

**‘Does Paul Really Understand?’  
A Reconstruction of the Life and Issues of Paul’s Corinthian Community  
with an Assessment of his Responsive Effectiveness**

**ABSTRACT**

Paul’s writing to Corinth was directed toward a community plagued by internal divisions, social and ethnic distinction, and a diversity of congregations. Today, controversy still burns brightly on these issues just as they did in the early church, rendering it ideal for theological and hermeneutical consideration. This paper will reconstruct the life and issues of the fledgling Corinthian church. This is done firstly, to determine whether Paul really understood the issues at hand, and secondly, to gauge the value of Paul’s response by the Corinthian community to his call.

**KEY WORDS:** scripture, relationships, problems, divisions, community.

**Introduction**

First Corinthians narrates how Paul heard of the Corinthian Christian community’s troubles, responded with a letter to remedy the situation, heal their divisions and answer their questions. Paul was deeply concerned for the spiritual health of the Corinthian church, which had been deprived of his guidance for several years. Consequently, Paul corresponded at greater length with the Corinthian church than with any of the other communities that he established. Paul confronted the community, addressing sin, the need for corrective action and a clear commitment to Christ. This paper will argue that Paul understood the life and issues of the Corinthian community. Paul’s response’s effectiveness was positive and appropriate to the life and issues of the Corinthian community at the time.

**Issues relating to Corinth**

There were various issues related to the community in Corinth. The three main issues related to: a) the church, b) members, c) authority. In a broad context problems within the church were notably related to mission, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, body, love, worship and prophecy. Issues with members

related to intellect, freedom, giving, sex, suffering and death. Issues with authority related to leaders, women and apostles.<sup>1</sup> The three issues dealt with here are problems relating to the life and issues of the Corinthian Christian community at the time relative to: (1) the Lord's Supper, (2) sexual morality, and (3) the role of women. Additionally, the developing conflict between the church in Corinth and Paul himself is addressed. This is concluded with an assessment of the contemporary situation in the church and world today relative to these issues.

## **The First Problem**

Firstly, problems within the church notably the Lord's Supper will be considered (1 Cor. 11:17-34). Paul heard of scandalous behaviour in the Corinthian community worship relative to the Eucharist. The purpose of the Eucharistic gathering was partaking in the Lord's Supper, as enacted by Jesus with the disciples. Regrettably, the behaviour of some Corinthian Christians denigrated the significance of the event.<sup>2</sup>

This resulted in class feelings and distinctions manifesting in the community (cf. James 2:1-4) with private cliques and affluent individuals initiating proceedings without waiting for others to eat. Gluttony, unsociable behaviour and drunkenness were becoming a familiar occurrence. To rebut this situation Paul reminds them that such conduct makes the professed reason for their joining in communion invalid and pointless.<sup>3</sup> Their actions constituted a contradiction to Church meaning and jeopardised the welfare of all. As such, Paul clearly perceived and understood this issue in the Corinthian community at the time.

Furthermore, the intention of the Lord's Supper was as a common meal, and Paul's condemnation relates to the Corinthians contradicting this principle (11:20-21). Thus, the Christians of Corinth would be better served by eating in their own homes rather than feigning a pretentious unity repudiated by their behaviour. Paul's intention is not to censure the issue of gluttony and drunkenness, but to emphasize an egocentric apathy which is the antithesis of love.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Johansson, review of *Paul on Modern Controversial Issues: The Moral Teaching of Paul: Selected Issues* (3rd ed), by Victor Paul Furnish, *The Expository Times* Vol 121(12), (September 2010):629-630.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond F. Collins, *Sacra Pagina Series Vol.7 First Corinthians* (Collegeville, Minn., The Liturgical Press, 1999), 416-424.

<sup>3</sup> Glyn Simon, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians – Creed and Conduct* (London: SCM Press, 1965), 114.

<sup>4</sup> Bradley B. Blue, 'The House Church at Corinth and the Lord's Supper: Famine, Food Supply and the Present Distress' *Criswell Theological Review* 5.2 (1991): 221-239.

