul talking about?

- What exactly is Paul contrasting here?
- See vv. 21-25 if you need a refresher.

In what way could 'weak' and 'foolish' things 'shame' the 'wise' and the 'strong'? (v. 27)

What does real wisdom from God look like?

How do you become wise, according to Paul? (v. 30)

In what way does being 'in Jesus' transform a believer?

What kind of boasting does Paul say is prohibited by this new wisdom?

What kind of boasting does Paul indicate that God wants instead? (vv. 29-31)

Boasting is another way of talking about what we think gives us status - with God, and with others. What we 'boast' about indicates what we think qualifies us what we think justifies us and what we think gives us our standing.

Read 2:1-5

In what way does Paul model this understanding of real wisdom in his own ministry and preaching?

What would have been lost if Paul had chosen to focus on impressing the Corinthians with sophisticated language and showy performances?

Application / Implications

In what ways do you relate to the people Paul is writing to? Do you feel weak and foolish, or do you feel powerful and wise?

What do the people in your university, College, workplace regard as impressive and intelligent? What do they dismiss and disregard?

In what ways are you tempted to have your view of yourself be shaped by their standards?

In what ways are you tempted to have your view of Jesus' life, death and resurrection be shaped by those standards?

In what ways do you sense Paul's challenging that?

In what ways are you tempted to 'boast' before God (relying on your own intelligence, efforts or goodness)?

What freedom is offered to you by what Paul is saying?

In what ways in your own ministry can you encourage people to rely on God's power and wisdom, rather than your own?

Prayer ideas

Praise God that we receive righteousness, holiness and redemption from him, because of Jesus.

Pray that you will be like Paul in valuing the message of the cross highly.

Pray that you will see the message of the cross as wise and powerful, and that through your ministry, others will also.

Study 4. 1 Cor 2:6-16

Andrew Judd

God's Spirit is the only way we can know about God and his plans for us

What's a random piece of trivia about you that not everyone in the group may know?

If you have time you can play "two truths and a lie", where each member says three things about themselves, one of which is untrue, and the rest of the group has to guess which is which. Just don't be too good at it or it may harm your credibility.

Observation and interpretation

You may remember that back in 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 Paul set up two types of wisdom - the wisdom of this world, and God's wisdom.

- What does Paul mean by "wisdom" here?
- What are the two types of "wisdom" Paul is contrasting? How do they differ?

Now have a read of 1 Corinthians 2:6-10.

- Who are the "rulers of this age" (verse 6), and why is their wisdom coming to nothing (verse 6)?
- How do we *know* that God's wisdom is really wise and the world's wisdom is really foolish?
- How is it possible to know anything about God and his plans? (Are we just smarter than the others?)
- What is the advantage in choosing the right wisdom?

Paul here is playing with words from the weird and wonderful world of Greek/Roman religions and cults, which were very popular in Corinth. The word "mysterion" normally referred to secret teachings, customs and ceremonies which the members of these strange religions kept secret from people who were not part of the club. But here Paul uses it for God's secret plan for the final salvation of the world which has only just been revealed by God to his people by the Spirit.

The "rulers of this age" were responsible for crucifying Jesus (verse 8). They are not only the individuals who ordered his execution (Pilate, Herod, the Jewish leaders) but "the world's organized opposition to God's wisdom" as well as "the pernicious spiritual forces behind them." (Scroggs & Bruce, cited in Ciampa and Rosner, 125)

The quotation in verse 9 is interesting, because it's not at all clear where he is quoting from. The closest thing in the Old Testament as we have it is Isaiah 64:4, which is the same sort of idea: you can't know anything about God unless he reveals it to you.

Read verses 10-16

- What is the point of Paul's analogy in verse 11.
- Why do some people accept this message as from God, while others think it's stupid?
- Why is the Spirit uniquely able to reveal to us who God is?
- Who are the "we" in verses and 16 - are they the same "we" or different groups?

Application / Implications

What is God's plan for you? How do you know?

Think about where you fit in this picture. If you had to use one word to describe how you feel what would it be?

Many strands in philosophy is very sceptical of our ability to know much less communicate anything about God. Isn't God a mystery?

Doesn't this passage encourage us to be arrogant about our "wisdom", as if everyone else is wrong and we are right? Shouldn't we be more humble?

How does this passage fit with your own experience of either sharing or hearing the gospel message?

Is it right for God to condemn the rulers of the world if they have not received the Spirit? (For that matter, is it right for anyone to be judged for rejecting Christ if they don't have the Spirit?)

This touches on God's work verses human responsibility. Generally the Bible presents them not as "versus" at all, but as two compatible realities. God reveals things to us in a way that changes our perspective on Christ, but in a way that doesn't compromise our humanity (including our ability to make morally responsible decisions). He's clever like that.

In fact, the Spirit restores our humanity - it wasn't God's fault that the rulers of this age couldn't recognise Christ, it was theirs! They were so twisted by their own sin, they mistook Christ's humility for pathetic weakness. Their fear and envy and hate meant they didn't want to understand what God was doing. They have already brought themselves under God's righteous justice long before the Spirit does (or doesn't) get involved.

And yet, for reasons that should blow our minds, he has mercy on some through his Spirit. Take Paul - he's on the way to exterminate the early church, and then Jesus turns his life around on the road to Damascus. In the process Paul doesn't become a robot; he becomes a better human.

This is a great mystery, but I sometimes think of it in terms of great art: God's wisdom is like a beautiful painting which makes us see the world differently, and recognise beauty we had been unable (or unwilling) to see before.

Prayer ideas

Give out post-it notes and get everyone to write things on it:

- The name of a friend
- The name of a neighbour or person you live with
- The name of a colleague or family member
- A place where you might meet someone you don't know yet

Spend some time praying for them, in light of what Paul tells us about wisdom and unwisdom.

Study 5. 1 Cor 3:1-20

Mark Wormell

Big idea: God has made us spiritual ('in-dwelt by the Spirit'). Let's behave as Spirit-filled people!

Intro ice-breaker question

When and where have you felt closest to God?

When and where have you felt furthest from God?

Not being wise before God can create in us a sense of distance between us and God.

We can feel 'cut-off' from church and God even when we are surrounded by other Christians. Factions can alienate and disappoint us

This question is designed to set-up the discussion later in the study about what it means for believers to be God's temple, and for God to in-dwell us.

Observation and interpretation

Many translations open with 'Brothers'. In our culture, this is a poor attempt to translate the Greek word, 'adelphoi'. In its context it clearly meant 'brothers and sisters', and that is how we should translate it.

1. What is Paul referring to in 3:2 when he says he gave them 'milk' not 'solid food'?

It is a challenging metaphor. Paul's point is not that there are two types of food, i.e. milk and solid food. Rather, the gospel that is the milk on which we start in the faith becomes solid food for those who move from being 'fleshly-worldly' to being people who behave as spiritual beings.

2. Why are they still not ready for 'solid food'?

Because the wisdom they are seeking strips the gospel of its power. They are not 'spiritual', as they live by the flesh or worldly wisdom, rather than *behaving* as people in-dwelt by the Spirit. Paul is applying his teaching in 2:6-16.

3. What images are created in your mind by the use of the word 'fleshly'? What are the signs that they are still 'fleshly'?
4. In verse 4 this is not the first time Paul has referred to the factions formed around Apollos and himself (see 1:12-17). What was the point there?

Paul's basic accusation is that they are acting divisively because they belong to 'this age'.

How is the idea developed in 3:5-9? [Servanthood is the only paradigm.]

5. What is the 'Day' referred to in verse 13?

Probably the 'Day' refers not to when we will be vindicated by our faith, but when God calls us to give an account of what we have done and said. The image of fire is one of judgement not punishment.

6. What 'reward' will they receive?

Probably seeing people mature in Christ and the church grow.

7. What role did the temple play in the OT?

Note: the word translated 'temple' actually refers to the inner sanctuary. God had chosen to dwell there (1 Kgs 8:27-30) but could choose to leave it (Ezek 10). It was the place where God was specially present and where he would meet with his people] So if the Corinthian Christians are now 'God's temple', what does this mean? [Note that it is the church which is the temple here. Not individual Christians. This text does not support 'my body is a temple' misapplications.

8. What foolishness should they adopt?

The wisdom of the cross, see 1:18-19.

9. If everything is theirs [v22] why shouldn't they boast?

Because it is theirs only because of Christ, and therefore they should boast only in Christ.

Application / Implications

11. How has your faith been built? What has contributed to its strength? What weaknesses exist?
12. Are you aware of factions or divisions at Barneys? If so, where do the divisions lie, and what can be done to heal them? If there are not factions, why not?
13. How do you see your role and gifts in the church compared to the role and gifts of staff?

Note that Paul calls the Corinthians 'fellow-workers' and 'God's field'. There is no sense a teacher or pastor being a 'leader' in the way that is used in secular society. We will come to different gifts in chapter 12-14.

14. How do you understand and experience being 'sacred'

I.e. 'separate/set apart'. It is linked to being in-dwelt by the Spirit, and how we are to behave.

Prayer ideas

15. Thanks for the way people have planted, watered, built you.
16. Pray that your lives will reflect the foundation on which you are built.
17. Pray for healing in the divisions in the church, here and elsewhere.
18. Pray that we all behave as spiritual beings (in the sense Paul means) and draw on the wisdom of Christ.

Study 6. 1 Cor 3:21-4:17

Michael Paget

We all judge our leaders and even one another. However, Paul says that, in the end, it is only the judgement of the Lord that counts.

‘It’s complicated, isn’t it? If only we could be less controlled by the opinions of others. Maybe a deserted island could be the answer. That would be a pricey way to avoid the judgments of others, but it might work. Apart from that option, you have a creepy sense that people are watching, judging, evaluating, accepting, or rejecting you. Sometimes the eyes belong to no one in particular. Other times you know exactly who or what group you are trying to please. Either way, you are controlled by other people more than you think, and other people, of course, are controlled by how you see them.’

- Ed Welch, What do you think of me? And why do I care?

Churches are often regarded as places of judgement and condemnation. Even church members sometimes describe feeling like they need to be perfect and cannot be honest about their real struggles. It’s all about image.

- Have you ever felt judged in church? Can you share with us about the experience?
- How did it make you feel?

Observation and interpretation

Read 1 Corinthians 3:21-23.

In this section Paul summarises his preceding teaching as ‘no more boasting about human leaders.’ Historically, over-identifying with leaders has been more associated with the Pentecostal tradition than mainstream Protestantism.

