

main course

welcome to corinth

INTRODUCTION

This material explores the quality of welcome of the early church in Corinth and asks if we do any better.

AIM

The aim is to challenge people to look carefully and critically at the signals they give to outsiders and those on the edges of their fellowship.

YOU WILL NEED

As leader, you will need to read through the material first. A DVD of the three scripts is being sent to signed up churches. Others can borrow a copy or download the video clips from this website, which has full instructions on how you do this. If you plan to use video clips of the three scripts or the DVD, make sure to view them beforehand and check they are playing properly.

If you choose readers instead, find people who will enter into their character and put over the material well. Gaius is a self confident person with whom it's not easy to disagree. Junia is an intelligent, sensitive young woman, who sees what is happening around her clearly but has little power to change things. Paul, the apostle, is a strong-minded individual, who gets easily frustrated by the behaviour of other people. He's running out of patience with the congregation in Corinth.

The website also has a template for photocopying the Bible passage.

You will also need:

- enough large sheets of paper for each smaller group, pens and a way to display the sheets
- a copy of 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 for everyone
- a copy of 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, with a gap to fit in verses 23-26, for everyone
- equipment to show the DVD or the video clips, or people to read the scripts.

COMMUNION AS WE KNOW IT

People give signals to one another all the time and know how to read them:

- clothes... "You can't go out dressed like that!"
- cars... "I'm not going to be seen driving that."
- houses... "They must be doing well to live there."

Looking at the local church's story, it's clear that signals are sent out there too:

- steps... "I can't get my wheelchair in there"
- silence... "People frowned at me and my toddler"
- writing... "It was all written down and I couldn't read it"

Communion is one of the most important things we do in church. What signals does our communion give about us?

In twos or threes, for 10 minutes, ask people to discuss:

What does our church's communion service say about us and our God?



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Invite some of the groups to share their answers with the whole group.

Now give everyone a copy of 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 with no indication of where it comes from. Many will recognise it from the communion service.

Ask the whole group if this reading fits with what they've been saying about communion in their church? Take a few moments to see what people think about this. Do people recognise the passage? Explain to them it's from one of Paul's letters to the church in Corinth.

WHAT THEY'RE REALLY PROUD OF IN CORINTH

The group is now moving back to the early church in Corinth.

Watch the DVD or video clip of Gaius or hear someone read his story. He is a church leader in Corinth and the whole-church assembly meets in his house.

"I'm Gaius Flavius Maximus – when all the house-churches in Corinth assemble in one place, it happens in my house. I think these whole-church assemblies are very special. I think they are the single best way of demonstrating the new relationship with God and with one another that we've all found by following Jesus.

Corinth is a very divided city, with lots of different ethnic groups and people of vastly different status, all separated out into specific groups and sub-groups. Most people here only get to know other people of similar background and status. But, as Christians, we don't have any of these restrictions.

We all belong together, rich and poor, householders and slaves, male and female, Jew and Gentile – all made one in Christ Jesus. And our whole-church assemblies, where we all eat and drink together and share the one sacred loaf and the one sacred cup, show more clearly than anything else we do that we are united in one holy fellowship, bound together in the love of Jesus. I consider it a very special privilege to host these gatherings in my house. I truly love these wonderful celebrations of the one, undivided people of God."

With the whole group, take five minutes to discuss Gaius' view of communion assemblies in Corinth:

In what ways is his account attractive?

WHAT PASSES UNNOTICED IN CORINTH

Watch the DVD or video clip of Junia, the young slave woman who struggles to get to church, or hear someone read her story.

"I am Junia. I don't know why any of you would want to listen to me. Yes, I'm one of the people God has called together in Corinth in the name of Jesus, but I'm really struggling to feel I belong. You see, I'm a slave. I belong to Antonius, a trader with a big villa near the Temple of Apollo. Antonius and his wife Livia are not Christians. So, when the whole church meets in assembly at Gaius' house, I can never get there on time. I have to serve the evening meal before my mistress Livia will let me leave.