Paul's denunciation is explicit as the Corinthian's behaviour held communion in contempt (v.22) and could not be allowed to persist. Paul's remedial approach is by way of an explanation of the Eucharist. Paul showed how love is necessary for the Eucharist to have meaning with this love commencing in their personal community relationships with one another, particularly the poor.<sup>5</sup>

Relevant to this point, Murphy O'Conner notes that:

The unity for the church is something more than physical juxtaposition in a determined space. It is a vital sharing of 'life' and the Corinthians cannot deceive themselves that they enjoy this if the physical life of the poor is endangered because they do not have enough to eat.<sup>6</sup>

Paul's concern related to the love of Christ living in the lives of everyday people. Christ loved the poor and our love for Christ is reflected in the caring for the poor.

## **The Second Problem**

The second problem regarded members and their sexual behaviour. Paul's severe reprimand on sexual immorality defiling the church is presented in (5:1-6). This shows the Corinthian's view of their emancipation in Christ was inclined towards a different approach to other Christians, and one of sexual pervasion permitting even worse evils than the Greeks.<sup>7</sup>

Paul condemns such sexual sin in the strongest of terms (6:9-20) because the troubles in the Corinthian church were basically related to sexual conduct.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, prostitution and immorality were harmful to marriages with Christians in a dilemma and unsure how to respond. Accordingly, Paul gave meaningful and practical solutions.<sup>9</sup>

Additionally, Paul's instruction can be separated into heterosexual and homosexual activity outside of marriage. Paul refuted the argument that as

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<sup>5</sup> Alexander R. Brown, 'Apocalyptic Transformation in Paul's Discourse on the Cross,' *Word & World* xvi No, 4 (Fall 1996): 427-436.

<sup>6</sup> Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *1 Corinthians* (Delaware U.S.A.: Michael Glazier, 1979), 111.

<sup>7</sup> Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary* (London: Tyndale Press, 1971), 85-86.

<sup>8</sup> John Coolidge Hurd Jr., *The Origin of 1 Corinthians* (Macon, Georgia U.S.A.: Mercer University Press, 1983), 274-276.

<sup>9</sup> Edward W. Glenny, '1 Corinthians 7:29-31 and the Teaching of the Continence in the Acts of Paul and Thecla' *Grace Theological Journal* 11.1 (1991): 53-70.

Christians were not bound by food laws then the same applied to sexual laws (6:13). Paul's unyielding and persuasive stance held that it is fundamentally impossible to compare the two, as in Christian terms the word 'body' denotes more than animal tissue. Paul maintained that the 'body' is the self, marshalling numerous arguments to sustain this position.<sup>10</sup>

Consequently, Paul's argument is based on six facts: (a) that our body matters to God (1:63), (b) our body will be raised (6:14), (c) our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (6:19), (d) our body is harmed by immorality (6:18), (e) fornication for a Christian is a rebellious act of independence, and most importantly (f) that our body belongs to Christ (6:19-20). Paul concludes by counselling to 'shun immorality' (6:18) and emphasising the body is for the Lord and should be kept that way, with this possibility only accessible through the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>11</sup>

Relative to homosexuality, Paul gives scant attention to the issue however he makes the point that it is basically unacceptable for Christian practice (6:9-11) and that it can be changed (6:9-11). Paul's premise holds that homosexuality is immoral and an unattainable avenue to Heaven. Paul refers to Genesis and the image of God residing mutually in the male and female (Gen.1:27).<sup>12</sup>

### **The Third Problem**

The third problem relates to authority and women. Paul is considered by many to be a misogynist. Nevertheless, Paul's overall attitude to women was reflective of the time and culture. However, Jesus' teachings were revolutionary relative to the role and rights of women, and Paul embraced this new perception afforded to women.<sup>13</sup>

The situation for women in Corinthian society indicates that women were held in low esteem in Hebrew, Greek and Roman culture. A women's authority was severely limited in that she was subject to the authority of her father or husband, a women could not inherit property, could not testify in a court of law or claim right to education. Moreover, the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, prostituted a thousand women in its service further demeaning their

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<sup>10</sup> Will Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy* (Cambridge U.K.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 214-217.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Green, *To Corinth with Love* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1982), 108-109.

