

SBRCC Adult Bible Class

I Corinthians

October 2019

Pre-Class materials for an overview of I Corinthians!

Next week we will focus almost exclusively on I Corinthians Chapters 11 and 14

- **Imagining an Ancient Person's Perspective** (pages 3 – 6)
Dale Martin, Yale Open Course, New Testament History
- **Paul's Letters in Chronological Order** (pages 7 – 8)
- **Paul's Mission and Letters** (pages 9 – 25)
www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/first/missions
- **Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to a community in the middle of a culture war**
[Douglas A. Campbell](#) (Professor of New Testament at Duke Divinity School)
(pages 27 – 33)
- **Early Christianity: The Letters of Paul** (pages 35 – 37)
Laura Nasrallah, Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity
The Letters of Paul from Harvard University at <http://edx.org/courses>.
- **Postcards from Paul? 😊** (page 39)

Imagining an Ancient Person's Perspective

We can try not just to look at the documents from the outside but to imagine how an ancient person who encountered an early Christian church from the outside would think about it.

Imagine that you are a seamstress who works in a cloth shop in the city of Corinth, in Greece, in the year 56. Eutyclus, a guy who lives next door to you and works in a leather workshop nearby, has just joined a new club, and he tells you about it. First, they don't meet in the daytime, but either early, before light, or after dark. There are only enough of them to fill a decent-sized dining room, but they call themselves the "town meeting." You're not quite sure what they do at these meetings. They don't appear to worship any god or goddess that you can see. They use the term "god" sometimes, but this god doesn't have a name, and to you that would be bizarre. Remember, you are pretending that you're a Greek living in the year 56 in Corinth. To you, these people look as if they don't believe in gods at all; they look like atheists.

The people in this new club have a very high respect for a criminal Jew who led some kind of guerrilla war and was executed long ago, somewhere in Syria. Eutyclus says, though, that this Jew is still alive somewhere. In fact, Eutyclus says that the Jew "bought" him, although you didn't know that Eutyclus was ever a slave. In fact, you're pretty sure he wasn't a slave. So what does it mean that this guy bought him? At these town meetings they eat meals—which is not unusual since most clubs in your society eat meals—but they call the meals the "boss's dinner," or sometimes "the thank-you." Some people say they eat human flesh at these dinners, but you doubt that because for some reason they seem to be vegetarians. You doubt whether vegetarians would eat human flesh. Eutyclus says that to initiate new members into their club, they "dip them," naked, and then they "get healthy." Once you're in the club, they call you "comrade," and you have sex with anyone and everyone, because it doesn't matter anymore whether you're a man or a woman; in fact, they kind of figure you're neither—or both.

I constructed this fanciful portrait out of actual data from the New Testament and other early Christian, Greek, and Roman sources. This was, in fact, the way at least a good many ancient people saw early Christian groups. For example, a later Roman governor informs the emperor that Christian groups he knew about met early in the morning or after dark. As we will see repeatedly, all the early Christian groups were “house churches” and must have been relatively small. The Greek term we translate as “church” (*ekklēsia*) in an ancient Greek context also, more commonly, referred to the public meeting of the citizens of a city. We must remember, in spite of our tendencies otherwise, that “god” is not the name of God and in the ancient context would have been used as the generic category for any god. Each god would have his or her own proper name. The Christian “god” did not. And we know from many sources that Christians were considered by others to be atheists.

Most people in Greece likely had no knowledge of Galilee; they would likely have taken it to be simply part of Syria, which was much better known. When Eutychus said that Jesus “bought” him, he would have been using the Greek word *agorazein*, whose older, more “religious” translation was “redeem.” The meal they ate regularly would have been the Communion, the “Lord’s Supper,” which in the earliest days of the Christian movement was observed along with a full dinner, something like a potluck supper (see the way Paul talks about it in 1 Cor 11:17–34, where it obviously was a meal, as we will see in a later chapter). Even the common English term for the Communion, the “Lord’s Supper,” is actually a more “formal” way of translating the Greek, which less formally could be translated as “the boss’s dinner.” *Kyrios* could mean “the Lord” or simply someone’s master or employer. And if outsiders heard these meals referred to with another ancient designation, the “Eucharist,” they may likely have taken that Greek word, *eucharistia*, as having its normal, everyday meaning of “thanks.”

We know from Christian defenses against the accusation that Christians were thought to consume human flesh. After all, they do say they are eating the body and blood of this man named Jesus (John 6:53–56; 1 Cor 10:16). We also know that Christians developed a reputation at some times and in some places of avoiding meat, perhaps because they wanted to avoid eating meat that might have been part of a sacrifice to a god, which most Christians carefully avoided. I said that they initiated one another by “dipping” into water: the word “baptize” in Greek meant simply “dip.” We know from later Christian sources that this was often done in private, and the person baptized was naked. To note that the Christians called this “getting healthy,” I just translated the Greek word we usually translate as “salvation” into its more mundane, everyday sense of “health” (*sōtēria*).

Christians did call one another “brother” and “sister,” and without knowing how those terms would later become theologically laden in Christianity, a Greek would likely have heard them as a rather odd, in-house, jargony use of language, much as Americans heard “comrade” during the cold war. As for that part about sex and not being male or female, Paul says that in Christ there is no male and female (Gal 3:28). And hearing Christians talk so much about loving one another, brother and sister, although there was no longer a difference between male and female—well, we may imagine how outsiders could have allowed their imaginations to run wild with salacious rumors, as does seem sometimes to have been the case.

Just as early Christian house churches, with their in-house, jargony language and their often odd-seeming practices and sometimes private meetings at night, would have appeared strange to the average inhabitant of Corinth, so the Bible presents us with a strange world if we approach it without our normal preconceptions, if we approach it fresh and from the outside. This is an ancient collection of documents from different times and places, put together much later to form the New Testament.

Yale Open Course: New Testament History

About the Professor

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Dale B. Martin specializes in New Testament and Christian Origins, including attention to the social and cultural history of the Greco-Roman world. Before joining the Yale faculty in 1999, he taught at Rhodes College and Duke University.







<http://oyc.yale.edu/religious-studies/rlst-152>

Available via iTunes U (search for Yale New Testament)








About the Course

This course provides a historical study of the origins of Christianity by analyzing the literature of the earliest Christian movements in historical context, concentrating on the New Testament. Although theological themes will occupy much of our attention, the course does not attempt a theological appropriation of the New Testament as scripture. Rather, the importance of the New Testament and other early Christian documents as ancient literature and as sources for historical study will be emphasized. A central organizing theme of the course will focus on the differences within early Christianity (-ies).