- What do you think are the corresponding dangers for an Anglican (or Baptist, or Presbyterian etc.) church like Barneys?
- Paul seems to think that the best antidote to boasting about leaders and breaking into factions around them is the gospel news that ‘All things are yours...and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God’ (vv.21, 23). How does believing this change things?

Read 1 Corinthians 4:1-5.

Here Paul, having told the Corinthians how they ought not to regard their leaders, describes how they should regard them.

- How does Paul say the Corinthians should view their leaders?
- What difference would this make to how they relate to them?
- What difference would this make the how their leaders experience their own ministry?

Ciampa and Rosner write:

'The Corinthians wanted to be judged as wise in society's eyes, and to judge their leaders, only some of whom they deemed worthy of praise, by the same worldly standard. Paul's response is to assert the singular prerogative of God to judge and to bestow praise.' (Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary)

Read 1 Corinthians 3:5-4:2

From 3:5-4:2, leaders in the church are described in 4 ways: servants (3:5); fellow workers (3:9); subordinates or assistants (4:1); and managers (4:1-2).

- What aspects of Christian ministry do each of these bring out?

An ancient document records the commissioning of a manager by his master:

"I have empowered you by this document to administer my estate in Arsinoe, and to collect the rents and, if need be, to arrange new leases or to cultivate some land yourself, and to give receipts in my name, and to transact any business connected with stewardship, just as I can transact it when I am present, and to distribute the plots in Karamis, restoring to me what remains over, as to which matter I rely on your good faith, and I confirm whatever you decide about them."

The Corinthians were assessing their leaders on the criteria of wisdom, eloquence and impressive person presence. God's basis for judgement, however, is that 'those who have been given a trust must prove faithful' (4:1-2).

- On what basis do we judge our leaders? What does faithfulness look like (4:8-13)?

We all judge our leaders and even one another. However, Paul says that, in the end, it is only the judgement of the Lord that counts (4:4-5). This isn't because he is a stoic - Paul has known and been hurt by judgement, even amongst those he led to Christ.

- What is the implication of this for the church (4:5)? What might this look like?

In the first 3 chapters of 1 Corinthians, Paul has highlighted six quotes from Scripture (1:19, 31; 2:9, 16; 3:19, 20) whose cumulative application is the same: 'no boasting about human beings.' In 4:6 he hammers this again: 'do not go beyond what is written!' The danger of disobedience, Paul says, is that they will become 'puffed up' (4:6; compare 4:8-13), and Paul writes to warn them against this (4:14).

- What is the danger of being 'puffed up' and why is it such a threat to the Christian life?

Application / Implications

- What barriers do you experience to living in the light of the Lord's judgement, and none other? Why do you think you find them substantial?
- It is often true that we feel judged by the standards by which we judge others. This is sometimes called 'projection'. Certainly, the Pharisees felt most condemned by Jesus Christ. Is there a difference between how you judge your leaders and how you want to be judged yourself? What is it?
- What can you do to see your leaders - and yourself - differently, in the light of this passage?

Study 7. 1 Cor 4:18-5:13

Michael Paget

The church is a community of grace. But sometimes moral cowardice is the enemy of love.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:18-21

- How do you feel when you read these words from Paul?

Sometimes, it is fair to say, St Paul can come across as jerk: "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power. What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a rod of discipline, or shall I come in love and with a gentle spirit?" (4:20-21)

Michel Foucault argued that claims to truth serve often, if not always, as disguised claims to power. Elizabeth Castelli, drawing on Foucault, claims that Paul's combination of authoritarian assertion with apparent self-effacement is a clever rhetorical strategy of manipulation.

Do you think Paul would have sought petty power in Corinth at the price of undermining and betraying the very gospel for which he daily sacrificed life and limb?

Thiselton points out:

"Once we argue, with Foucault, that even appeals to acting as a servant can be manipulative, virtually any altruistic action can be construed in this way, not least the political strategies of Foucault himself. It is Paul's gentleness that is to be copied, not a self assertion that demands freedom from constraints... [T]he criterion of Christlikeness pinpoints acceptance of constraints as a mark of authenticity in Christ's messianic temptations. Paul does not impose on the Christians in Corinth criteria that he does not accept for himself."

- What is Paul's attitude towards the Corinthians (4:14)? How has this been demonstrated in his life?
- Paul wants to show the difference between mere talk and the real power of the gospel. What do you think the 'power' is that he's speaking about (4:20)? How is it different to what is at work at times amongst the Christians in Corinth?

Tim Keller writes:

"His active concern is for our joy and well-being. Most people love those who love them, yet God loves and seeks the good even of people who are his enemies. But because God is good and loving, he cannot tolerate evil. The opposite of love is not anger, but indifference. "The more you love your son, the more you hate in him the liar, the drunkard,

the traitor," (E. Gifford). To imagine God's situation, imagine a judge who also is a father, who sits at the trial of his guilty son. A judge knows he cannot let his son go, for without justice no society can survive. How much less can a loving God merely ignore or suspend justice for us—who are loved, yet guilty of rebellion against his loving authority?"

- Love is not indifference to others – it seeks their good. But sometimes moral cowardice is the enemy of love. What did Paul risk by speaking to the Corinthians in this way, out of love? When do you find it hard to seek the good of others?

Read 1 Corinthians 5:1-13.

- What immediately strikes you as hard or challenging about this passage?

All of the 'you's in this passage are plural. Paul is speaking of the actions of the church collectively, not of individuals.

- Paul describes 2 groups: those who the church is to exercise judgement over, and those who the church is not to exercise judgement over. Who are these two groups? Why is the responsibility of the church different towards each? Why is the church to judge one? Why not the other?
- Paul says that there are people who '[claim] to be a brother or sister', which implies that they aren't actually Christians. What does this mean for the connection between behaviour and salvation?

Application / Implications

- What does it look like to judge within the church?
- What is the goal of judgement within the church? What is the danger of not judging?
- The church is a community of grace. How can we be both this, and a community in which judgement is exercised?

The Reformers agreed that there were three marks of the true church of God. For example, the Belgic Confession (1561) says:

"The true church can be recognized if it has the following marks: The church engages in the pure preaching of the gospel; it makes use of the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them; it practices church discipline for correcting faults. In short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it

and holding Jesus Christ as the only Head. By these marks one can be assured of recognizing the true church - and no one ought to be separated from it."

'Church discipline' refers to the kind of judgement Paul is describing in 1 Corinthians 5.

- How does church discipline, exercised rightly, protect those inside and outside the church? Exercised badly, how can it harm?
- What should church discipline look like at Barneys? What about in this growth group?

Study 8. 1 Cor 6:1-11

Michael Paget

The Christian community's way of life must line up with the gospel they claim to believe

Observation and interpretation

Read 1 Corinthians 6:1-6.

This passage, tragically, assumes 'disputes' (or 'grievances' - literally, 'matters against others') in the church that have led to lawsuits.

Paul describes two categories of people: 'the ungodly' and 'the Lord's people'. (Notice that he doesn't fall into the trap of middle class Christendom, which divides on the basis of 'the moral' and 'the immoral'.)

- What are Paul's reasons for believing 'the Lord's people' competent and 'the ungodly' incompetent to exercise judgement in the church?

Read Proverbs 9:10

- What does Proverbs 9:10 say is necessary for wisdom? Why?

Wisdom is knowledge of how to live well in the world. It's not just about pragmatics, but it doesn't exclude practical things as well - but it is also about goodness and integrity, in light of the character of God.

The Bible assumes wisdom is necessary for exercising good judgement (see Prov 25:12).

- Paul is shocked that Christians might take lawsuits among other Christians to those 'whose way of life is scorned by the church' (6:4), rather than one 'among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers'. What is the connection between a 'way of life' and lack of wisdom?

Reflection:

Read a certain way, this biblical teaching could appear to be an attempt to protect the reputation of the institution that is the church (check out 6:6). This, of course, is exactly what many denominations so wickedly did in the face of persistent child abuse by clergy: they exercised judgement 'inside' rather than 'before unbelievers.' Wonderfully, the truth has come out, and those decisions have been exposed and institutions rightly shamed.

Keep in mind, however, that Paul is talking about civil suits here. In the ancient world, most law was 'civil': there was no prosecutor, just a plaintiff and a defendant. You brought your own case before the court. In 'criminal' matters, though, Paul thoroughly upholds the role of the government (see Romans 13) and its role in exercising vengeance. It is hard to

imagine (especially in the light of the previous study) the apostle Paul supporting a church sheltering abusers of the weak and vulnerable.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:7-8.

Paul's great concern isn't with the reputation of the church. Rather, he claims that the presence of lawsuits - and 'cheating' and 'doing wrong' to one another - is a sign that the Christians in Corinth are defeated already. By 'defeated' he means something like 'living in a way that is utterly out-of-step with the gospel they claim to believe'.

- How are lawsuits within the church an indication that the church has stopped living with a Christian worldview?
- How does Paul's rhetoric - describing their lawsuits as 'trivial cases' and asking 'why not rather be wronged...cheated?' - help you answer this question?

Read 1 Corinthians 6:9-11.

- Do Christians still sin?
- Have a read of this lengthy excerpt from Jerry Bridges' book, *The Discipline of Grace*, with this question in mind: 'what is the relationship between being Christian and sinning?'

To die to sin then means, first of all, to die to its legal or penal reign and, secondly, as a necessary result, to die to its dominion over us. ... There is no such thing as salvation from sin's penalty without an accompanying deliverance from sin's dominion. This obviously does not mean we no longer sin, but that sin no longer reigns in our lives.

How did we die to sin? We have already noted that we died to sin through our union with Christ. Paul said in Romans 6:10 that Christ died to sin, and in verse 8 he said we died with Christ. That Christ died to sin is a rather startling but wonderful statement. Christ did not die to the dominion of sin, as He was never under it. However, when He was made sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21)—that is, when He was charged with our sin—He did come under its legal reign and was made subject to its penalty.

When Jesus died, He died to the legal reign of sin. Through our federal union with Him in His death, we, too, died to the legal reign of sin. But because the legal reign and the practical dominion of sin in our lives are inseparable, we died not only to its legal reign but also to its corrupting dominion over us. Hallelujah! What a Savior we have who was able to not only free us from sin's penalty but also from its dominion.

The question arises, however, "If we died to sin's dominion, why do we still struggle with sin in our daily lives?" When Paul wrote, "We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" he was referring, not to the activity of committing sins, but to continuing to live under the dominion of sin. The word live means to continue in or abide in. It connotes a settled course of life. To use Paul's words from Romans 8:7, "The sinful mind [one under sin's dominion] is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so." But the believer who has died to sin's reign and dominion delights in God's law. The believer approves of it as holy, righteous, and good (Romans 7:12), even though he or she may struggle to obey it.