<sup>12</sup> Malick, David E. "The Condemnation of Homosexuality in 1 Corinthians 6:9," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150: 600 (1993): 479-492.

<sup>13</sup> Oxford Dictionary of Current English, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

social status. Such was the state of affairs of women in Corinth at that time and the problem faced by Saint Paul.<sup>14</sup>

Conversely, Christianity engaged women in church and community work, women such as Mary, Tryphaena and Tryphosa who 'worked hard in the Lord' (Rom.16:12). They are found labouring with Paul in spreading the Gospel (Phil.4:3) and supporting in various ways. For women both to pray and prophecy during public worship (1 Cor.11:5) was acceptable by Paul, despite being a contradiction to the customs of the time.<sup>15</sup>

The fact that Paul was clear on the position of women in the church and they were equal with all others is clarified in Galatians (3:28). For Paul men and women had complete equality of standing before God (1 Cor. 11:11). Unquestionably, the radical teaching of Jesus had systematically permeated into the heart of Paul, the rabbi and apostle of Jesus.

However, an issue Paul disagreed with on women related to women's headdress (11:5). By dispensing with the customary covering for their heads many of women within the Corinthian church were defying tradition. It appears they viewed their action as having religious importance as the particular circumstance on which they chose to exhibit their uncovered heads was at worship. Their unconventional behaviour was obviously an expression of a new found freedom related to the Christian faith.<sup>16</sup>

Undoubtedly, this was an assertion of feminine freedom found within the context of the new faith. To these women the covered head was symbolical of their subordination to men, and ceased to be acknowledged by them under conditions of worship. Paul differed with them on this point of headdress despite acknowledging women's right to speak in church under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This Paul ruled as an exception to the silence he otherwise imposed on them (ch.14:34), nevertheless he considered it did not excuse them from covering their heads.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Brian S. Rosner, 'Temple Prostitution in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20,' *Novum Testamentum* 40.4 (October 1998): 336-351.

<sup>15</sup> Wm. O. Jr. Walker, '1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and Paul's Views Regarding Women,' *Journal of Biblical Literature* 94, No. 1 (March 1975): 94-110.

<sup>16</sup> Kevin Quast, *Reading the Corinthian Correspondence: An Introduction*. Mahwah (U.S.A.: Paulist Press, 1994), 67-70.

<sup>17</sup> J. Stanley Glen, *Pastoral Problems in First Corinthians* (London: Epworth Press, 1965), 128-9.

## The Conflict between Corinth and Paul

Having considered problems within the church relating to the Lord's Supper, sex and women there is a further dynamic for reflection when viewing the circumstances that occasioned the letter of First Corinthians. This dynamic relates to the developing conflict between the church in Corinth and Paul himself. Watson notes Gordon Fee's observation that 'the language and style of First Corinthians are especially rhetorical and combative. Paul is taking them on at every turn, he is attacking and challenging with all the weapons in his literary arsenal.'<sup>18</sup>

While Paul is undoubtedly seeking to right both their theology and practices in a comprehensive way, it is clear that he needs to defend his apostolate. Moreover, the fact remains that the Corinthians had written to Paul seeking his advice. This verifies Paul's remaining an authority figure in their eyes, understanding and appreciating their lives and issues. Notably, Paul wrote First Corinthians to address exceptional issues, rather than to demonstrate common principles, or to give an expose of Christian practice.<sup>19</sup>

Neyrey clarifies this point in stating:

By his own admission, Paul thought and behaved like a typical, first-century Jew in the Eastern Mediterranean (Phil. 3:4b-6). ... Paul was clearly socialized into a Jewish and Pharisaic world. On the micro level, his cosmos consisted of biblical, temple, and pharisaic tradition. On the macro level, Paul shared with other first-century Mediterranean Jews certain cultural perceptions about the cosmos, a symbolic universe. These perceptions inform all of his letters, colour the way he experienced reality, and structure the way he behaved. Those who would understand Paul ought also to share his perception, both on the micro and macro level.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Nigel Watson, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: Epworth Press, 1992), xx-xxi.