Paul's Letters in Chronological Order: Part 1

<p>1st Journey</p> 	<p>From Antioch to the</p> <p>GALATIANS</p> <p>You are free from the Law! No Circumcision!</p>	<p>Paul's follow-up to his first churches after the Jerusalem council. No circumcision required!</p>
<p>2nd Journey</p> 	<p>From Macedonia to the</p> <p>1 THESSALONIANS</p> <p>Jesus will return for us!</p>	<p>Paul counteracts a false teaching that Jesus had already returned and there was no more resurrection.</p>
	<p>From Corinth to the</p> <p>2 THESSALONIANS</p> <p>We don't know when He's coming, keep working!</p>	<p>Paul rebukes those who had become lazy in light of Jesus' imminent return. They must keep working.</p>
<p>3rd Journey</p> 	<p>From Ephesus to the</p> <p>1 CORINTHIANS</p> <p>Stop sinning! Start Loving!</p>	<p>Paul responds to a list of questions and complaints from the Corinthians.</p>
	<p>From Macedonia to the</p> <p>2 CORINTHIANS</p> <p>I'm an apostle, so listen to me!</p>	<p>Paul defends himself against being called a false apostle. Paul is also preparing them for a collection he is taking for the church in Jerusalem.</p>
	<p>From Corinth to the</p> <p>ROMANS</p> <p>Grace thru faith - works of Law = HOPE!</p>	<p>Paul explains the full gospel message of faith in Jesus to a Jewish audience who is confused about how to now view the purpose of the Law.</p>

Paul's Letters in Chronological Order: Part 2

1st Roman Imprisonment		
	<p>From Rome to the EPHESIANS Jews + Gentiles = One New Man!</p>	<p>Paul paints a picture of what a healthy, unified body of Christ looks like.</p>
	<p>From Rome to the PHILIPPIANS In joy, peace, and humility we press on!</p>	<p>Paul encourages the church to stay focused and press on in spite of the false teachers.</p>
	<p>From Rome to the COLOSSIANS Jesus is the supreme head, so grow in Him!</p>	<p>Paul emphasizes the humanity and deity of Jesus in order to counteract false teaching about the identity of Christ.</p>
	<p>From Rome to the PHILEMON Take back your slave as a brother!</p>	<p>Paul encourages Philemon to receive his runaway slave, Onesimus, since he has now received Jesus and wants to repent.</p>
After Acts		
	<p>From Macedonia to 1 TIMOTHY Lead the Ephesian church well!</p>	<p>Paul encourages the young pastor, Timothy, to stay in Ephesus and not be intimidated by the older men who are teaching heresy. He should lead with strength and courage.</p>
	<p>From Corinth to TITUS Lead the Cretan church well!</p>	<p>Paul encourages the young pastor, Titus, to lead the church on the island of Crete with confidence.</p>
2nd Roman Imprisonment		
	<p>From Rome to 2 TIMOTHY I'm going to die, so carry the torch!</p>	<p>In the face of his imminent execution, Paul writes his final words of encouragement to his beloved disciple, Timothy.</p>

Paul's Mission and Letters

Carrying the 'good news' of Jesus Christ to non-Jews, Paul's letters to his fledgling congregations reveal their internal tension and conflict.

Wayne A. Meeks:

Woolsey Professor of Biblical Studies Yale University

WHO WAS PAUL?

The Apostle Paul is, next to Jesus, clearly the most intriguing figure of the 1st century of Christianity, and far better known than Jesus because he wrote all of those letters that we have [as] primary sources.... There are many astonishing things about him. For example, in modern scholarship, we have tended to divide various categories. There are gentiles, and there are Jews. There are Greek speaking people and there are Hebrew speaking people. There's Palestinian Judaism, which includes apocalypticism. There's Rabbinic Judaism and there's Hellenistic Judaism, which has derived deeply from the Greek world. Paul seems to fall into several of these categories, therefore confounding our modern divisions. So he's an intriguing and puzzling character in some respects.



The primary impact he has left on Christianity after him is through his letters, but in his own time, he sees himself primarily as a prophet to the non-Jews, to bring to them the message of the crucified Messiah, and he does this in an extraordinary way. He is a person who is somehow a city person, and he sees that the cities are the key to the rapid spread of this new message. ...At one point he can write to the Roman Christians, I have filled up the gospel in the East, I have no more room to work here. What could he possibly mean? There are only a handful of Christians in each of several major cities in the Eastern Empire. What does he mean, that he has filled up all of the Eastern Empire with the gospel? But we look at those places and we see [that] each of them is on a major Roman road or it is at a major seaport. They are the great trading centers of the world. They are the center of migrations of people and he sees this world, from a Roman point of view, which is an urban point of view, that the surrounding country is centered in that city and the spread of Christianity depends upon getting it to those major centers....

L. Michael White:

Professor of Classics and Director of the Religious Studies Program University of Texas at Austin

PAUL IN CORINTH

Mike, take us back in time to Corinth early fifties and describe the scene. What's happening? What's going on that's new?

The city of Corinth in about the year 50 would have been the burgeoning capital of a Roman province in the Greek East. ... A great center. It had two ports. One on the Aegean side and one on the Adriatic side so that it served as one of the major crossroads for Roman shipping throughout the Mediterranean. So when Paul arrived in Corinth in the year 50, he would have come up the slopes to the center of the city and seen the rise of a great Roman splendor. A kind of monumental city built around the remains of the older Greek city, the center of which was the temple of Apollo with its great monolithic Ionic columns standing up above the rest of the city.

When Paul writes letters he's writing everyday, ordinary letters to real people in real cities trying to deal with the circumstances in which they're living. ... [H]e does want to deal with theological issues, but Paul isn't writing theological treatises as much as he's giving advice and instruction and encouragement for living.

And what does Paul do when he arrives in Corinth?

So when Paul gets there he must have gone among the merchants and the artisans who would have been the key figures in the economic growth of the city, precisely because Corinth was an important trade center spanning the Eastern and the Western half of the Mediterranean. ... The city of Corinth is a bustling cosmopolitan place with people from all over the Mediterranean world there, and so when we see Paul in Corinth he's really another one of these travelers and tradesman. Traditionally at least Paul is a tent maker. He's somehow involved in the tent making or leather working industry. We've often viewed Paul as some sort of handworker. He may be actually from the upper artisan class. His family may have owned the business back in Tarsus. We're not absolutely sure but it's quite reasonable to think of Paul then moving very comfortably among the artisans who frequent and inhabit the marketplaces of a city like Corinth

....

... Let's imagine Paul going up the main street of Corinth through the monumental Roman archway into the forum, the center of city life, the place where all the business and most of the political activities are done in the public life of this Roman city. Here are the shops. Here are the offices of the city magistrates, and we're standing literally in the shadow of the great temple of Apollo. It's among these artisans, among the shopkeepers, among the bustle of activity of a Greek city that we must imagine Paul beginning to talk about his message of Jesus and so when we hear Paul say "I've determined to know nothing among you but Jesus Christ, Jesus the Messiah and him crucified," that must have struck an interesting chord among these cosmopolitan Greeks who would have inhabited Corinth at that time.



Temple of Apollo at Corinth

How would they have reacted?

They must have reacted as if this is some sort of strange message at certain levels. What does it mean to call someone the Christ or the Messiah? It must not have been intelligible to a lot of them until some sort of explanation could be given. From other references within Paul's writings we can determine some of the rudiments of his preaching message. He talks about how they turn from idols to serve a living God so he brings a message of the one Jewish God as part of his preaching. He's a Jewish preacher. Secondly, he talks about the wrath to come, a kind of apocalyptic image of a coming judgment on all who worship idols and don't serve that living God, and thirdly he talks about Jesus the Messiah as the one who will deliver from that wrath. So in Paul's view it is the messianic identity of Jesus that is an important new element in this very traditional Jewish message and now there's one other element. He's taking it to a non-Jewish audience. He's preaching to gentiles.

So why is he preaching to gentiles?

Paul had decided to preach to gentiles apparently out of his own revelatory experience that this was the mission that had been given him by God when God called him to function as a prophet for this new Jesus movement.

But Paul was Jewish, wasn't he?