We must distinguish between the activity of sin, which is true in all believers, and the dominion of sin, which is true of all unbelievers. Sinclair Ferguson has written, "Sin is not primarily an activity of man's will so much as a captivity which man suffers, as an alien power grips his soul. It is an axiom for [John] Owen [whose teaching Ferguson is summarizing] that while the presence of sin can never be abolished in this life, nor the influence of sin altered (its tendency is always the same), its dominion can, indeed, must be destroyed if a man is to be a Christian.

Therefore a believer cannot continue in sin. We no longer live in the realm of sin, under its reign and practical dominion. We have, to use Paul's words, died to sin. We indeed do sin and even our best deeds are stained with sin, but our attitude toward it is essentially different from that of an unbeliever. We succumb to temptations, either from our own evil desires (James 1:13), or from the world or the Devil (Ephesians 2:1-3), but this is different from a settled disposition. Further, to paraphrase from Ferguson on John Owen, our sin is a burden that afflicts us rather than a pleasure that delights us.

- Have the Christians in Corinth stopped doing wrong? What is the difference between 'doing wrong' and 'being a wrongdoer'?
- How are vv.9-11 a great warning to those who call themselves Christian? How are they a comfort?
- What does v.11 say to those who want to trust in Jesus Christ but feel burdened with the guilt of their sins?

Application / Implications

- When is it appropriate to bring another Christian before secular law courts?
- In vv.9-11, what kinds of 'being a wrongdoer' has the modern church focussed on? Which ones might we have conveniently overlooked? How might we in our community be in genuine danger?

Study 9. 1 Cor 6:12-20

Mark Wormell

Big idea: God has made us Holy. Be Holy with our bodies, at all times and in all ways.

Intro ice-breaker question

What is your favourite TV drama? What attitudes to sex underlie that program?

The key for the next two studies is to see how radically different Paul's portrayal of God's plans for us sexually and in marriage are from the dominant Gentile and Jewish views and practices of the time.

While we may see that these differences were liberating (picking up Paul's theme of the freedom Christ brought), we can expect them to have been disruptive and difficult.

This passage is considered one of the hardest exegetically in 1 Corinthians. But the main point is clear and simple: flee sexual immorality.

Research suggests that Corinthian attitudes to sex were varied, but generally different from Christian views today. Some thought sex was recreational, while minorities thought it either debased our spiritual essence and should be avoided, or was only for procreation. Some thought it was recreational outside marriage and for procreation in marriage.

The dominant view in Corinth was expressed in the male head of the household having the right to have sex with his male and female slaves, going to prostitutes, having sex with other men, and confining sex with his wife to producing legitimate heirs.

It is unclear if there were 'temple prostitutes' at the time Paul wrote (probably not), but there would have been prostitutes who were brought out at the end of dinners and religious festivals for the enjoyment of the men.

Husbands would generally be older than their wives, and both Greek and Jewish traditions considered conversation with women to be a waste of time.

Interpretation of this passage is made more difficult by trying to work out the eschatology of the Corinthians. Some claim they had an 'over-realised eschatology'. That is, they thought all or most of the benefits of Christ's victory had already arrived. Others had a more conventional 'now and not yet' eschatology, seeing Christ's victory inaugurating the end times, but many benefits awaiting Christ's return. Some commentators want to see the sexual freedom of some Christian Corinthians as evidence of an 'over-realised eschatology', which had them believe that it doesn't matter what they do because they are saved. We will see this probably misreads the passage.

An important part of interpreting this passage is to understand what Paul was responding to. What had they said that prompted this response?

Observation and interpretation

1. What do you think Paul was responding to in verse 12?

Probably the Corinthians' defence of their sexual immorality and idolatry (referred to in 6:9-10), and their claim that Christ had made them free so 'everything is lawful' to them.

2. What attitudes are evident in the Corinthian claim that "Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both"? [they include the view that the sexual nature of the body is useless unless used for sex]
3. What contrast does Paul draw between the Corinthian view of the body and God's view?

Rather than being an 'over-realised eschatological' view that bodies don't matter, Paul seems to be saying that the resurrection shows that bodies do really matter to God and therefore we should be careful what we do with them.

4. Regarding verse 15, when else has Paul talked about dividing Christ? [1:13]
5. In what ways can we consider our bodies 'temples of the Holy Spirit'?
6. What does Paul include in 'sexual immorality'?

It's broader than prostitution. It covers all illicit sexual relations, e.g. incest, pre-marital sex, extra-marital sex and homosexual sex.

7. What is the main point of the passage?

Application / Implications

8. What do you think of the idea that casual sex (with a prostitute or someone else) makes you one with them?
9. Today, what things do you think Paul would include in his list of sexual immoralities?
10. Is casual sex ok as it doesn't hurt anyone else? Why?
11. How can we glorify God in our bodies?

Only using our bodies in obedience to God or in way that we could expect to please God. It sets up Paul's later discussion on marriage.

12. What films/shows (if any) should we 'flee' (i.e. avoid)? Why?
13. Do you think verse 18 is justification for pastors being more directed towards sexual sins than other sins (e.g. greed, vanity)? Do you think it justifies us being harder on sexually explicit entertainment than ultra-violent entertainment?
14. What responsibilities do we have to a Christian who appears to be caught in sexual immorality?
15. Is it OK for Christian film critics, police officers, customs officers etc. to view sexually explicit material?

The purpose of this question is to engage with the complexities of our workplaces, and Paul's low view of sexual gratification for its own sake.

16. If the only way to close down an illegal brothel is to employ council inspectors to visit the illegal brothel and buy sexual services, could a Christian employ a council inspector to do so, and could a Christian council inspector buy sexual service for this purpose?

Prayer ideas

- Thanks for the clarity of Paul's teaching.
- Help to flee sexual immorality.
- For our churches and wider society to adopt attitudes towards sex that reflect God's plans for it.

Study 10. 1 Cor 7:1-16

Mark Wormell

Big idea: Jesus transformed marriage.

Intro ice-breaker question

What type of husband do you think Paul would have made? [I have suggested this question because I think we can often read Paul's teaching on sex and marriage with pre-conceived ideas about Paul]

Note Paul now moves from responding to things he has heard about the church in Corinth to things they have asked him.

Neither this passage, nor 1 Corinthians contains all Paul's teaching on marriage.

Observation and interpretation

1. Read 7:1. If you are using different translations, what variations can you see?

Some say 'don't touch' others 'don't have sexual relations', others 'don't marry'. 'Touch' here is a Greek euphemism for sexual gratification. It probably refers to sex for the reason of one's own pleasure or passion, but does not include procreation.

2. Read the rest of the passage. How does the teaching in 6:12-20 impact the teaching in this passage?

If sex was only permitted within marriage, there would be no outlet outside marriage for sexual expression, and there would be a much greater focus on the sexual relations between a husband and his wife.

3. In verse 3, what does it say and what does it not say?

Husbands and wives are to give not demand!

4. How radical is verse 4?!!

This represents an unprecedented restriction on a husband's sexual freedom.

5. How might the apparent circularity in verse 4 be resolved?

For example: prayer and discussion.

6. What are the implications of verse 5 for conversation between a husband and wife?

Yes! They have to talk with each other. And they may be expected to pray together. They are 'one' not only when joined in sex, but one body loving and serving God.

7. Do you think Paul has a general preference between marriage and singleness?
8. How does Paul's teaching on divorce fit with Jesus' teaching on divorce?

See Matt 19:9, Mark 10:2-12, Luke 16:18. For further reference see this article by Mike Paget <http://matthiasmedia.com/briefing/2012/01/the-good-news-of-divorce/>

9. What do you think Paul means by an unbelieving partner being made holy by the believing partner?

Application / Implications

10. Do you think Paul's reference to prayer exhausts the circumstances when couple may abstain from sex?
11. How often should married people have sex? How might they know?

Prayer and discussion.

12. Do you think a fear of lack of self-control is a good reason to marry? What do your answers to this question say of contemporary views on the choice of marriage partner and the purposes of marriage?
13. Do we ever accept the sexual sins of Christians because we don't really take sin seriously?
14. What view of God's plan for sex and marriage do you take away from this passage?

Please do not miss the mutuality in much of this passage. And note that Paul does not have a low view of sex. He does not think it makes us impure.

Prayer ideas

15. For our own marriages [if any is married]

16. For the marriages of all at Barneys and known to us.
17. For God's view of marriage to be attractive beyond Christian circles.
18. For divorced people to feel welcome at Barneys.
19. For singleness to be honoured by us as it is by God.

Study 11. 1 Cor 7:17-24

Erica Hamence

Big idea: Because of Jesus, old ways of defining and dividing people are rendered unimportant.

This passage touches on the important and controversial issue of slavery. It is important to recognise that, though many of us may feel far from this issue personally, there are many slaves today, even in Australia. This is not an abstract, theoretical or merely interesting issue, but a 'live' one for many people - including Christians - in the world today. It is not Paul's intention to make a defence (or a criticism) of slavery here; his interest is in encouraging the Corinthians to consider their position before God as more significant than any other social category they might belong to.

However, because Paul touches on this topic in making his argument, we should be clear about what he is talking about.

It might be helpful to consider that slavery in Paul's day was quite different from modern slavery. People could sell themselves into slavery in order to pay off debts. Slaves could be integrated into families in a relationship akin to that of a live-in nanny nowadays. That said, redemption from slavery is a powerful metaphor for the gospel (Romans 6:14-23; Luke 4:18-19; Gal. 5:1). It is clear then that slavery was not considered a good in itself. Moreover, those who had slaves were told they must treat them well (Col. 4:1; Philemon 12-17; Eph. 6:9), and slave-traders are explicitly denounced in 1 Tim. 1:8-11. So, for Christians, there is no excuse for poor treatment of slaves.

However, it remains disturbing for some - Christians and sceptics alike - that the New Testament doesn't denounce or overthrow the institution of slavery completely. Why, as Paul does in our passage, encourage slaves to remain in their state?

I think in the New Testament we see that we see a different kind of slavery being highlighted, and a different kind of freedom being championed. A free person who is nonetheless a slave to sin is worse off than a slave who knows Jesus. A slave who knows Jesus is freed from their sin, and is given a new status as 'brother' (1 Tim. 6:2) and 'the Lord's freedman' (1 Cor. 7:22). A Christian who is not a slave to an earthly master is nonetheless a slave of Christ's (1 Cor. 7:24). So then, the contrast is not between slavery, which is bad, and freedom, which is good. Instead, the contrast is between *to whom* or *to what* we are slaves, and *for whom* and *for what* we are freed.

