

Lesson Two

CONNECTED IN CHRIST

SCRIPTURE

1 Corinthians 3–4

MAIN IDEA

Through our baptism in Christ, we have all the gifts we need to live well, grow spiritually, resolve conflicts, and care for each other as members of one family.

OPENING PRAYER

*God of all,
you have called us together in Jesus Christ,
and offered us everything we need to grow in faith and love.
Help us bring our very best to the study of your word,
and then help us use what we learn
to nourish your church
for the sake of your world.
Amen.*

INTRODUCTION

In these two chapters, Paul chastises the Corinthians for living according to the flesh. Paul does not despise our bodies. On the contrary, he cares deeply about them. He even uses the human body as a metaphor for our connection to Jesus Christ and each other. For Paul, “the flesh” is shorthand for living according to pagan values, focused on oneself and on this life only. As baptized Christians, the Corinthians should treat their own bodies and those of their neighbors differently from the prevailing norms of pagan Corinth. Through baptism, they have been united with Jesus Christ and each other. They must honor this reality in their actions now, even as they hope for a deeper union with God and each other in the age to come.

To remind his friends that they are one in Jesus Christ, Paul offers a variety of metaphors for the church: God’s field, God’s building, God’s temple. Both individually and as the church, their bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. Their actions, their whole lives, are meant to point toward resurrection, new life, hope, rather than toward death, exploitation, dead ends.

Paul uses metaphors for himself that might surprise us today. Spiritually, he is both mother and father to the family the Corinthians are meant to be. As Paul reasserts his apostolic authority to teach his friends the mysteries of faith, he leads us, today, to consider how we steward those mysteries, our inheritance from his time.

LESSON

Paul opens Chapter 3 with a metaphor: when he met the Corinthians, they were infants and he was their mother figure. We might wonder whether his friends bristled at his description of them as they had been a few years earlier:

“I could not speak to you as spiritual people but rather as fleshly, as infants in Christ” (3:1). And yet it’s true that at the time, the gospel had been entirely new to them. For the previously pagan majority in the Corinthian church, the idea of God loving them selflessly, sacrificing for them, was foreign. At best, the gods of pagan cults might improve some aspect of a person’s life in exchange for their having made the right sacrifices. This mentality was mocked repeatedly in the Hebrew Scriptures, as in Psalm 50, when God asks God’s people to change their behavior rather than increase their animal sacrifices:

*If I were hungry, I would not tell you,
for the world and all that is in it is mine.
Do I eat the flesh of bulls,
or drink the blood of goats?
Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving,
and pay your vows to the Most High.
(Ps. 50:12–14)*

Paul as a Mother to His Children in Faith

Embracing the reality that they were infants in the faith was, paradoxically, the wisest and most powerful thing Paul’s friends could do. Embracing their ignorance would enable them to be curious about the gospel, to open themselves to the Spirit’s wisdom, and to grow in faith.

Paul’s role in nurturing these infants in the faith can also seem paradoxical, as one of the metaphors he used for himself was distinctly feminine. “I fed you with milk,” he writes in 3:2, “not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food.” Without apparent self-consciousness, Paul uses the metaphor of a mother or a wet nurse for his apostolic role. Around the same time as he wrote this letter, he used another maternal

metaphor in addressing the Galatian church: “My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you” (Gal. 4:19). New Testament scholar Beverly Roberts Gaventa notes that Paul’s “use of maternal imagery” in chapter 3 “reinforces the imagery of family that appears throughout 1 Corinthians, language that serves to build up the Corinthian community.”¹

Gaventa has found that maternal images for Paul were common in the church’s first millennium. The fourth-century bishop and theologian Gregory of Nyssa referred to Paul as a “breast for infants” who “nourishes the newly born of the Church with milk.” Some early church traditions even claimed “that milk rather than blood flowed from Paul’s body at his execution.”² In the eleventh century, Anselm of Canterbury addressed Paul in prayer as “sweet nurse, sweet mother,” and Christians as “the sons you are in labor with, and nurse.”³ For these teachers of the faith, Paul’s nurturing role lived on through his writings.