Paul was Jewish. Paul was a Jewish prophet but when Paul talks about himself he describes himself as having been called from the womb to serve and fulfill this mission. But that language of being called from the womb is prophetic language drawn directly from the prophet Isaiah and the prophet Jeremiah, so Paul sees himself in direct continuity with this Jewish legacy of the prophetic tradition as someone called to have a special purpose. A special function on behalf of God.

Do we know anything about Paul's upbringing, his background?

Traditionally Paul grew up as a Diaspora Jew. That is from a Jewish family, with a very traditional Jewish upbringing but living not in the homeland but rather in Tarsus, a city in Eastern Turkey. So he lives in a Greek city, itself, in fact, an interesting kind of crossroads on the frontier of the Middle East, and yet he also had a very traditional Jewish education. He was himself a Pharisee and trained as a Pharisee so he would have been conversant with the tradition of interpretation of the scriptures and indeed of the prophets themselves. When we hear Paul using prophetic language both as a way of framing his preaching message and also as a way of describing his own self-understanding, it is because he was steeped in that prophetic language from his own studies in the Jewish tradition.

PAUL IN ANTIOCH

Why does Paul go to Antioch?

We have the story of Paul's life in a complete narrative fashion given to us in the Book of Acts, which details his activities from the time that he was in Jerusalem to the time that he goes to Damascus. There he has a conversion experience and afterwards comes back to Jerusalem. He then moves on to Antioch, one of the other important cities of the Greek East under Roman rule. In fact it's the capital of Roman Syria. We also know that there was a very large Jewish community in Antioch, and apparently when Paul went there it was because he understood it to offer a very important opportunity for him to preach this new message that he had come to understand as a result of his own revelatory experience about Jesus.

...Alongside of our account of Paul's life that we get from the Book of Acts we also have an account that Paul himself gives us and it's very important to notice that in some ways these two accounts contradict one another. They're not completely parallel in the way they describe certain events in Paul's career. For example in Galatians, when Paul tells us about his early career, he explicitly says he has little or nothing to do with Jerusalem early on. Only later does he come back to Jerusalem to become more familiar with the leaders of the Jerusalem Christian community. Paul himself spends more of his time away from Jerusalem. Initially in the area of Arabia. Probably around the city of Damascus, and then he moves back to Antioch. Paul describes much of his activity in the early stages of his career as a Christian. That is after his conversion around the areas of Antioch and Tarsus, his hometown.

Now when Paul describes his return to Antioch it's clear that's he working in this mixed Jewish and non-Jewish or gentile population of a major cosmopolitan center. Antioch itself has one of the largest Jewish communities outside of the Jewish homeland in the Roman period. It's been suggested that maybe something like forty thousand people in this Jewish community. So we must imagine a number of different Jewish congregations and sub-sections of the city in and through which Paul could have moved and still felt very much at home within the Jewish community. Some of these Jewish congregations probably like Paul, probably like other people in the homeland, also knew this apocalyptic message of a messianic expectation and maybe more than one kind of Messiah. Just like we see back in the homeland at this same period. So expect Paul to be preaching about a Messiah. To be talking about a messianic identity isn't really all that unique in and of itself, rather, it's more important to recognize that Paul and other followers of the Jesus movement of this time would have been given a special new meaning or a special new kind of information about their understanding of who and what that Messiah was to be.

A NEW VIEW OF THE MESSIAH

Which was?

In the Jesus movement it's clear that a new understanding has come to the fore. In fact it's slightly odd from certain perspectives. One doesn't normally expect that a Messiah should die and yet we have this ironic message in Paul that in fact the Messiah is the one who has been

crucified. Now it's true that one could within a standard Jewish tradition think of the Messiah dying. The difference is that even when a Messiah should go through some sort of death or suffering that the event precipitated by that death should be the coming of the new kingdom.... What we find in Paul, and indeed among most of the early Christians, is a slightly ironic twist of fate that the death of the Messiah doesn't immediately inaugurate the new kingdom, and yet that doesn't seem to diminish their sense of apocalyptic expectation. Paul still thinks it's coming soon. He will go through his entire life thinking the kingdom will come soon but the Messiah had already died.

How does Paul refer to Jesus?

So when we hear Paul talking about the message of Jesus Christ and him crucified, we're beginning to get for the first time in the New Testament the language that will become the hallmark of all the later Christian tradition. Indeed it's where we get much of the vocabulary that makes Christianity distinctive. The term "Christ" is a title. It's the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *Messiah* and they mean exactly the same thing. They both refer to someone who is anointed. ... It's identifying him as a religious figure in a new way.

...However, for Paul to use the term "Christ" does not automatically signal that we're dealing within a Christian frame of reference that everyone would have recognized. The term Christ, Messiah, could have been used by any number of different Jewish people and still meant different things. So just to hear that term even in the Greek city like Antioch probably wasn't all that unique, and yet it had to have sparked some interest. It's significant therefore that the Book of Acts tells us that the term "Christian" is a follower of the Messiah or a proponent of some Messiah.

THE TERM "CHRISTIAN"

The term "Christian" was first coined in Antioch probably some ten maybe even fifteen years after the death of Jesus. Now while this term Christian of course becomes the standard terminology for all later Christian traditions, and we think of it in much more lofty and positive terms, at the time that it was coined it was probably a slur. It was probably thrown at these early followers of Jesus as some derogatory designation of them. This is what we often see happening with new religious movements.... We often find in the sociology of sectarian groups that the group may have

one self designation. They may call themselves "the way" or "the true light" or something like that because that's their religious self conception, but outsiders will often label them by the name of the leader or the name of some catchy element in their message that sparks their interest. So when we hear at Antioch that they're called "Christians" we have to think of that in more in the vein of them being called "Messianists" or "Christies." People who follow a Messiah or just talk about the Messiah an awful lot and we're not actually sure who coined the term. Whether it's other Jews who didn't believe in the Messiah or pagans who heard these Jewish groups talking about messianic ideas. It's not entirely clear.

CONTROVERSY: DO YOU HAVE TO BECOME A JEW TO FOLLOW JESUS?

Were there practical issues that arose during the time that Paul was in Antioch? Can you describe to me the difference in the tension between Jerusalem and Antioch? The tensions that arose over time.

It's during the time that Paul is in Antioch that a major new development starts to take place in the Christian movement. Because it's there that we first hear of the expansion of the movement more to gentiles, to non-Jews. Even though it's coming out of this predominantly Jewish social context of the synagogue communities of Antioch. Now the situation seems to be that initially when people were attracted to the Jesus movement, they first became Jews and they had to go through all the rituals and rites of conversion to Judaism. But apparently it's among Paul and some of his close supporters that they began to think that it was okay to become a member of the Christian movement without having to go through all of those rites of conversion to Judaism, and that would, in the case of Paul's career, spark one of the most important controversies of the first generation of the Christian movement. Do you have to become a Jew in order to be a follower of Jesus as the Messiah?

The major issues in converting to Judaism for a gentile, for a non-Jew, is that one must, if a male, become circumcised, and of course this was an obvious distinction if one is working out in a Greek gymnasium where everyone was nude to begin with, so the physical fact of circumcision was the noticeably distinctive quality to Jewish self-identity in the Greco-Roman world. So the ritual of circumcision as a process of conversion to Judaism is one of those major hurdles that people would have thought about from the Greek world background in which Paul was living.

Now the other things that one must do in order to convert to Judaism, in addition to circumcision if a male, would be to observe the Torah. That is, the Jewish law and the dietary and other kinds of purity regulations that would have come from the Torah.