Paul's point is that, in a Christian community, our identity and status in Jesus is more important than any other category we might fall into. There is no category you might belong to which makes you better or worse spiritually.

Getting familiar with the passage

When you read through the passage you'll notice there is a refrain, repeated three times: 'remain in the situation to which God has called you'.

This is applied to two different, but related, situations: circumcision and slavery.

Paul is making the point that, in Christ, our old identities and social markers (indeed, our social divisions) are done away with, or rendered unimportant. A Corinthian Christian should feel no pride or shame or spiritual hindrance because of his circumcised or uncircumcised state, and neither should a slave or free person. This is because their old ways of conceiving of identity and standing have been superseded by their new standing in Jesus.

If you think back to what we know about the Corinthian church's enthrallment with prestige and spiritual superiority, this would probably have been quite challenging for some (as well as encouraging for others). The social differences which they hold dear are unimportant to God.

Here is what some commentators have said about the passage:

- Thiselton says: 'In one sense, the new eschatological reality of the gospel abolishes "human" categorization; but in a deeper and more realistic sense it relativizes and redefines them.'
- Garland says: 'change of status is unnecessary as it relates to God's call, but that does not mean that change of status is prohibited.'
- Ciampa and Rosner say: 'God does not reckon one condition better than another in terms of serving him. In fact, God placed the Corinthians in these circumstances.' (Notice the repeated 'calling' language; it occurs 8 times in our passage)

See below for a passage breakdown:

The refrain:

V 17 'Nevertheless, *each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him.* This is the rule I lay down in all the churches.'

Example of circumcision:

V 18 'Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised.'

Why:

V 19 'Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts.'

The refrain:

V 20 '*Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him.*'

Example of slavery:

V 21 'Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you - although if you can gain your freedom, do so.'

Why:

V 22 'For he who was a slave when we was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ's slave.'

V 23 'You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men.'

The refrain:

V 24 'Brothers, each man, responsible to God, *should remain in the situation God called him to.*'

Observation and interpretation

What do you think it would have been like to be a Jewish Christian hearing Paul say (in verse 19) 'circumcision is nothing'?

What would it have been like for a Christian from a Gentile background hearing Paul say (in verse 19) 'uncircumcision is nothing'?

What values and assumptions is Paul challenging here?

If circumcision and uncircumcision are unimportant, what is important?

(Given that he has just dismissed circumcision as unimportant, is it contradictory for Paul to say 'Keeping God's commands is what counts'?)

Why does Paul shift focus from marriage (e.g. 7:15-16) to circumcision and then slavery?

What connects all of these topics? (Looking at Galatians 3:26-29 might help here).

It might also help to read through the passage and note any repeated words or phrases. What indication do these give you of where Paul's argument is going?

(It might also help to read ahead to 1 Cor. 7:29-31 to see where Paul is taking us).

How can Paul say that slaves should stay as they are? Should this be understood as an endorsement of slavery in general? If not, what in this passage leads you away from that conclusion?

Three times Paul encourages his readers to 'remain in the situation God called you to'. For what reasons do you think they might have wanted to change their situation?

- Consider that they may have wanted to improve their standing in society or the church.
- They may have spiritualised one state over another, thinking that they were able to serve or honour God better that way (remember Paul's critique of 'those mutilators of

the flesh' in Philippians 3:2-3, those who argued that Christians must be circumcised in order to be truly Christian).

- They may have looked down on those who were different from them.
- You may be able to think of other reasons why this issue was important.

Ciampa and Rosner say: 'Paul is not against making any change to one's circumstances, as v. 21b proves. Rather, he is responding to the opinion that such changes will enhance one's calling to live as a Christian.'

Application / Implications

Circumcision and slavery might not feel like very significant issues for us as Christians today.

- What modern-day equivalents to these social dividers can you think of?
- What things might Christians think of as more or less spiritual?
- What divisions keep us from seeing one another as brothers and sisters?
- How can we (as a Growth Group, and as a church) ensure that we don't let other ways of categorising ourselves or others take priority over who we all are in Christ?
- Do you consider yourself Christ's slave? What challenges you about this?
- What do you need to reject in order to serve him wholeheartedly?

Prayer ideas

Pray to thank God that, because of Jesus you are freed from sin, and enslaved to Christ.

Pray that God will help you to see any ways in which you are undermining the new status and identity in Christ that he makes available to you and others, and pray that instead you will seek to live as he has called you.

Further reading: Tess Holgate, "An us and them kind of world", at <http://www.biblesociety.org.au/news/an-us-and-them-kind-of-world>

Study 12. 1 Cor 7:25-40

Big idea: being married, though a gift from God, brings particular temptations to compromise our faith in God

Introduction

Observation and interpretation

"Virgins" in verse 25 and following means young women of marriageable age, usually without sexual experience. In his context Paul is probably thinking of young betrothed women who are questioning whether to go through with their marriages in light of pressure from some groups who think it is intrinsically more holy to resist sexual desire. It seems the Corinthians have asked Paul about it, and may have assumed his support for the anti-sex position given his own situation as an unmarried man.

Read verses 25-28

- What do you think Paul means by the "present crisis", and why is it relevant to the question of marriage?
- What kind of "troubles" (verse 28) is Paul trying to help people avoid?

Some commentators think this refers to particular persecution, culminating in the destruction of the temple in AD69 (shortly after this letter was written). Others think he is speaking more generally about the end times as we wait for Jesus' return.

Read verses 29-35

- What does it mean that "the time is short" (verse 29)?
- What are some of the practical benefits of being single in these last days?

Read verses 36-40

- What mistakes does Paul want engaged couples to avoid?
- Why must a widow, if she remarries, pick someone who "belongs to the Lord" (verse 39)?

Application / Implications

Do we live in a similar age (of "crisis", in which "time is short") to the one Paul is describing here?

What temptations are there for married people to compromise their faith in Christ for the sake of their spouse or children?

Imagine a young person is weighing up whether to get married or not, and asks you for your theological advice. Based on what Paul says here, what factors do you think they should consider?

Paul is writing into a situation where some people were over-emphasising the benefits of singleness. Think about our own church culture: do we over-emphasise marriage or singleness? What could we change to have a more balanced Biblical view?

Prayer ideas

- Pray for those in your group who are single (whether never married, divorced or engaged), that they would not compromise their faith in Christ
- Pray for those in your group who are married, that they would not compromise their faith in Christ
- Pray for those in the world today who are experiencing persecution for the sake of Christ, particularly those who have children

Study 13. 1 Cor 8:1-13

Big idea: knowledge is no good if it destroys a brother or sister

Introduction

Observation and interpretation

Read verses 1-3

- Is there anything wrong with knowledge?
- What is “food sacrificed to idols”?

Read verses 4-8

- What do Paul and his audience know about idols?
- What do the other people (“weaker brothers”) think about idols?
- Why is their conscience “defiled” if they eat food they think is sacrificed to idols?

Read verses 9-13

- Why might it be sinful to eat food sacrificed to an idol, even though we know that idols are meaningless?

Application / Implications

Like Corinth, Sydney is a multicultural society with lots of beliefs. Are there any things in our life you can think of which is similar to “food sacrificed to idols”?

In what other ways can knowledge of our freedom actually destroy rather than build up another brother or sister?

“I believe alcohol is evil, and I’m the weaker brother, so you should stop drinking alcohol.” How would you respond to this statement?

Prayer ideas

- Pray for those who are captive to idols (of all sorts) in our world.

- Pray that our knowledge would seek to build up and not destroy.

Study 14. 1 Cor 9:1-23

Big idea: the gospel calls us to give up our rights for the good of others

Introduction

Many countries have a statement of fundamental rights, for example the USA's "bill of rights". Imagine Australia was adopting a bill of rights - what would you campaign to put on it?

Observation and interpretation

Read 1 Cor 9:1-12a

The Old Testament law being referred to in verse 9 is from Deuteronomy 25:4 and concerns farm animal welfare. An animal being used to tread out grain would often be muzzled so that it could not eat the grain as it goes. The Old Testament law says, in essence, "no, let the poor animal have its share of the food too!"

- What rights does Paul insist he and the other apostles have?
- What is the link between an Ox and an apostle in verse 9?

Read 1 Cor 12b - 18

- If Paul and the other apostles have these rights then why didn't he exercise them?
- Paul is committed to his work whether he is recognised for it or not. What is his motivation for preaching the gospel?

Read 1 Cor 19-23

- "I have become all things to all people". What does Paul mean?
- What does it mean to "share in the blessings" of the gospel?

Application / Implications

- Paul talks here about the rights that he has but chooses not to use. What do you think he wants the Corinthians to learn from him in this?
- It seems in many situations that "if you don't stand up for your rights, who will?" What is it about the gospel which makes giving up rights voluntarily a good idea?

- What rights do we find particularly hard to give up for the sake of the gospel?
- Paul talks about winning people to Christ “by all possible means”. Is there a limit to what we can or should do to win people for Christ?

Prayer ideas

- Pray for the gospel perspective which enables us to give up our rights voluntarily for Christ.
- Pray for opportunities to share Christ with friends, family or work colleagues this week.

Study 15. 1 Cor 9:24-10:22

Big idea: don't fall away.

Introduction

If your week were an athletics event what would it be?

With this kind of slightly unusual opening question it is helpful for the leader to go first, explaining the question then offering their own answer, e.g.: "My week at work has been like a hurdles race, because some obstacles I get over and others I smash into but I keep on running anyway."

Observation and interpretation

Read 1 Cor 9:24-27

- According to Paul, why is the Christian life a bit like a running race?
- Why is the Christian life different to a running race?
- What does it mean to be "disqualified" in the Christian life?

Read 1 Cor 10:1-13

- What lessons does Paul want us to learn from Israel's history?
- What kind of things does Paul want the Corinthian Christians to avoid?

The link to the Old Testament narrative is a pretty clear indictment of the Corinthians - the desert wanderings of the Israelites (including the idolatry of the Golden Calf, the desire for food of Egypt, and the immorality with the Moabite daughters) hit pretty close to home for the Corinthians who had issues with idolatry, covetousness, immorality and more.

Read 1 Cor 10:14-22

- Here Paul returns to the subject of eating food sacrificed to idols. What do the preceding two sections add to the question of whether they can eat food sacrificed to idols?

Application / Implications

- Do Christians need to worry about falling away?

It is important to acknowledge a good tension here: some people may raise the theological principle of predestination and perseverance, and the difference between our status in the New Covenant with that of Israel. These things are true. And yet the warning is

also real: don't presume on God's grace by thinking that sin doesn't matter. God preserves his chosen people through warnings such as these, as Christians hear this warning and respond in repentance.