<sup>19</sup> James D.G. Dunn, *Corinthians* (Sheffield England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995). 19.

<sup>20</sup> Jerome H. Neyrey, *Paul In Other Words* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 11-12.

## The Contemporary Situation

Hermeneutically, Corinth reflects realistically on our contemporary Christian community situation. The problems and issues addressed by Paul are still relevant to society and the church today. The text offers a splendid observation of Paul the church cultivator and pastor utilizing his theology for the service of the church. Green offers a contemporary viewpoint in noting:

The spread of abuses and problems at Corinth enable us to share the apostle's perspective on a large number of issues of contemporary importance to the church. The whole correspondence throbs with life and love. However, there are difficulties associated with Corinthians that keep it a closed book to most church members today. The Corinthian issues are considered too awkward to tackle, such as tongues, prophecy and veiled women.<sup>21</sup>

Naturally, this appraisal would be stalled at the outset if Paul's solutions to these problems related simply to antiquated issues. For example, if First Corinthians rests on the necessity of the Lord's Supper, sexual practices or the wearing veils to worship then the ethical instruction of Paul may well be relegated to archaic morality. Fortunately however, Paul's ethic is a protest against such literalistic and legalistic teaching. Paul's concern with practical issues should not be construed as a banal particularise. Rather, the concern rests on the conviction that basic ethical issues are relevant to all aspects of human conduct.<sup>22</sup>

Providentially, Paul's ethic is an objection to such literalistic and legalistic teaching. His concern with the practical should not be negatively construed but rather his concern with facts supports his conviction that fundamental ethical issues are pertinent to all facets of human behaviour. Paul's analysis and response to these commonplace issues offer theological considerations of merit. Repeatedly throughout First Corinthians Paul commences with a common concern, probes its depth for theological understanding, and applies theological principles for the practical application to Christian life.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Green, *To Corinth with Love* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1982), 10.

<sup>22</sup> Victor Paul Furnish, 'Development in Paul's Thought,' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 38. No.3 (September 1970): 289-303.

<sup>23</sup> William Baird, *The Corinthian Church- A Biblical Approach to Urban Culture* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964), 27-28.

Paul's theological ethic can only be fully understood in relation to its application and relevance. First Corinthians may be applied here as a fundamental source for investigation because the tension between the practical and theological are constantly sustained. Here the Christocentric character of Paul's thought is clearly expressed with Paul's answers founded on the 'rock' of Christ (1Cor. 10:4).

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it has been seen how Paul confronted the Corinthian Christians regarding their sins and shortcomings, exhorting them not to merge with the world or accept its false values and erroneous lifestyles. The root causes of these errors may be viewed as an assimilation of the Gospel to Hellenism; however a more plausible explanation is the human inclination to reshape God in our own image.

Paul was well aware of what he was doing and why, when he wrote to the church of God at Corinth (1:2). Paul's purpose in writing to the Corinthians is clearly one of reproof. Paul wants them to know of his concern for the assembly, and tells them what they should and should not do in explicit terms. In addressing the issues relating to the Lord's Supper, marriage and women (as with other issues) Paul exhibits a clear understanding of the facts. This is received through the reliability of the sources and Paul's own background and worldly experiences. Paul's adroit and forthright response address's the situation squarely and accurately warranting an effective outcome. Paul makes it clear that his actions have no self-advantaged. His writing is a command of the Lord (14:37).

Paul's letter to the Corinthians offers the contemporary reader a window into a real and struggling early Christian community, one that challenged its members to allow the Gospel's engagement in the reality of their daily lives. Similarly, the contemporary reader is challenged to allow the Gospel message to engage them in the realities of daily life, and to celebrate their own oneness in Christ when the church gathers for Eucharist and spiritual communication.

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