The one other thing to say, though, is that conversion to Judaism was actually much easier for women, and it may actually be the simple fact that more women could easily be attracted to Judaism...we know that later on when we see Paul's churches in the Greek world... in those Greek cities there are far more women in them, and it may be that this is where he had an early following precisely because it was already a hurdle that was easier to jump.

So how did Paul get this idea that it was okay not to do all this stuff? What was his logic?

Paul's notion that it was possible for gentiles to enter the congregation of God without some of the rules of Judaism interestingly enough seems to be a conviction on his part that comes from his own interpretation of the Jewish scriptures. In fact he gets it mostly from the prophet Isaiah. Paul's message of the conversion of gentiles seems to be predicated on the Isaiah language of what will happen when the kingdom comes when the Messiah has arrived and there will be a light to the nations, "a light to the gentiles." And in that sense Paul views the messianic age having arrived with Jesus as being a window of opportunity for bringing in the gentiles into the elect status alongside the people of Israel. So what Paul is really doing is creating this apocalyptic message of what the kingdom is about to be, and the arrival of the gentiles, the engrafting or integrating of the gentiles who will come to believe in the true God of Israel into the community of Israel as the elect nation, then is one of the hallmarks of the messianic age.

TENSION OVER DINING FELLOWSHIP



Do these views that Paul had, did they cause conflict or tension with the group in Jerusalem?

Apparently Paul's attitude toward gentile converts stimulated controversy both at Antioch among the Jewish communities there and also among the older Christian communities back in Jerusalem. There are several issues involved here. One is the notion of the dietary laws, the eating restrictions that they would have abstained from eating certain kinds of food if one was an observant Jew. Also with whom one could eat, and so we see some indication during Paul's time in Antioch that this becomes a source of some tension. Precisely because in Paul's view it's now possible to integrate these gentiles, people who don't keep the proper food laws, into a dining fellowship with Jews, all of whom are followers of Jesus. And it's in that mixed community where fellowship around a common meal and the celebration of the story of Jesus is the center where Paul brings everyone together, but because it's at a meal it also runs headlong into some Jewish sensitivities about what kind of foods you can eat and with whom you can eat.

Now where we see this tension coming to a head most clearly is after Paul returns from a conference in Jerusalem. When he went to Jerusalem he took with him a young gentile convert by the name of Titus who was Paul's test case and Paul says explicitly that he went down to Jerusalem to meet with the leaders of the church there. ... Peter, one of the leading Apostles from all the gospel stories, and James the brother of Jesus himself.... When Paul goes to see them he takes with him Titus and some of the others of the Antioch community who are his supporters in the beginning..., and they go down to ask the question of "how do we deal with these gentile converts?" and they manage to get some sort of rough agreement with the Jerusalem leadership. They agree that it's okay for Paul to convert these gentiles and yet not to force them to be circumcised.

So when Paul goes back to Antioch he seems to think that he's won a major victory in the understanding of what the Christian will be. Shortly after his return to Antioch, however, Peter arrives from Jerusalem. Initially Peter seems to have been willing to keep fellowship with Paul and these gentile converts. He eats with them, but then not too long thereafter some other people from Jerusalem arrive and Peter backs off. He refuses to eat

with them, and Paul blows his stack because he feels that Peter has backed out on a fundamental agreement on what it means for gentiles to convert to followers of Jesus. Paul says he confronts Peter to his face and challenges him with hypocrisy.

What was the flip side of the agreement with Peter and James in Jerusalem? Did Paul agree to do anything in return ...?

The other thing that emerged out of the Jerusalem conference was that Paul would go predominantly to a gentile audience and from this point on in Paul's career he is a preacher predominantly to gentiles. He doesn't really work mostly in Jewish communities any longer. In fact he even says that Peter is the one charged to be the missionary to the Jewish communities. Now as part of this agreement that was reached in Jerusalem, Paul also decides that it would be important to raise funds in support of the poor in Jerusalem. That is, the followers of the Jesus movement who live there and who seem to be beset with some problems as a result of the famine or other kind of economic distress. So part of Paul's missionary activity for the rest of his career is raising funds to bring back to Jerusalem.

So what happens after he and Peter have this blow up? What does Paul do?

The blow up in Antioch over eating with gentiles probably is the turning point in Paul's career. Up until that point Paul has worked predominantly within Diaspora Jewish communities, where he moves out of the Jewish context to deal with gentiles, but after the blow up with Peter, Paul leaves Antioch and probably never returned again. And from that point on, Paul works almost exclusively within gentile communities. Now we know he does encounter other Jews in these major Greek cities and there presumably are Jewish communities in all of them, but Paul doesn't view himself as working any longer within a predominantly Jewish matrix.

PAUL IN THE AEGEAN BASIN

After the blow up with Peter at Antioch, Paul left and went to Western Turkey or Asia Minor and Greece, and that would be the new center of his missionary activity for the next ten years of his life. The dates are hard to decipher here in precise detail but if we think of the Jerusalem conference in about the year 48 by the year 49 or 50, we know that Paul is up in Northern Greece, Macedonia, in the cities of Phillipi and Thessalonica. By the year 50 he arrives in **Corinth** and it's at that juncture that we think of him then beginning to preach this message of Jesus Christ.... For the next ten years... from 50 to roughly 60, Paul will concentrate all of his efforts in this region of the Aegean basin. That is the region bounded by the Eastern coast of Greece and the Western coast of Turkey and the island in-between. That will be his mission center for the next ten years.

...Now within this circuit of the Aegean basin Paul basically has two or three major cities that serve as his mission bases. We know of the two cities up in Macedonia, Phillipi and Thessalonica, that he frequents. He travels to them on several different occasions. **Corinth is his base** in Southern Greece. On the Eastern side of the Aegean in Turkey his base is the major city of Ephesus which precisely at the time that Paul is arriving there is about to become the most important metropolis of all Asia.

... In about the year 50 to 55 when Paul is traveling back and forth from Corinth to Ephesus, this is a period when the whole Aegean is going through the beginnings of a massive growth under Roman expansion... Roman development. We should think of it as Roman urbanization programs. Now Ephesus up until this time had really not been the major city of Asia. Only under the Emperor Nero and a little later on would it really take off and grow to become the most important Greek city in the East. Paul was there just at the beginning of that process, and so we have to imagine Paul coming in to Ephesus from the harbor, down the main street to the Greek theater and encountering what was at that stage still a smallish city but one that was just about ready to take off. Like Corinth, Ephesus was a cosmopolitan environment. We have to imagine traders there from Egypt, from the Turkish hinterlands, from Greece, from Italy. In fact the inscriptions and the statues and the art work and the buildings all tell us that this is really a crossroads of culture and religious life throughout the Mediterranean world.

THE PAULINE MISSION -- LETTERS FROM EPHEBUS

So what does Paul do when he gets to Ephesus?

While all of the cities to which Paul travels in this period are very important to his work, it's probably Ephesus and the areas immediately around Ephesus that will be his most important base of operations. For several years we will see Paul living in and around Ephesus and writing letters back and forth to these other congregations. We have to think of it this way; Paul mostly travels around in a kind of circuit of these congregations around the Aegean rim, or he sends out his helpers and his co-workers, people like Timothy and Titus, to take information or check out what's happening over in Phillipi or some place like that. Sometimes perhaps even to go and help start a new congregation. Some place over in, say, Colossae or maybe up toward the interior in Galatia. So we have to imagine the Pauline mission as a kind of beehive of activity... as Paul, his co-workers, other Christians from various cities are all traveling back and forth across the Aegean, but most importantly, we discover Paul doing something new. He writes letters as a mechanism for further instructing them in his understanding of the Christian message. You see it's Paul who starts the writing of the New Testament by writing letters to these fledgling congregations in the cities of the Greek East.