- What things have you seen cause Christians to stumble in their faith, and how can we avoid those mistakes?
- Have you ever been tempted to seriously abandon Christian faith or life? What did you do to resist it?
- Are there any old Christians (living or dead, known personally to you or only through stories) that you really admire for their "good race"? Why?

Prayer ideas

- Pray for those experiencing temptation right now.
- Pray for those who seem to have fallen away, that they would get back in the race.

Study 16. 1 Cor 10:23-11:1

Andrew Judd

Big idea: following Christ's example will mean laying down our rights for the good of others

Introduction

What's the weirdest thing you've ever eaten?

Observation and interpretation

Read 1 Cor 10:23-24. How do we decide if the use of a right is beneficial or not-beneficial?

At this point you may need to remind people that this is continuing a discussion that started in chapter 8 about food sacrificed to idols in the temple.

Read 1 Cor 10:25-26

- In 1 Cor 10:19-21 Paul forbids the Corinthians to eat meat sacrificed to idols. But now he is fine with it. Why is Paul suddenly happy not asking too many questions about where the meat in the market came from?
- How does the quotation from Psalm 24:1 ("The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it") support Paul's case that you can eat meat in good conscience?

Paul is adamant that Christians can have no part in eating meat *in the temple* (1 Cor 10:19-21). However this case study in chapter 10:23-11:1 concerns meat which has potentially come from the temple but is now for sale in the marketplace (in "plain packaging", so to speak, without any explicit link to idol worship). It is highly likely that much of the meat you'd buy in the market had come from the temple. And Paul himself may have been seen eating meat from the market. But for Paul there is no danger of idolatry here - just some quality steaks. Unless of course someone raises the issue...

Read 1 Cor 10:27-30

- This hypothetical involves an invitation to eat at someone's house. Why might Paul choose not to eat this time?
- Why does Paul feel the need to clarify in verse 29-30 that he is refraining from eating for the *other* person's sake?

Read 1 Cor 10:31-11:1

- What does “do it all for the glory of God” mean in this context?
- What precisely is the example which Paul wants the Corinthians to follow? (You might like to look at 2 Timothy 2:8-10 and Philippians 2:1-11)

Application / Implications

Can you think of a modern situation where you might put aside your rights for the sake of someone else’s conscience?

What does this mean for a Christian view of “rights” in our legal and social arena? Is it ever right to insist on rights?

Consider this hypothetical. Two housemates have moved into a small place in Redfern. Chris does not drink alcohol, but Sam does. Sam has started keeping bottles of wine in the house to serve to dinner guests. Chris has repeatedly asked Sam not to store it in the house: “As someone who doesn’t drink alcohol, I find it offensive that you store this Demon’s Drink here.” How could both Sam and Chris apply this passage to their situation?

Prayer ideas

- Pray in thankfulness for the gifts of God you have received today.
- Pray for those in our church who are struggling with the pull back into idolatry of all sorts.
- Pray that we would be ready to lay down our rights as Christ lay down his.

Study 17. 1 Cor 11:2-16

Andrew Judd

Big idea: like last week the theme is using our freedom for the good of others. While the gospel brings freedom and equality for women and men, this freedom should be used to build up not destroy.

Introduction

This is one of the most difficult parts of 1 Corinthians to read, as we are listening in mid way through a conversation which assumes several cultural practices which are obscure to us. But despite its strangeness to us, and significant uncertainties over some parts of it, it nevertheless offers a beautiful and life giving message to us today. In their commentary, Rosner and Ciampa helpfully summarise some of the principles which are clear from this passage:

Despite its obscurities, Paul's teaching in this passage clearly affirms three things: a balance between (1) respect for a creation mandate to maintain and even celebrate the gender distinctions with which we have been created; (2) a respect for culturally specific approaches to guarding moral and sexual purity; and (3) a commitment to fully integrating women and their gifts into the experience of the worshipping community. (Ciampa and Rosner, *1 Corinthians*, 557)

Observation and interpretation

Read Galatians 3:28

- How does the gospel affect how we see gender differences?

This passage continues the theme from last week of using freedom for building up rather than destroying others.

Our starting point here is important: men and women are both created equally in God's image (see also Gen 1:27), and in Christ they are equally inheritors of every spiritual blessing. Yet this massive statement of equality seems to have been taken by some of the people at Corinth as permission to throw out gender differences entirely. Newly converted women who embraced their Christian freedom too enthusiastically risked publicly shaming their husbands.

Read 11:2-3

- What does “head” mean in this context? Why do you think Paul has chosen to use this word?
- Does the ordering of these relationships imply inferiority?
- Is this a statement about the relationship between men and women in general, or specifically about a husband and a wife?

Keep in mind here that “man” and “husband” (and “woman” and “wife”) are the same word in the original language (“aner” means man/husband, and “gyne” means woman/wife) so context has to be the guide.

Read 11:4-6

- What involvement does Paul anticipate women will have in public Christian worship? (Maybe look at Joel 2:28)
- What does Paul fear will happen if either men or women throw off cultural gender markers while performing Christian ministry?

It is not quite certain what sort of “head covering” Paul is talking about here. It may be he is talking about having *long hair* versus having *short hair*, or it may be that he is talking about a type of hat which women were expected to wear in a public context.

We don’t have time to go into the details here, but depending on how we understand the social context, it could be that a woman not wearing her head covering would be seen as immodest (flaunting her sexual freedom). On the other hand, it is possible that a man wearing long hair was a sign that he was effeminate or homosexual.

Read 11:7-16

- Why does Paul link his argument back to Adam and Eve?
- Given we are part of a new creation in Christ, why should we pay attention to our origins in Adam and Eve?

This passage is not about whether women are equal with men or share the image of God with them. Genesis 1:27 makes clear that both man and woman are made in his image, and Paul reinforces that later in 1 Cor 15:49.

Paul’s concern here seems to be more about women and men not distracting attention away from God’s glory by dressing in a way that was (in that culture) shocking or scandalous or seductive. As a reminder about how important our earthly gatherings are, Paul cites the angels – heavenly observers who will notice anything in our church services which takes away from God’s glory.

Rosner and Ciampa write this: “By wearing her veil during public worship the woman signals her own status as created by God even while covering up any trace of human glory in the presence of God and his angelic court. The woman’s head is not one over which others have authority. God has granted her authority to pray and prophesy. She exercises

that authority in a dignified way by respecting both herself and the rest of the congregation through the avoidance of provocative attire or any dress or behavior which would bring shame on herself, others, or God, in a context where all eyes and every heart should be focused on God's glory in the midst of his holy people." (1 Corinthians, p 533)

Application / Implications

Paul's concern seems to be about not bringing shame on others while performing Christian ministry. Can you think of examples in our culture where this principle might apply?

Are there things that we do in church worship which could possibly draw attention away from God's glory and on to ourselves? What can be done to minimise this risk?

How can we ensure that the community benefits from the spiritual gifts of both men and women?

Prayer ideas

- Thanks God for the goodness of our gendered humanity, and the even greater promise of the new creation
- Pray for our gatherings that they would glorify God and not man
- Thank God for the spiritual gifts given to us through Godly women in our congregation, and pray that they will use them in a way that builds up the body of Christ and brings glory to God

Study 18. 1 Cor 11:17-34

Mike Paget

Big idea: our gatherings should reflect the unity we have in Christ

Introduction

Tom Wright, a New Testament historian, told this story: 'The school groundsman was working to get the sports field read for the big match the next day. The same pitch had been used for both hockey and football, and he needed to be sure that it was now marked out afresh with the right lines for tomorrow's football game.

'But early on he made a small mistake and crossed from one line to the other. His eye was so firmly fixed on the ground ahead of him, marking the lines straight, that he didn't realise. Only when he had finished, and stood up and looked at the whole field, did he realise what he had done. He had rubbed out the lines he should have been drawing more clearly, and he had drawn more clearly the lines he should have rubbed out.'

Last week, we saw how the Corinthians had been blurring the lines between male and female which should have been clearly marked (11:2-16). This week, we see that they were marking out more clearly a line that should have been obliterated altogether.

Paul begins a new section of his letter to the church in Corinth with these words: 'In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good' (11:17). By 'meetings', Paul is referring to 'when you come together as a church' (v.18). In this section, from 11:17-14:39, Paul will describe a series of practices reflecting underlying beliefs that make gathering as church worse than skipping church altogether!

Observation and interpretation

Read Luke 22:1-30 & 1 Corinthians 10:14-17.

As you have read, Jesus chose to explain his death on the evening of the great Passover meal. The Passover was the high point of the Jewish calendar. It was the night the Jews celebrated God's rescue of the ancient people of Israel. When Jesus says in verse 20 that his 'blood' is being "poured out for you" he is using this ancient Jewish symbolism to describe his death as a new 'Passover'. His death, then, will be the way in which God's judgement 'passes over' men and women so that they can be forgiven not condemned.

This meal became the foundation for the 'Lord's Supper', also called the 'Holy Communion' or 'Eucharist' (which comes from the Greek eucharisto, to give thanks).

The Christian philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre argued that you can never tell whether a thing is good or bad unless you know its purpose (greek telos). In his book *After Virtue*, for example, he asks, how can you tell if a watch is a good or bad one? If I try to hammer a nail with my watch, and it breaks, should I complain that it is a 'bad watch'? Of course not. To determine if something is good or bad, helpful or harmful, you must first understand what it is for.

In these passages, the Lord's Supper is described as teaching vertical truths (our relationship with God in Christ) and horizontal truths (our relationship with one another in Christ). How would you express these truths? How are they related?

In 1 Cor 11:18, Paul says he has heard that their gatherings are marked by 'divisions' that are particularly visible during the Lord's Supper. These divisions don't seem quite the same as the earlier 'factions and splits' around leaders. Read vv.19-22. How would you describe the two groups? What do you think is going on?

Read vv.27-32. Paul says that there are serious consequences in the 'vertical' flowing out of a failure to live out the 'horizontal'. What are they? What is God doing through these consequences, and why?

Application / Implications

What preventative measures does Paul propose to help us avoid trampling on the horizontal in the Lord's Supper? What might that look like for you? And for your group?

David Garland, who has written a commentary on 1 Corinthians, suggests that "the Lord's Supper should accent and intensify group solidarity; the Corinthians' supper accented and intensified social differences." He then asks us to reflect on this question about our own churches: "Does what is done proclaim the Lord's death or does it advertise our selfishness?"