What do you think of Paul’s metaphor of himself as a mother or wet nurse? What do you appreciate, or dislike, about his openness to using female images for himself?

Paul as a Father to His Children in Faith

The embodied metaphors Paul uses for his relationship with the Corinthians and other

congregations show that he does not despise our human flesh. When he rebukes the Corinthians for being “in the flesh,” as biblical scholar Richard Hays writes, he is rebuking them for “*living in rivalry and disunity within the church.*”⁴ They are behaving as if they were still pagan; as if their baptism had not fundamentally transformed them, body and soul; as if they were not members together of Christ’s body, beyond their own flesh.

Serving as the Corinthians’ mother in faith does not keep Paul from also seeing himself as their spiritual father. “Indeed, in Christ Jesus I fathered you through the gospel” (4:15), he says. He calls Timothy, his partner in evangelism, “my beloved and trustworthy child in the Lord” (4:17), in implicit contrast with the unruly Corinthians. Paul asserts his paternal authority—a powerful metaphor in the Greco-Roman world, where fathers ruled the home—by asking about his next visit, “Am I to come to you with a stick, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?” (4:21).

Paul places himself in the role of disciplinarian, as the Corinthians’ spiritual father. How did you react to his question, “Am I to come to you with a stick, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?” (4:21). How does, or doesn’t, your church enforce discipline concerning teaching and the practice of faith?

1 Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 41–42.

2 Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul*, 14–15.

3 Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul*, 15.

4 Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 48. Italics in the original.

Not Just Children in Faith, But Siblings in Faith

If Paul is the Corinthians' parent in faith, the congregation's members are each other's siblings. Perhaps because factionalism is such a problem in the Corinthian church, he uses the word "brother" or "brothers" thirty-nine times in this letter. That's more than twice as often as in Romans, and more than three times as often as in Second Corinthians.⁵ In Greek, as in Spanish, the word "brothers" can be understood to include sisters too. It's clear from the context that Paul is addressing both women and men, which is why most translations say "brothers and sisters."⁶ He is reminding the Corinthians, regardless of gender, that they are all members of one family. Although Paul claims authority within this family, Jesus Christ is its head.

Paul's familial language has a clear implication: if the Corinthians are siblings in Jesus Christ, and if Paul is their spiritual parent, then they must find ways to resolve conflicts and care for each other as family.

Many churches today describe themselves as a family, or "like a family." What do you see as the positive aspects of that metaphor? Do you see downsides to it? Does your opinion change when you move beyond your own congregation, to thinking of your whole denomination as a family, or of every baptized Christian in the world as one family?

Not Paul's Will, But God's

The authority Paul claims doesn't come from within himself, but rather from God who called him to be an apostle. Without God's action turning the hearts and minds of the people Paul evangelized, his actions would amount to nothing. Paul offers a series of metaphors that emphasize God's agency and God's call for Christians to follow the Holy Spirit's guidance.

All these metaphors point to the church as a collective endeavor made up of individual parts. "You are God's field," he tells them, "God's building." Paul's converts may have known the metaphor of the field was not original to him. He may have taught them that God had nicknamed Israel "God's plants" more than once (see Jeremiah 24:6, Ezekiel 16:7). Perhaps because he is speaking to city dwellers, Paul also calls the congregation "God's building". By God's grace, he says, "like a wise master builder I laid a foundation," on which the Corinthians now need to continue construction (3:10). Both the foundation of the edifice and the grace to build are gifts from God: "that foundation is Jesus Christ" (3:11).

Together Building God's Temple

Paul implicitly asks his friends: with what materials do you want to build the church, your faith, and your Christian community? Don't you want to bring your best; beautiful materials that will endure, like "gold, silver, precious stones" (3:12)? Before you answer, remember: the day of judgment is coming, and in its fire, straw and even strong wood will burn up. Exactly how Paul conceived of that fire, we don't know. It might be hellfire, the torment of persistently unfaithful

⁵ Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul*, 47.