What kinds of letters is he writing? Is he writing scripture?

Now when we say that Paul writes letters we have to realize that Paul really doesn't think of himself as writing scripture. He hasn't yet thought of a New Testament. It didn't exist yet. For Paul the Bible means the Hebrew Scriptures, or more precisely, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures that we call the Septuagint. So when Paul quotes scripture he's quoting from the Hebrew Bible in its Greek form. When Paul writes letters he's writing everyday, ordinary letters to real people in real cities trying to deal with the circumstances in which they're living. ...He does want to deal with theological issues, but Paul isn't writing theological treatises as much as he's giving advice and instruction and encouragement for living.

Is he meeting any conflicts? Are there practical problems that he has to kind of worry about?

The other thing that Paul's letters show us is that these fledgling congregations are also facing enormous difficulties of social adjustment, and so when Paul writes he very often is trying to mediate disputes or settle the social tensions that crop up precisely because of the mixture of people that come in to these congregations. For example we know that Paul wrote at least four or more letters to Corinth, only two of which seem to be preserved in the New Testament, and there are probably maybe as many as ten different letters that go back and forth between Corinth and Paul during the time that he's living in Ephesus. We also know from the letters that there are at least five or six different congregations of Christians in Corinth, each one located in someone's home in some different suburb of the city. So we hear of people like Chloe and Gaeas and Stephanus and a very prominent woman by the name of Phoebe who lives in the port city of Cenchreae. All of whom have congregations that gather in their homes, and so it's this mixed and varied small cell group kind of organization that probably establishes some of the important social context for Paul's letters, precisely because there are disagreements that crop up. There are differences of opinion on what the message means. There are differences of behavior and ethical patterns that these converts will naturally incline toward in their attempt to live the Christian life. Some of them take the message differently and it's those differences of opinion that prompt some controversy that Paul himself feels compelled to respond to in his letters. First Corinthians is a very good example here. Paul says, "I hear there are disputes among you," and he proceeds then to talk about the difficulties that these disputes create in the life of the Christian communities there.

One of the difficulties is precisely over social differentiation among the members of the community. Rich and poor, Jewish and gentile are living side by side and worshipping side by side, and sometimes the tension seems to want to fragment the entire community. Paul has to say it's really the fellowship of the community, the ability to come together that's the important hallmark of the Christian message, and he has to try to show them the way to get back to that ideal.

What's the tone of Paul's letters? Describe his tone. Does it change?

When we see Paul's letters, we realize that he's writing a very ordinary kind of prose letter writing style because it's very similar to what we see in all the standard letters of the ancient world. Letter writing itself had a very standardized style and tone, and we know from the discovery of many, many letters from Egypt among the papyri that the practice of letter writing and the forms of letter writing had become very commonplace in the Greco-Roman world, and Paul's letters match up with these typical letters from the ancient world very, very well. Paul adapted some of the standard stylistic features of letter writing to the particular needs of his own theological concerns and his needs of instruction for these Christian communities. So Paul kind of develops a standard letter form for his style of writing. But within that standard style Paul is very adaptable. He's able to take the standard elements of a letter and make them fit the peculiar needs of any given situation. If the Corinthian community is suffering from too much division and strife he turns it into a letter of instruction on harmony and unity. In the case of the Thessalonian congregation when they're not sure about what's going to happen to them he turned it into a letter of consolation and comfort. In the case of the Galatian community when they seemed to be ready to turn their back on Paul entirely and become much more Jewish in their orientation he turns into a scolding parent and blisters them with purple prose about how they cannot turn back on the Gospel of Christ that he had given them. So the letters vary sharply in tone according to the needs of the situation and the circumstances to which he's writing.

THE KINGDOM IS STILL COMING

It's clear that one of the concerns that keep showing up throughout this period of Paul's ministry is when is this kingdom going to arrive. What's going to happen? How soon? From a fairly early stage we know that almost from the moment that Paul began preaching in the Greek world that people assumed that the kingdom would have to arrive soon. Paul's very first letter, the earliest, single writing that we have in the New Testament is First Thessalonians and already in First Thessalonians Paul is having to console them when people are starting to die within the congregation and the kingdom hasn't arrived yet.

Still, by the end of Paul's career when he writes the massive Roman letter,

probably the last thing that he wrote, and when he writes it he still is saying the time has grown short. The kingdom is still near. It appears that Paul never expected to die before the kingdom would arrive and so this apocalyptic message that was the hallmark of the earliest stages of the Jesus movement is still one of its central features prophetic preaching of Paul.

So Paul's mediating all this stuff, trying to keep all these people more or less on target but is he also making other plans? Is he envisioning something? Does he have a sense of urgency?

Paul's an interesting case because he is so able to blend a thoroughly Jewish self consciousness and a thoroughly Jewish interpretation of scripture with a great deal of knowledge of Greek rhetoric and philosophy of standard letter writing and other aspects of Greek culture. Paul really is a blend of all of those things and it's precisely that blending that seems to provide a lot of the dynamic quality of his understanding of early Christianity. Now when Paul gets to the end of his Aegean phase of ministry he seems also to be facing some problems. We know that later on... by the middle fifties... around 55 to 58, other Christians are starting to move in to Paul's territories and starting to argue with his congregations over proper forms of Christian practice and belief.

THE END OF PAUL'S AEGEAN CAREER

Paul's a controversial figure throughout his life. It started when he was back in Antioch. It continues throughout his Aegean ministry, and... the conflicts and controversies that Paul precipitates by virtue of his personality and his preaching really will follow him throughout his career.

By around the year 58 or 60, though, Paul seems to have felt that he had done as much as he could do in the Greek East and was preparing to move on. When Paul wrote the Roman letter, it's the longest of all of his letters and the last one that he wrote, he was preparing to go to Rome. He was writing to Rome but he himself had never been there. We know who was carrying the letter. It's his house church patroness Phoebe who has gone ahead to Rome to prepare the way.... Paul is going to Rome to get the Christian communities at Rome to support him in a new endeavor to go to Spain...to start a new gentile mission in an area that had never before heard the preaching of Jesus. But before he does that he wants to

fulfill the promise that he had made to Peter and James back in the Jerusalem conference. For these ten years that he's been in the Aegean he's had his congregations collecting monies together to take back to Jerusalem. Now we find him gathering all that up, each congregation sending an emissary with their part of the contribution, and they're all going as an entourage to lay it at the feet of James in Jerusalem. James is the brother of Jesus, now the leader of the Jerusalem congregation, and it is the direct legacy to Jesus himself through the family members that seems to be very important in this first generation of the Jerusalem congregation.

Does he make it and what happens?

Paul apparently never got to Spain, although we don't know for sure. What seems to have happened is when he went back to Jerusalem with the contribution, he was arrested as some sort of rabble rouser.... This sets the stage for his eventual trials and... tradition holds he eventually died a martyr's death....