What is your answer? How could we better reflect the unity that Christ has won for us when we gather? What could your growth group do this Sunday?

Prayer ideas

- Pray that our church can express the unity we have in Christ.
- Pray for those churches currently experiencing division and turmoil.

Study 19. 1 Cor 12:1-31

Mike Paget

Big idea: in the status-obsessed world of Corinth, the church has been playing like a bunch of soloists, and the end result has sounded pretty hideous.

Introduction

I used to play a great deal of football (soccer, for the parochial) until my prospects of international stardom were dashed with a knee injury that led to surgery. And then more surgery. Truth be told, I was never a great player. Worse than that - I was a 'back'.

Many players will deny it, but there is a definite hierarchy on the football field. The strikers score all the goals, and earn all the glory (in fact, the most famous defenders are largely famous because of their goal-scoring, too). Chances are that even if you've never watched a game of football in your life, you'd recognise the names of some of the greats, like Pele and Ronaldo. The top-10 highest paid players in the world are mostly strikers (or at least forwards).

Backs rarely rate a mention.

But you can't win a game with only strikers. That's the story of every under-5s game every played.

It's true for orchestras, too.

I used to maul a clarinet. We loved to look down on the trombones who, in turn, happily condescended to the tuba. But all of us played in the shadow of the strings. The cellos, first. And above them, the viola. But at the apex, the very tip of it all, were the violins. The prima donnas and virtuosos of every high school orchestra.

But as N.T. Wright points out, sooner or later you encounter a moment when everyone depends upon the instruments that were usually looked down upon: 'you can't start Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute* unless the trombones are in good form.'

Here's the problem: in the status-obsessed world of Corinth, the church has been playing like a bunch of soloists, and the end result has sounded pretty hideous.

Observation and interpretation

Read 1 Cor 12:1-6. In v.1 in the NIV, 'gifts of the Spirit' is probably better translated 'spiritual things'. The Corinthian church, fascinated with spirituality, assumed that anything 'spiritual' must be from God. How does Paul say you can tell apart pagan and Christianity 'spiritualities'?

In vv.4-6, Paul could seem to be immediately reversing his position. 'All spiritual things come from the one God.' But 'spiritual things' (v.1), 'speaking by the Spirit' (v.3) and 'gifts' (v.4) are probably all describing the same thing. If actions speak louder than words, then, what do all gifts of God 'say' (v.3)? How might they do that?

How many ways does God describe the singular divine origin of the unity and diversity of gifts in the church (vv.4-6)? What do you think Paul wants us to understand about both God and church from this?

Read vv.7-11. Is anyone weirded out yet? That's OK - breathe. Here's what we hard-bitten late-modern materialists need to remember: God is not like us. If something is from God, then it does make much sense to worry if it doesn't look like it comes from human beings.

Which of these spiritual gifts have you seen at work in the church? What does Paul say they are for? Does this help explain why not all gifts are seen in all churches?

Read vv.12-26. Paul really speaks to two common experiences: our tendency to look down on those who don't have what we have, and our equal tendency to envy those who have what we don't have (but really want). How does Paul address each of these experiences?

Application / Implications

As a group, take some time to explore how you believe God has equipped each of your fellow-members. Remember: 'to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is give for the common good.' If you aren't sure, pray for that person that God will make it clear.

Are all of you using your gifts for the common good in the church? Talk about how you might do that better.

Which of the gifts are we at Barneys likely to prize more highly? Which do we need to take more care to honour? How could we do that better?

Prayer ideas

Pray for each other and our church.

Study 20. 1 Cor 12:31-13:13

Erica Hamence

Big idea: love is more important than gifts

Introduction

This passage has three main parts, which can be summarised like this:

- vv1-3 The Priority of love (over gifts)
- vv4-7 The characteristics of love
- vv8-13 The permanence of love (over gifts)

Paul's main point is that love is more important than gifts, and that should show itself in the way the church worships.

Observation, interpretation and implications

Because of the nature of this passage, we are breaking with our normal structure (Observation/Interpretation then Implications) and instead considering the three sections one by one and thinking about their implications along the way.

Read verses 1-3

- Why does Paul specifically mention tongues, prophecy, knowledge and faith in these verses? (Consider the context in the letter)
- What is the problem with the exercise of gifts without love?
 - What does Paul mean when he says 'I am nothing' and 'I gain nothing'?
- In pairs or groups of three, discuss:
 - What would it look like to exercise gifts with and without love? (Think in particular of your own gifts). Try and be specific about the difference.
 - Do you think we tend to prefer to have great gifts, or great love? Why?

Read verses 4-7

There are fifteen descriptions of love here, and you probably won't have time to consider each in detail.

In groups of 2-3, take one or two descriptions of love and unpack it:

- What does it mean to be (patient, kind, not boastful, etc.)?
- What other Bible passages or themes will inform our understanding of this characteristic?
- In what ways is this also a description of God?
- What Bible passages will inform your understanding of that?

Some examples:

God is patient

Exodus 34:6 says the Lord is 'the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness...'

God is kind

Titus 3:4 – 'But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.'

Luke 6:35 – 'love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.'

In Christ, God keeps no record of wrongs

2 Cor. 5:19: 'that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them.'

- Do you tend to think of God in this way? Why/why not?

- What will help you grow in love?

The three tips from Sunday were to:

- a) Remember that God is patient/kind/slow to anger, etc. towards us.
- b) Remember that he is patient/kind/slow to anger, etc. towards people we need to love.
- c) Remember that he is patient/kind/slow to anger, etc. even when we struggle to love.

- In what ways can you imagine this helping?

Report back to the whole group what you've learned.

Read verses 8-13

- How does love compare with gifts in this section? What distinction is Paul emphasising?
- When will the gifts of tongues, knowledge, prophecy end, and why?
- In what way can we say that love is the greatest of the virtues?

Prayer ideas

Pray for one another to grow in love, as individuals and as a group.

Study 21. 1 Cor 14:1-26

Big idea: speaking in tongues is good but prophecy is better

Introduction

If you could instantly learn any language to a native speaker level what would it be and why?

Observation and interpretation

Look up the following passages and try to work out what we can say for sure about what "speaking in tongues" and "prophecy" involves:

	Speaking in tongues	Prophecy
Who you are speaking to?	1 Cor 14:2	1 Cor 14:3
Who is edified?	1 Cor 14:4	1 Cor 14:4
Is the language intelligible to others?	1 Cor 14:9-12, 14, 16	1 Cor 14:19
What happens to unbelievers when they hear it?	1 Cor 14:23	1 Cor 14:24-25

Read 1 Corinthians 14:1-5

- Why is the one who prophesies greater than the one who speaks in tongues?
- If everyone has their own gift, and not everyone is a prophet (1 Corinthians 12:29) then why does Paul suggest that we eagerly desire the gifts of the Spirit "especially prophecy" (14:1)?

Read 1 Corinthians 14:6-12

- Why does Paul pick these metaphors to explain how prophecy is superior to tongues? What is the point he's trying to drive home?

Read 1 Corinthians 14:13-19

- Is there anything wrong with speaking in tongues?
- Under what circumstances could speaking in tongues be useful in church?

Read 1 Corinthians 14:20-25

- Why is speaking in tongues a "sign" to unbelievers? Is it a positive sign or a negative sign?
- How do you think prophecy causes outsiders to be "convicted of sin" and to "fall down and worship God" (14:25)?

Prophecy

Paul uses "Prophecy" here as a broad term for speech directed towards the congregation about them and God on a particular occasion or with a particular focus. Like the reading of Scripture or the teaching of doctrine it is communication from God, but it is more tailored to the specific situation of the hearers.

- It can take the form of challenge, comfort, judgment, consolation - whatever is needed to build up the hearers.
- It doesn't have to be spontaneous, in fact it seems like Paul imagines people receiving a prophetic word at home, stewing on it a while, and then bringing it before the congregation to be weighed (1 Cor 14:26-40).
- It's not necessarily about predicting the future. In the Old Testament it was partly about warning people about what is to come, but also about giving God's commentary on human affairs - the point is how to live in light of what's to come, not to feel superior because you know who is going to win the Grand Final.
- Old Testament "big P Prophets" were rare, and were commissioned by God (Jeremiah 1:4-10) and if they got their prediction wrong they would be put to death as a false prophet. In New Testament land we don't have big P Prophets, we have Jesus (Heb 1:1). The gift of prophecy continues, but you are less likely to be writing new books of the Bible at this stage in God's salvation history.
- Some people have a particular gift of prophecy, but everyone has the Spirit and so is able to be used by God to deliver his message (See Joel 2:28-32). So the most basic level - when you tell your friend they probably should take Jesus seriously and they do, then you have been used by God to communicate God's most urgent message to their situation.
- The final thing that's worth saying about prophecy is that it comes in different shapes and sizes. There are hopefully elements of prophecy in our preaching at Barneys, at least in some sermons, but it can also be delivered one on one or in a small group. I

think songs can have elements of prophecy in them - most great songwriters I know see their job as dwelling on scriptures in prayer in order to discern what God wants his people to sing about.

Tongues

It's hard to say exactly what "Speaking in Tongues" means in this passage, because that same expression is used in different ways in different parts of the Bible. Some possibilities are:

1. *Natural human language.* "speaking in tongues" is a normal Biblical way of describing someone who is speaking in a human language (e.g. "people from every tribe and language (Greek: *glossa*, meaning tongue) and people and nation" Rev 5:9). Here, however, it seems like the language is not a normal human language which people in the church can learn.
2. *Natural human language supernaturally given.* In Acts 2 people are able to speak in languages they don't know and be understood by people from other nations. It is not quite clear, however, whether this is a supernatural gift of learning language really fast, or a supernatural gift of hearing the same words in your own language (i.e. is the miracle on the transmitting or the receiving end?)
3. *Divine language.* Sometimes it seems like the New Testament is talking about an angelic or divine language which people with the Spirit can use to communicate with God.
4. *Wordless communication.* It could be that what is being communicated is not actually an intelligible language at all, but some sort of Spirit-powered connection with God.

If we assume that a different person is given the gift of interpretation (14:5, 14:13), and that the person speaking is not actually able to translate the prayer into their own native language (which perhaps 1 Cor 14:14 hints at) then the most likely candidate is somewhere between the third and fourth option.

Application / Implications

- Should we celebrate the gift of tongues more in our life as a church?
- We tend to think of the sermon as being the main way in which God's word is brought to bear on our community. But this seems to suggest that, while there are different gifts for different people, we should all be seeking to cultivate prophetic gifts in our community. What opportunities could we all take to build up the church with our speech?
- Apart from the sermon, how could we include opportunity for different people in our community to exercise prophetic gifts in our services?