⁶ Beverly Gaventa notes this as well in *Our Mother Saint Paul*, 47.

souls. Or it might be a different kind of fire, holy flames that test and refine, and that consume what is not needed for eternal life in the company of God and the saints. Regardless, Paul seems to ask, wouldn't they rather build something that will last, and whose beauty will testify to God's goodness, rather than something that will burn to ashes?

Lest his friends think they're constructing just any building, Paul asks explicitly, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" (3:16) He writes in the plural: the Corinthians are God's temple *together*, and God's Spirit dwells in them *together*. Once people are baptized, they no longer belong to themselves alone. They are members of a larger body, headed by Jesus Christ. We'll see Paul develop this metaphor in chapter 12.

What are some material things that remind you to offer the best of your gifts to God? It might be something like stained glass windows in your church, a favorite piece of music sung by your choir, or a monetary offering. What do you, personally, seek to offer that is beautiful? This might be something tangible like a gift for arranging flowers, or it could be something emotional like a warm smile and a listening ear for someone who needs them.

God's Generous Gift of the Gospel

In chapter 4, Paul again moves God to the forefront of the Corinthians' consciousness, referring to himself and other apostles as "servants of Christ and stewards of God's

mysteries" (4:1). Not for the last time, he sounds a bit defensive regarding critiques of him that might be floating around: "But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court" (4:3). He uses what may be his peevish feelings to continue making his larger theological point, that God alone will judge him, along with the Corinthians and all people.

In this chapter, Paul implicitly encourages gratitude and humility. He has just told the congregation that in Jesus Christ, they already have everything they need, including the wisdom that will guide them to live well (3:21–23). This wisdom is available to everyone. Paul and Apollos taught the Corinthians "Not beyond what is written" (4:6), probably in contrast to false teachers (like those he will mention in 2 Corinthians 11:13) who teach esoteric, secret knowledge that causes some to believe they know better than their siblings in faith. We seem to hear Paul's frustration with his friends, as he reminds them that the gospel is a gift. Having it, all Christians are rich beyond measure, even though in the city of Corinth and in the Roman Empire generally, they are strictly divided by their access to wealth.

In contrast to the Corinthians who are sowing division by seeking to rule over others, Paul points to himself and his fellow apostles not just as servants, but as "a spectacle to the world, to angels and to humans" (4:9). They are "fools for the sake of Christ," "weak," "dishonored," "hungry and thirsty," "naked and beaten and homeless," "weary from the work of our own hands" (4:10–12). Gesturing to the wisdom of the cross he has already outlined, and echoing what Christians will come to know as

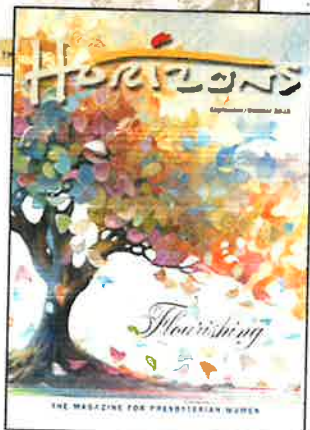
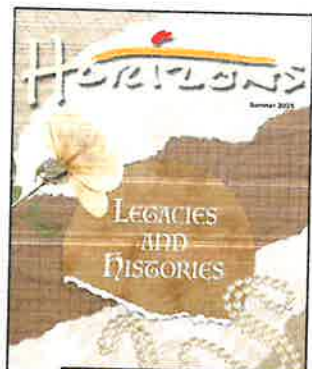
the Sermon on the Mount, Paul reminds the Corinthians that the way of Jesus is not arrogance. Instead, it is blessing, kindness, and perseverance, even when one is regarded as “the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things” (4:12–13). In the following chapter, he will have more to say about how to demonstrate that one has been transformed by the gospel.

TAKEAWAY

Christians are called to remember that we are siblings in faith, united in Jesus Christ. Often, we grow in faith by admitting what we don’t know or aren’t sure of, and then learning from Jesus together. When we share our gifts and support each other, we glorify God and receive strength and guidance—even in hard times.

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