THE PASSING OF THE FIRST GENERATION

We don't know precisely what happened to either Peter or Paul. Tradition holds that they were both martyred in Rome in around the year 64. This was after the great fire, and the emperor Nero seemed to have wanted to blame the fire on a variety of groups in Rome such as Jews and Christians. Now what really happened to Peter and Paul, we can never say for sure but by the mid sixties, say between 62 and 64, it does appear that both Peter and Paul have died. About the same time Josephus tells us that James, the brother of Jesus at Jerusalem, has also been killed. All in about the same two or three year period, so by the mid sixties the original first generation of leadership of the Christian movement has passed away and this is going to set the stage for an important shift that will occur within the next few years.

We also shouldn't minimize the level of expectation that was going through their minds at that time because ... with the passing of this first generation, the expectation that all of those coming events must be closer to hand probably was a concern for a lot of people. At the same time the situation in Jerusalem itself was becoming a good bit more tense...

Holland Lee Hendrix:

President of the Faculty Union Theological Seminary

PAUL'S THREATENING MESSAGE

Paul alludes in a number of his letters to the message that he would have communicated verbally probably in the settings of the forum... and the homes of private individuals in these cities. And in talking about what he preached to them, he emphasizes two things; on the one hand, very clearly, the importance of the death and resurrection of Jesus, on the other hand he also emphasizes the importance of understanding the end time, and the immediacy of the end time, and that one must be prepared for it, and the way one prepares for it is to be good. We find a lot of ethics in Paul. And it's around this issue of how one lives in anticipation of the end time that's just around the corner for Paul. This is tied very importantly to Paul's message about the saving significance the dead, now risen, Jesus.

Clearly the message about the coming end time was the part that would have been threatening to a Roman official and would have been threatening to any native population that had vested some authority in Roman officialdom. And it's very important to keep that in mind. Paul would not just have upset potentially Roman officials, Paul would have upset local populations dependent on Roman rule for their livelihood and continued peace and security.

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to a community in the middle of a culture war

The church at Corinth had many problems. Some simple kindness would have helped.

by [*Douglas A. Campbell*](#) (*Professor of New Testament at Duke Divinity School*) Dec 22, 2017

Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians, now lost, in the fall of 50 CE. The Corinthians pushed back quite hard. They wrote a reply to Paul with a number of questions. In the spring of 51 CE he wrote a long letter back, our 1 Corinthians. This is where we start to build up a more detailed picture of the community, and it is not a pretty sight.

The church at Corinth was a mess. I count 15 distinguishable problems that Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians: partisanship, with the Corinthians factionalizing behind rival leaders (1:10–4:21; 16:10–18); incest (5:1–13); prostitution (6:12–21); celibacy within marriage (7:1–7); Christians married to one another asking about divorce (7:8–11, 39); Christians married to pagans asking about divorce (7:12–16); questions surrounding marriage and remarriage (7:25–40); lawsuits (6:1–11); idolatry (8:1–11:1); concerns about women praying and prophesying in immodest ways (11:2–16); chaos in worship, with speaking in tongues and competing voices (chapter 14); inequality in the communal meal (11:17–34); denials of the bodily resurrection of Jesus and of Christians (15:1–58); the collection of a large sum of money to be sent to Jerusalem (16:1–4); and a change in Paul’s travel plans (16:5–9).

Underlying this mess, there were four main difficulties: a basic failure in relating to one another in love; a dramatic failure of the local church leaders to act considerately in the face of their competition for status and influence; arrogant theological reasoning that denied the importance of the body (which we might call “Christian intellectualism”); and tensions arising from the pressures that Paul’s teaching about sex placed on his converts. Each of these problems would have been bad enough, but when they were all present together, the combination was toxic.

When we take a step back from all the ins and outs of the issues in the letter, we can see that Paul is urging something simple on the Corinthians. A great deal of what he says can be summed up in the phrase “appropriate relating.” One of the letter’s high points is chapters 12–13. Chapter 13 describes at length the principal Christian way of relating, which is with love. Its profundity is evidenced by the fact that it is still read at weddings all over the world today.

Love is patient, love is kind.

It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.

It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered. It keeps no record of wrongs.

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.

It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails. (13:4–8a, NIV)

Chapter 12 uses the image of the body of Christ to lay out the way the community should relate together. No part of the Christian body is unimportant. Every part is linked to every other part, no matter how humble it might seem to be.

Paul applies this advice especially to the disorders in the Corinthians' communal meeting. This was a meal together at which the Lord's Supper was celebrated, followed by a period of worship with singing and the use of spiritual gifts. People spoke in tongues, prophesied, and prayed for one another's healing (11:2–14:40). We have already noted how many problems are evident here. It is nevertheless amazing to observe how many of these problems would disappear if the Corinthians would just be nicer to one another.

People who love one another don't pray and prophesy in the communal meeting so that their clothing will become disarrayed and violate a viewer's sense of propriety; they don't shame their spouses publicly with their behavior; they don't bring lavish meals to a church picnic and gorge on them while other church members stand around hungry; and they don't babble in tongues on top of one another during the time of worship. Neither do they factionalize into bitter partisan disputes. They don't slander rival leaders but stay loyal to their original founder; they don't steal from one another; they don't mock people who are offended by a food item that they personally don't think matters; neither do they judge people whom they think are ignoring something that should worry them.

So many problems in Corinth—and I suspect in many other places—would be solved if Christians were simply kinder to one another. But something seems to be making considerate and appropriate relating especially hard at Corinth, and we don't have to look far to find out what that was. The Corinthian church was unusually diverse, and the ethic of appropriate relating that Paul taught wasn't strong enough to overcome the tensions that these differences were bringing into the community. In this respect, Paul's greatest missionary success created his greatest challenges.

When the church was founded ten years before this exchange of correspondence, in the early 40s, Priscilla and Aquila worked with Paul to convert people in the handworker community and probably also in the streets outside the small factory-shops the handworkers labored in. These potential converts were out-and-out pagans. They were tough, poor, uncouth people. In the synagogue in Corinth, however, Paul was more successful than usual. Generally, he got expelled from the local synagogue after he had tried to convince everyone there to acknowledge Jesus as Lord, and sometimes he was quickly chased out of town. But in Corinth he had some outstanding successes. He converted a wealthy God worshiper, Gaius Titius Justus, and a Jewish synagogue patron, Crispus. By the time he wrote his Corinthian letters, ten years later, another Jewish synagogue patron had been converted, Sosthenes. So there were Jewish converts and God worshipers in the Corinthian church alongside the pagans. Equally important, some of these converts seem to have been wealthy, forming an additional contrast with the poor pagan handworkers and street converts.

Ancient society was marked by considerable differences in wealth. The top 1.5 percent in some cities monopolized at least 20 percent of all the resources. The rest of the top 10 percent owned the next 20 percent of income. The bottom echelon of society lived in constant hunger, literally

"from hand to mouth," meaning that when they got any food they immediately ate it. By our standards, then, ancient society was extremely unequal. The elite were very wealthy and well connected compared to everyone else, and vastly superior to them in terms of power and status.

To top it all off, Paul's converts were navigating relationships with people of different genders in all the complex and diverse ways that people usually do this—as singles, betrothed, and then in various married situations, whether happily married, unhappily married, married to another Christian, or married to a pagan. Every community is always involved with these powerful relational dynamics which do not always play out smoothly.