Prayer ideas

- Pray for our community, that we might be a place where people encounter the living God!

Study 22. 1 Cor 14:26-40

Mark Wormell

**Big idea: God values order in church and in marriages.
We must not use this to control or abuse each other.**

Introduction

What do you do when God disagrees with you? For example, what do you do when an ethical principle that you hold dear seems to be contradicted by God's word in the Bible?

Try to wrestle with this question. Do people always just say, 'if God says it, it must be right'? Or do we try all sorts of ways to accommodate God's apparent meaning to our views?

'Women should remain silent in the churches.' There have been few more controversial issues in the Church in Sydney (and many other parts of the Western world) in the last 30 years than the role of women in the Church, particularly in leadership and church services. This passage, together with 1 Timothy 2:11-15, and the 'submission' passages of Ephesians 5:22-33 and 1 Peter 3:1-8 (yes, this is not only an issue for the apostle Paul) have provoked much disagreement and division (and factions!: see 1 Corinthians 1:10-13).

Commentaries bulge when they come to these passages. There is not time here to suggest all the possible 'solutions' or interpretations. Some have suggested this passage is a textual error. They say, based on textual evidence, it does not belong here or in the Bible at all. However, it appears in the earliest texts and cannot be wished away.

Whatever one believes, it cannot have been meant literally. In 11:5 Paul clearly contemplates women praying and prophesying, and there is no suggestion only men should sing the hymns mentioned in 14:26. Presumably female deacons could speak in connection with their distribution of relief to the poor, and women could greet each other and family members.

Issues include:

1. What forms of speech were prohibited, and do we have equivalent forms of speech in the church today?
2. Whether the passage should be limited to particular issues in Corinth, or the culture of the time? For example, few churches insist on the head coverings or hair arrangements mentioned in chapter 11.
3. Whether things that were shameful 2,000 years ago (e.g. women or wives questioning men in public), but are no longer shameful, should shape what we do today?
4. Whether the passage applies to all women, or only married women (the word that is translated 'women' can also mean only wives)?
5. What single women, widows and women married to non-Christians should do?
6. How we should apply it today?

7. Whether the apparent purpose of good order should be the dominating principle, so that we may permit women a wide range of verbal communication in church as long as good order is maintained in church and marriages?

Descriptions of the cultural setting are contested. However, there is little doubt the Greek culture was heavily skewed in favour of men. Only men had many legal rights, or could take roles in public life. Women could go out in public only if accompanied. Normally they could not speak to men other than their husbands or relatives. Wives were usually much younger than their husbands (married at 12-14 yo). They lived under the authority of their father until married, when the authority of the husband would take over. Women did not live alone, and needed the protection of a man both for physical safety and propriety.

There were no church buildings. Small groups of Christians met in their homes. They were small enough in number to know each other. There was no need to manage hundreds of worshippers. Yet, Paul still found it necessary to encourage orderly meetings. They should take turns to speak, and not over-do things. They should avoid things that were culturally shameful.

Observation and interpretation

1. Read the whole passage. What do you think is the governing idea?

It could be verse 26 'Everything must be done so that the church may be built up', or perhaps it is verse 33, and we should conform ourselves more to the character of God.

2. What parts do you find difficult or not easy to understand or accept?

3. While there is to be order in the Corinthian church meetings, they seem less structured than us. Each week at Barneys the staff, under the control of our senior minister, decide on the order of service, the Bible readings, the sermon topic, the songs, the prayers and the identity of the people who do things 'up front'. Are we departing from 'church' as Paul envisaged it? Is that OK?

4. Paul was writing to a small church, that met in someone's house, not a church of many hundreds of people. Does this make a difference?

5. What do you think 'prophecy' means in this context? Verse 31 seems to suggest they were all capable of prophecy. Are we?

In this context, 'prophecy' probably was a form of highly occasion or situation focussed teaching or encouragement. Some have argued it is like the 'application' focussed modern sermon, although others would context this. Conservative commentator Anthony Thiselton says prophecy, 'combines pastoral insight into the needs of persons, communities, situations with the ability to address these with a God-given utterance or longer discourse (whether unprompted or prepared with judgement, decision and rational reflection) leading to challenge or comfort, judgement or consolation, but ultimately building up the addressees'.

6. What aspects of order does Paul encourage in verses 26-32?

7. How does verse 34 sit with your understanding of the 'equality' between the sexes that is mentioned in Genesis 1:27 and Galatians 3:28? Are these relevant to the issue of order Paul is addressing in this passage?
8. How does verse 34 sit with Paul's teaching that women can pray and prophecy (1 Cor 11:5)? What does Paul think women should not speak?
9. Why do you think Paul thought good order in church was so important?

Application / Implications

10. If Paul's point here about women speaking in church is that they should not question the teaching/prophecy/interpretations of their husbands, or other men, because that could bring disorder in church and/or marriages, then, given the greater equality and communication between the sexes that exists in our culture today, and that many women do not live with a father or husband, what limits (if any) on women speaking do you think Paul would impose on our churches? [Sorry this is such a long question!]
11. One issue the churches in Sydney faces is that women have often not received the same training and practice in preaching that men receive. Do you think more women should be trained as preachers? Would you like to hear more women preachers?
12. Do you think more people should have a say in how our services are structured and run? How, and who should decide?
13. [If you have time] Thinking back to the opening question, 'What do you do when God disagrees with you?', how would you answer that question now?

Perhaps something along the following lines may emerge:

First, great care needs to be taken to understand what the passage says and means in its original context.

Second, the original social context needs to be considered.

Third, thought needs to be given to whether universal truths are being set out. For example, it could be that 'order in church and marriages' is the main point rather than 'women always being silent'.

Fourth, the passage needs to be understood in the context of the whole Bible, particularly the New Testament teaching on the role of women and marriage.

Fifth, care needs to be taken to not impose modern values on universal truths, yet we need to be prepared to apply these universal truths to our churches today, and not blindly hang onto or reproduce past cultures or social norms.

Prayer ideas

- Understanding, peace and good relations.
- Building up.
- For Mark Wormell, as he preaches at Barneys on this subject :)

Study 23. 1 Cor 15:1-11

Andrew Judd

Big idea: Hold firmly to the message that Christ died for our sins and was raised.

Introduction

What's the most important news you've ever had to deliver to someone?

Observation and interpretation

Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-2

"Gospel" is originally a secular term meaning "good news", which came to refer specifically to God's announcement concerning Jesus Christ. Later Christians used "the gospels" to mean a book recording details of Jesus life.

- What does it mean to "believe in vain" (verse 2) and how does Paul suggest we avoid that?

Read 1 Corinthians 15:3-5

- For Paul, what is the gospel story? What things do you find interesting or surprising about how he outlines the gospel here?
- In 1 Corinthians 2:2 Paul resolves to know nothing but "Christ and him crucified". Is the resurrection an optional extra to the gospel, or did he forget to include it back in chapter two?

Interestingly in 2 Timothy 2:8 Paul majors on the resurrection as he summarises the gospel: "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead." So the cross and resurrection seem to be inseparable - speaking of one implies the other.

- Twice Paul says "according to the Scriptures". What does this mean and why is it so important?
- What does "resurrection" mean? How does it differ from merely resuscitating someone who is clinically dead through CPR?
- Jesus "was raised" - he didn't raise himself. Who did the raising and why is that significant?

Read 1 Corinthians 15:5-11

- Why does Paul both to name these people and tell us whether they're living or dead?
- Why does Paul call himself the "least" of the apostles?

"Abnormally born" here is not a very nice thing to say about Paul – it can mean a miscarriage or a premature birth, alluding to the unusual way that Paul came to be an apostle. Indeed some may have doubted Paul's credentials as he was not "born again" in the "normal way" for an apostle – he never met Jesus before his crucifixion, he persecuted the church, and he saw Jesus after everyone else.

- What does the "grace of God" mean to Paul?
- Why do you think Paul is so keen to bring the Corinthians back to the original message he preached to them?

Application / Implications

- Imagine you're on a bus about one minute from your stop, and someone asks you to explain the gospel to them. What would you say?
- Is it possible to investigate the historical truth of the resurrection or does belief in the resurrection require faith?
- Imagine that the whole gospel was the same except Jesus was not raised (he was truly the Son of God, and he truly died for our sins, but then he went to be with God without coming back to earth). What difference would that make to the Christian faith?

We often talk about the resurrection as an after thought in our gospel presentations, but it is actually as central as the cross. Some examples:

- Acts 17:30-31 speaks about the role of the resurrection in giving vindication of Jesus' identity – reversing humanity's erroneous judgment on him as worthy of death.
- Next week in 1 Corinthians 15:20 we'll hear about the resurrection as the "first fruits" of our own bodily resurrection.
- In Romans 1:4 Christ's resurrection is the means by which he is appointed or declared the Son of God in power.

Prayer ideas

- Praise God for the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.
- Pray for opportunities to share this gospel with others this week.

Study 24. 1 Cor 15:12-34

Andrew Judd

Big idea: our future makes us fearless, because nothing can break us in a way that God won't fix

Introduction

Would you rather know the exact date of your death or the exact way you will die?

Observation and interpretation

Read 1 Corinthians 15:12-19

- Paul's logic can be a little tricky to follow here. For Paul, what is the fundamental problem with people believing there is no such thing as the resurrection of the dead?

It seems that some of the Corinthians rejected (perhaps on philosophical grounds) the whole idea of a resurrection of the dead, favouring a more "sophisticated" Christianity, which didn't involve a body walking out of his tomb. This may be what is behind Paul's warning that "bad company corrupts good character" (verse 33): i.e. don't be led astray by people who deny the resurrection!

- Either Christ "has been" raised or "has not been raised" - but in either case it is not Christ but someone else who is actually *doing* the raising. Who? (I.e. who is the agent in these passive sentences?)
- Why would no resurrection mean we are still "in our sins"?

N.T. Wright puts it really well when he says: "For Paul the point of the resurrection is not simply that the creator god has done something remarkable for one solitary individual ... but that, in and through the resurrection, 'the present evil age' has been invaded by the 'age to come', the time of restoration, return, covenant renewal, and forgiveness." (N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, cited in Rosner and Ciampa, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*). If Christ has not been raised, therefore, then Christ is a sham, Paul is a con-artist, and we have no right to claim any of the benefits of the resurrection kingdom. False hope is no hope at all.

- Is it important that Christ was raised in a physical body (as opposed to some sort of spiritual elevation to a higher place)?

Read 1 Corinthians 15:20-28

- In what way is Christ the “firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep”?

“Firstfruits is an Old Testament idea - the first part harvested of a bigger crop, which gives hope that the rest of the harvest is coming and will presumably be of equal quality. It has interesting sacrificial overtones because these “firstfruits” were normally owed to God as a sacrifice expressing confidence in God (Exodus 23:19).

- What is the point of Paul’s comparison between Christ and Adam?

This links to the creation story in Genesis 1-3. Paul is highlighting our membership of either “team Adam” or “team Christ”; we are “in Christ”, or we are still “in Adam”; one or other of these men is our representative; which team we are on determines our destiny. What the two teams have in common is that a reality (death, in Adam’s case; resurrection in Jesus’ case) came through a human being. But they differ obviously in the desirability of that reality! See Romans 5:12-21, and also Rory Shiner’s excellent books *One Forever* and *Raised Forever*.

- How does Christ defeat the last enemy of death?

Some of the details in this passage may raise questions about the end times. Paul here doesn’t seem to envisage a clear chronology of events to come (unlike the way that some people find a clear timeline in Revelation 20). The point is bigger than mere chronology: a future is coming when God in Christ will put the world the right way up again. See also Psalms 8 and 110.

Application / Implications

If your group is up for it, you could centre the Bible study around this exercise (i.e. you could potentially skip some of the observation questions and build them into this exercise, particularly if you stop along the way to talk about interesting or passages). If they are not into tables, feel free to skip to the questions below.

Alternate realities exercise: In this passage Paul puts things in the negative - but under the surface there is a much more positive reality which Paul believes is actually true.

Try filling in this table as a group on a whiteboard or big piece of paper.

First find statements in the passage belonging to the negative version of reality and write each element in the left column. Then try to find or work out the corresponding positive statement in the right.

Alternative Reality A	Alternative Reality B
If...	If...
<i>Christ is not raised,</i>	<i>Christ has been raised</i>
<i>There is no resurrection of the dead</i>	
<i>Our faith is useless</i>	
<i>Etc...</i>	

Read 1 Corinthians 15:29-34. Paul thinks that his life choices are madness if the dead are not raised.

- What parts of your life would be madness if Alternative Reality A is true?
- Are Christians really to be “pitied more than all others” if Alternative Reality A is true (i.e. if there is no resurrection)? Surely there is some benefit in living a good life here and now?
- How would you live differently if you truly weren’t afraid of death?
- When do you find it hardest to believe that the dead will really be raised? What might help us to hope more certainly for the resurrection?

This section contains a confusing phrase: “baptised for the dead”. This probably is referring to people who were particularly motivated to become Christians because of their concern for what happens after death.

Prayer ideas

- Pray in thanks and praise that Christ was indeed raised from the dead. You might also like to try opening up a time when people in the group can pray in short “God you...” sentences. E.g. “God you are the one who raises dead people to life!”.

Study 25. 1 Cor 15:35-58

Mike Paget

Big idea: the shape of the future to come changes how we live here and now

Introduction

In 1 Corinthians 15:35-58, Paul is continuing to wrestle with the skepticism of the Christians in Corinth about the promised resurrection of God's people. He refers to a real or anticipated question from this difficult church:

1 Cor 15:35 But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?"

One prominent theme in ancient Greek philosophy contended that everything spiritual is intrinsically good and everything physical is intrinsically evil. To those who held this view prior to coming to Christ, the idea of a resurrected body would have been repugnant, if not unthinkable. Paul presents a new idea: that the physical and the spiritual are related.

What expectations do the authors of the Old Testament display about the resurrection? (Psalm 16; Isaiah 53; Daniel 12) How is this different from the Greek view?

Observation and interpretation

Read 1 Corinthians 15:36-44. What point is Paul making by these comparisons?

Read 1 Corinthians 15:45-49. How is Adam relevant to the resurrection? What does it mean to 'bear the image' of Adam and of Jesus?

Read 1 Corinthians 15:50-53. Why do we need to be transformed?

Read 1 Corinthians 15:54-58. What is the victory that Paul writes about?

Read Romans 5:12-17. What does it mean for God to take away the sting of death?

Read Philippians 3:20-21. What will our transformed bodies be like?

The gospel accounts describe Jesus' resurrected body in surprising ways. What are some of them?

- Luke 24:31
- Luke 24:39, John 20:17, 27
- Luke 24:42-43
- John 20:19,26
- Mark 16:12-14, John 21:1-7

What does this tell you about the nature of things to come?

Application / Implications

What difference does an 'imperishable' body make? Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and Revelation 21:1-4.

What is one way in which you are not living as someone who will be raised from the dead? Share this with your group.

Prayer ideas

- Pray in light of the things you've shared above.
- Praise God for the resurrection of the dead.

Study 26. 1 Cor 16:1-24

Andrew Judd

Big idea: our connections with Christians throughout the world give us opportunity to care for their needs

Introduction

Think of the last postcard you received (if you can!). Who was it from, and where were they?

Observation, interpretation and implications

1. Collections for the needy

Read 1 Corinthians 16:1-4

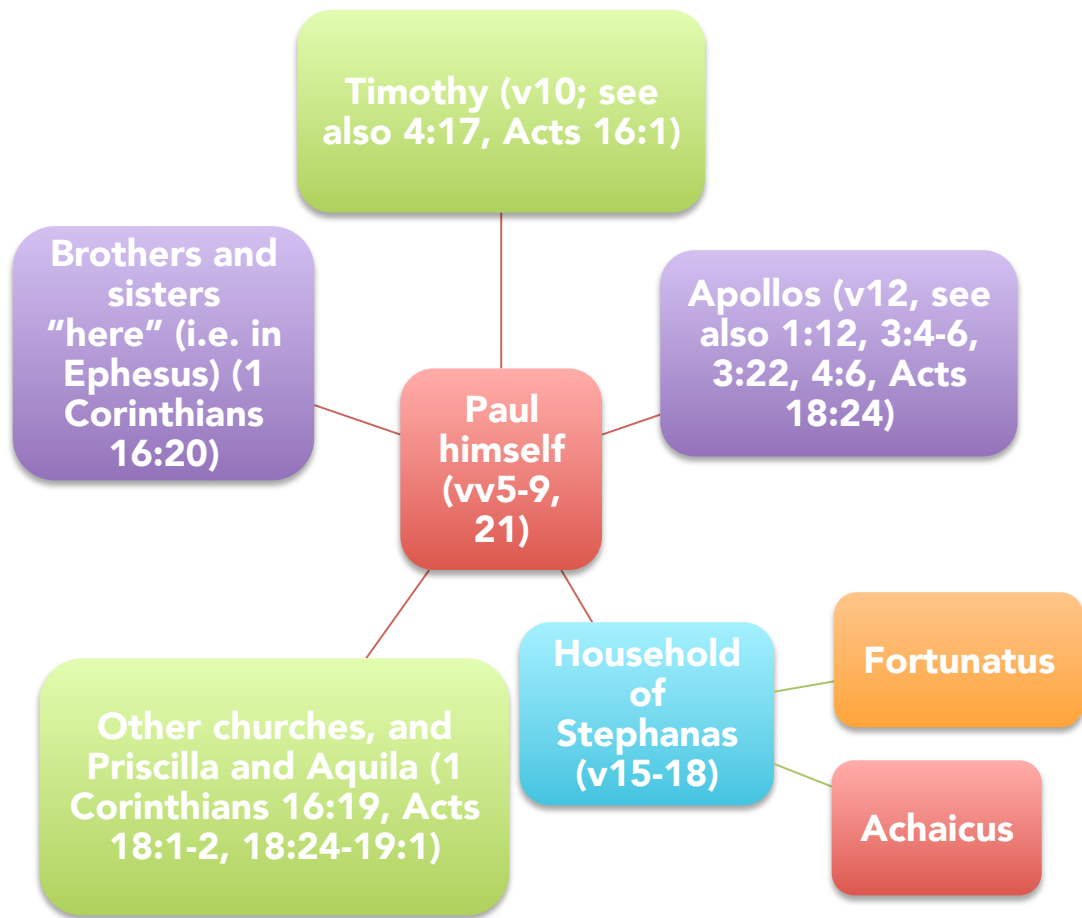
- Why was Paul helping them to send money to Jerusalem? (Hint see Acts 11:28-30, 2 Corinthians 8:13-15)
- What is the benefit of Paul's plan that each person set aside money at the start of the week?
- How might we apply these principles today to practically care for Christians in other parts of the world?
- Many people give electronically to different charities. What is the advantage of us giving together as a church in the way the Corinthians are doing here?

2. Comings and goings

Paul mentions a bunch of people as he shares greetings, and talks about travel plans.

- Do you find it surprising that God's word includes such incidental details about people long dead?
- Why is God's word so anchored in this particular time and place?

Using a whiteboard or big piece of paper, try to draw a picture or diagram of all the people mentioned. Who are they, and what do Paul's comments about them reveal about his hopes and fears for the Corinthian church?



People often giggle at the “holy kiss” in verse 20. The “kiss” was a cultural practice for greeting, departing and expressing a relationship of peace, love and respect. It particularly applied within families. The “holy” part of the expression probably emphasises that this is a greeting shared now with a special significance among the holy people of God (i.e. the church).

Final words of advice

- What is interesting about the way Paul uses provisional language throughout (e.g. “if the Lord permits” in verse 7)?
- What does it mean to be “on your guard” (16:13)? What threats did Paul anticipate for the Corinthians, and what threats do we need to be aware of today?
- 1 Corinthians has been a wild ride full of heavy rebukes for the church at Corinth. What do Paul’s final closing comments in verses 22-24 reveal at the end of the day about how he sees them and what he wants for them?

Review of 1 Corinthians

- If you had to summarise the book of 1 Corinthians in a single sentence, what would you say?

You can do this activity in a fun way by getting each person to work out their own sentence, then join with one other person to hone their sentence (deciding as a pair whether to adopt one person's or modify), then threes, fours, and so on until the whole group has settled on a summary.

- What have you found encouraging or challenging about this series on 1 Corinthians?
- The book of 1 Corinthians is sometimes referred to as the book of "1 Sydney" because of how it applies to our city. What do you think Paul's message would be to believers in Sydney today?

Prayer ideas

- Pray for Christians in other parts of the world that you're aware of that are in need.

You might like to ask someone in your group to do some research about this prior to the night so you can pray in an informed way.

- Give thanks to God for Paul and the Corinthians - that in Christ we are connected with them though they lived thousands of years ago, and that their lives and passions and struggles can speak to us today.
- Take some time to pray about the things that we've been confronted with in this series on 1 Corinthians.