In short, the Corinthian church was crisscrossed by significant differences. It was composed of people who were from an utterly pagan background, who were half-Jewish pagans (that is, converted God worshipers), and who were Jews. There were many poor converts but also a number of high-status and wealthy figures, along with their households. And as always, there were complicated gender dynamics surrounding sexual activity. These diverse Corinthian converts brought into their Christian community all the hostility, suspicion, and misunderstanding that arose from these differences in race, class, and gender. Paul's exhortations to the Corinthians simply to be nicer to one another didn't overcome these differences. Moreover, there were problems of leadership that prevented the Corinthians from resolving their differences.

Paul composed 1 Corinthians carefully in five blocks of argument, each one of which addresses a cluster of related problems. But he began the letter with the heart of the matter: the partisan divisions in the Corinthian community. The Corinthians are factionalized. They have split up behind different leaders—principally behind Paul and Apollos, but also behind Peter, whom Paul calls Cephas, and there is possibly even some independent "Christ party" in view (1:12).

On one level this partisanship is entirely understandable. Partisanship was a standard feature of ancient Greco-Roman city life, and it hasn't exactly gone away. The United States recently came through an extraordinary election in which both sides vilified their opposition. But things were even nastier in the ancient world. There was no liberal veneer to cover things over.

The bitter partisanship evident at Corinth is linked tightly with another feature of the community: life in the ancient city was a desperate struggle for survival and an equally desperate climb up the proverbial greasy pole to the top. The tiny number of people who inhabited the top 1 percent were survivors. They were highly competitive, aggressive, tough people who sat on those beneath them and fended off their rivals ruthlessly. They also used the considerable resources of Greco-Roman rhetoric to mock and denigrate their competitors. The unusual degree of factionalism in the Corinthian community is traceable in large measure to the handful of elite figures who are in it—the wealthy and highly educated converts that Paul and Apollos had made in and around the synagogue, including Gaius, Crispus, and Sosthenes. (The end of Paul's letter to the Romans, written in Corinth, mentions another local politician, Erastus.) These local civic leaders were acting as they usually did, striving with one another for attention and influence in an intensely competitive fashion, all while preserving their privileges and status from the great unwashed who made up the rest of the congregation.

Another dimension in the poor behavior of the elite members of the Corinthian church comes through clearly in Paul's long responses. In addition to their competitiveness, the Corinthians have a cultural view of leadership, and this problematized their relationship with Paul. Greco-Roman cities loved appearances. They loved what people looked like, how much money they had, their connections, and how they spoke. Fully trained rhetorical professionals could captivate audiences for hours. They were the rock stars of the ancient world, and they commanded huge fees for their performances. They looked beautiful and spoke beautifully.

In one of the most profound passages he ever wrote, Paul points out that the Christian God revealed in the crucified Jesus could not be more different from this (1:18–2:16). By journeying down into the human condition and ultimately accepting a shameful death, Jesus revealed that God was a reaching God, an inclusive and gentle God who valued everyone, including the most despised and marginalized. Those whom society looked down on, God was especially concerned about and eager to reach. (The older theological term for this virtue was *condescension*, a word that has now been inverted into its opposite, being freighted with unhelpful connotations of superiority and haughtiness.) This is what a Christian leader should look like. It could hardly be more dramatically countercultural, and Paul lived out this leadership style in person.

He was not trained in the flashy tradition of Greco-Roman rhetoric. He had taken a somewhat unusual sectarian degree in advanced Jewish studies at an obscure regional university in Jerusalem. He was quite brilliant and a leader in his own tradition, being highly skilled in the things it valued. He could recall and manipulate scriptural texts at will. But he couldn't speak well, so he didn't sound like much to Greco-Roman snobs, and he looked like nothing. He was dirty, bedraggled, and unpaid. He labored away in small filthy workshops with his own hands. He might even have had an ongoing battle with some unsightly disease like acute conjunctivitis. This would have made his eyes red and weepy. In terms of appearances, then, he came across as a sickly handworker, just one step above a slave.

All of this led at least some of the local Corinthian leaders to disrespect Paul, and some of them probably despised him. They were embarrassed by his leadership and far preferred the more culturally impressive qualifications of a rhetorician like Apollos (see Acts 18:24–28). They had no intention of following his example and acting like servant leaders—living alongside their humble converts and caring for those who were weak and shamed. They threw their weight behind alternative, far more attractive leaders at Corinth, vilifying their founder. Sharp divisions ensued.

In short, there was a dramatic failure of leadership at Corinth. The wealthy local converts who dominated the community were behaving as Greco-Roman leaders behaved. They were competing with one another for influence, status, and power—no love lost in this battle! Moreover, they were competing in the terms that their surrounding culture dictated, in terms of appearances and money, so they were undermining Paul's leadership as they elevated the merits of their patrons. In addition, they were continuing to despise and humiliate their social inferiors.

Paul points out at the beginning of 1 Corinthians—returning to the theme at many later points in the rest of the letter—that this behavior is a fundamental betrayal of Christian community. Christians are to love, support, and encourage one another, not compete with one another, and

their leaders are to follow in the footsteps of the crucified Christ. The leader who reaches down to live alongside people, and who values and engages with the poor and the marginalized, is the true Christian leader. This is the “appearance” that matters.

We learn a lot from this Corinthian debacle. In small, relatively homogeneous communities like Philippi, Thessalonica, and Colossae, Paul’s ethic didn’t have to deal with the tensions created by deep social divisions. At Thessalonica, he had to deal with things like lazy community members. But in a larger, more diverse church like Corinth, Paul’s ethic of kindness faced much tougher challenges. It had to overcome deep divisions of race, class, and gender present within the fabric of the community.

Here we see both the importance of Christian leadership and its true nature. Christian leaders can manage and heal these divisions, provided they act appropriately. They are to humble themselves and bridge existing social chasms, thereby drawing the community together behind them. But this type of leadership is deeply countercultural. It is hard to recognize, while cultural accounts of leadership in terms of status, wealth, and influence directly undermine this authentic account.

Sadly, there was another factor at work at Corinth that was closely related to the leadership failure, and it made things still worse. Some of the community leaders were intellectually arrogant. The elite status of some of Paul’s converts presupposed an advanced education—the equivalent of a modern college degree—and some simply had the confidence that having a lot of money brings. As local community leaders in the city’s politics, they were used to thinking about things and proposing policies and judgments. But they weren’t as clever as they thought they were. They were inferring what they thought were theologically appropriate Christian actions and behaviors, but they were jumping to conclusions and pushing them too hard. The results were destructive.

One group was correctly saying that food doesn’t matter and the kingdom of God isn’t a matter of meat and drink, but they turned their confidence into a weapon. Some of the Corinthians were Jews or were strongly committed to Jewish ways of living. They shared the general Jewish revulsion to meat that has been improperly prepared. Such meat would have been quite literally a nauseating prospect for them, and I imagine that they looked down their noses at anyone eating it. But our amateur theologians reversed this attitude and paid it back with interest. They happily ate their idol meat and mocked those who had a problem with it. “Such scruples. What fools!” (1 Cor. 8:1–13).

Paul corrects this insensitivity with his basic relational argument. Although it is technically correct that food doesn’t matter to this degree anymore, such arrogance hardly possesses relational integrity. The kindness and consideration that he began the letter describing in relation to God and Jesus is not being followed here, as it should be.

In a second problematic act of intellectualism, the group pushed another maxim to extremes. “Idols don’t actually exist,” as the Bible repeatedly says, so there are no problems with attending idol feasts and worship events. It is not as if anything is actually there! In this way, the puffed-up ones, as Paul calls them, could continue to attend the plethora of idolatrous events that structured the ancient pagan city—its processions, feasts, festivals, and sacrifices.

To deal with this problem, Paul reintroduces the relationality and connectedness that these thinkers keep overlooking. Idols aren't anything, but these pagan events are intertwined with the evil powers that roam the cosmos outside the church. Pagan culture might not be what it says it is, but it is still dangerous. Attending an idolatrous worship event is creating a foolish vulnerability to evil, as well as being deeply unfaithful to God. Can we really attend a black Sabbath and escape unscathed? Can we walk in a national parade without thinking that a nation, a flag, or a history "is anything"? Paul instructs this group of Corinthians not to play with fire (1 Cor. 10:1–22).

Paul's final extended argument in the letter (15:1–58) addresses the denial of Jesus' bodily resurrection, and our intellectuals are probably in view here again. Some strands of ancient Greek thinking disparaged matter and material things. They believed that only the unseen world of the spirit was important. Spirit was pure and eternal; matter was impure and transitory. Spiritual things had been trapped in material things the way we might get our car stuck in a mudslide. The right way forward was to get the car out of the mud and hose it off. For people thinking in this fashion, Jesus' bodily resurrection made no sense. He was spirit. He'd had his material things, including his body, hosed off by death, so technically there was no bodily resurrection. Who needs a bodily resurrection? The whole idea is absurd.

Paul is rather horrified by this line of thinking. He argues at length that if Jesus has not been raised bodily, then no one has been saved from their sins and their other problems, including death. But he also argues that the body with which Jesus has been raised is not like our bodies, which are mortal and die. It is a glorious, imperishable, spiritual body. Moreover, even as we occupy our present locations, we must pay constant attention to what our current imperfect bodies are doing. Paul has earlier spoken of being careful not to bring our bodies into contact with prostitutes and idolatrous worship festivals (1 Cor. 6:12–20). Here, too, he is saying that bodies matter.

Questions generated by sex and gender roiled the Corinthians, and they roil us still today. There isn't space here to consider the fascinating ways Paul navigated the issue of appropriate sexual behavior with the Corinthians, but it's a topic worthy of further consideration elsewhere.

Even without considering Paul's discussions of sex and gender, we have learned three critically important things from our study of the Corinthians. First, Paul's ethic of Christian love was deeply countercultural and highly demanding. Homogeneous and idealized communities mask how tough it is to practice this kindness and consideration across social divisions where it needs to bridge and heal and not merely to fit into a group that already gets along quite well. Corinth exposes this countercultural challenge.

Second, local Christian leadership is critical to this process. This leadership must be formed on Christ's leadership, modeled by Paul and his students. Conventional assessments of value must be abandoned. Conventional competitive relations must be repented of. This recalibration of what an authentic leader looks like is very difficult. Every community has elites, and invariably throughout history those elites have contested for status in terms of conventional markers. Paul challenges the Corinthians and us to do things differently. The deeply countercultural challenge

of Christian behavior is exposed by Corinth here again, although it also reveals as no other community does the need for good leaders if a diverse Christian community is to move forward.

Third, we learn that intellectualism is damaging when it comes in the form of aggressive theological and ethical judgments that are separated from right relating and from the right depth in the Jewish tradition. It creates further differences that become places of further tension, dispute, and conflict. Christian thinking must not be separated from Christian acting in relation to other Christians. Neither must it be separated from a broad and rich account of the community rooted in Judaism. Above all, it must not suppose that our bodies do not matter. We act through our bodies, so everything they do is important.

In sum, the Christian way asks all its followers to be kind and considerate toward one another. It asks its leaders to be sensitive to “the least of these”—if necessary, living alongside them. These actions are fairly simple in theory but incredibly demanding in practice. They are deeply countercultural. If they are to take root, above all they require the right sort of leadership. Christian leaders must help their communities navigate their current locations ethically with due depth, sensitivity, and courage, as Paul did for the Corinthians.

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Register for Early Christianity: The Letters of Paul from Harvard University at <http://edx.org/courses>.

About this Course: The letters of Paul are the earliest texts in the Christian scriptures, written by a Jew at a time when the word "Christian" hadn't yet been coined. What is the religious and political context into which they emerged? How were they first interpreted? How and why do they make such an enormous impact in Christian communities and in politics today?

Archaeological materials and ancient writings will help you to enter the ancient Mediterranean world and to think about religious groups, power, poverty, health, and the lives of elites and slaves in the Roman Empire. We'll explore how immediately controversial these letters were, and how these letters are used today to debate relations between Christians and Jews; issues such as love, law, and grace; and topics such as charismatic Christianity, homosexuality, and women's religious leadership.

Whether you've been studying Paul's letters for years or are merely curious about what Christian scriptures are, this course will provide you with information to deepen your understanding of the ancient contexts and present-day controversies about these texts.

Course Staff:

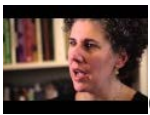
Laura Nasrallah, Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity Nasrallah's research and teaching bring together New Testament and early Christian literature with the archaeological remains of the Mediterranean world. She also investigates how these texts make an impact in religious communities and in politics today. Her books include *An Ecstasy of Folly: Prophecy and Authority in Early Christianity*, *Christian Responses to Roman Art and Architecture: The Second-Century Church Amid the Spaces of Empire*, and two co-edited volumes, *Prejudice and Christian Beginnings: Investigating Race, Gender, and Ethnicity in Early Christian Studies* and *From Roman to Early Christian Thessalonikē: Studies in Religion and Archaeology*. She's currently at work on a commentary on 1 Corinthians and a book titled *Archaeology and the Letters of Paul*. Her awards include a Henry Luce III Fellowship in Theology and a fellowship from the American Association of University Women.

Note from Chuck:

Below are several of the youtube videos from this class. When we studied this material in a previous Bible class there were 45 different video clips. The only version of the youtube videos I could find at this time (Fall 2019) are below. The audio is in English. Subtitles are in Portuguese ☺. This playlist had about a third of the original clips.....most of the first third of the class.

Dr. Nasrallah is no longer at Harvard Divinity School as of July 1, 2019. She is now the Buckingham Professor of New Testament Criticism and Interpretation at Yale Divinity School.

Early Christianity The Letters of Paul



[Course Trailer - Early Christianity: The Letters of Paul](#)

by [Harvard Divinity School](#) 2 minutes 25 seconds



[Day 1 \(Introduction\)](#)

by [Harvard Divinity School](#) 13 minutes 25 seconds

[Authorship 1:17](#)

[How Does a Letter Start? \(Prescripts\) 2:11](#)

[When Were the Letters of Paul Written and in What Language? 1:58](#)

[Audience 4:52](#)

[Occasional Letters 1:01](#)

[How Paul Refers to Himself 1:13](#)

[Philemon \(Teaching Staff Discussion\) 7:16](#)

[Prescripts \(Teaching Staff Discussion\) 14:20](#)

[Epistolography 1:27](#)

[How did you send a Letter in Antiquity? 1:54](#)

[How did you write a letter in Antiquity? 1:34](#)

[What's the Form of a Letter in the Ancient World? 4:10](#)

[Who Wrote Letters? How did you learn? 1:42](#)

[Do Paul's Letter Tell Us Anything About How They Were Written or Sent? 1:59](#)



Little is known about Paul's Post Cards to the early Church.