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Then I have to find my way across town down streets lined with taverns filled with half-drunk sailors and travellers. If I am not to be impossibly late for my dear Lord Jesus, I have to set off on my own, missing even my meagre supper, and run the gauntlet of unwanted attentions almost all of the way.

I know that the big assembly is a special celebration of our togetherness in Jesus, but by the time I arrive, it's a struggle even to get into the courtyard of Gaius' house and none of the food that has been served in the dining room ever seems to reach us. All the time we can hear the sounds of jollity and laughter coming from the dining room where Gaius and those who host house-churches in their homes have been eating and drinking all evening.

I know this love feast is supposed to show our togetherness, but when I walk home hungry after being left unnoticed at the edge of the gathering I still love my Lord Jesus and the welcome he gives me... but I'm not so sure that I love the church and all the people in it. It doesn't feel fair. It doesn't feel Christian."

In twos or threes, for 10 minutes, consider Junia's story:

Can people share any experiences where they have been left out or on the edge? How did it feel?

Why is Junia's story of church life in Corinth so different from what Gaius says?

PAUL'S VIEWS ON COMMUNION IN CORINTH

Give everyone a copy of 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 with a blank space for verses 23-26.

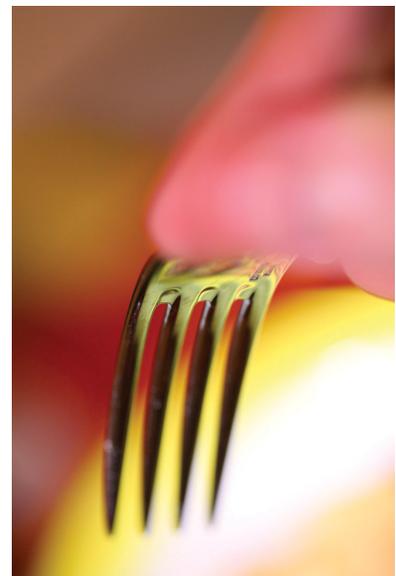
Explain the group is looking at the wider context of a familiar text about the institution of the Lord's Supper. Invite everyone to combine this reading with the missing excerpt they were given earlier. Ask them to share their response to seeing this passage in its original place.

We are now joining Paul in Ephesus.

Watch the DVD or video clip of Paul, or hear someone read his words. Paul is dictating the section of 1 Corinthians on behaviour at communion, and shows his frustration with what he's heard.

"Tertius! Can you come now? I'm ready to dictate more of that letter to the church in Corinth. Come on, man, I'm waiting! The next thing I want to do is explain my objections to the way they conduct their whole-church assemblies. Y'know, they are such a disgrace! They claim these gatherings demonstrate their love and togetherness in Christ and their unity in the Spirit of God, but anyone passing by would simply see or hear the world's ugly ways re-produced.

From what I hear, a passerby would hear loud merriment from Gaius' guest dining room, watched silently by hungry, ignored slaves and traders gathered round the door and in the courtyard. Where is the Gospel in that? Can't they see what they're doing? Do they never stop to think what their fellowship looks like to people on the edges, or people on the outside? How can they ever



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hope to attract new believers in Jesus if they never do a reality check on themselves? How can they ever expect to succeed in mission, or help the people of Corinth? Are you ready, Tertius? I'll try to put this firmly, but caringly. Let's see...!"

Together, with the whole group, take five minutes to discuss Paul's reaction to the church in Corinth:

- what does he think they are signalling by the way they conduct communion?
- what does he suggest they should do as a result?

FOLLOWING PAUL BACK TO OUR OWN CHURCH

While we may not suffer today from drunkenness and starvation at communion, we do need to do a reality check about what we think we are signalling, and the signals others receive from us. We may also need to change things as a result.

Ask for people's response to two, quick questions:

- what parts of our church life need regular reality checks?
- where should we stand, and whose perspectives do we need, so we can do reality checks on the signals our church gives?

Ask people to return to their smaller groups for 10 minutes, give each group a large piece of paper for their answers, and pose the question:

What reality checks should we plan for our church, and how can we make them happen?

With the one, big group, ask each smaller group to share their responses. Display their answer sheets for people to read later.

Pose a final question:

what are we going to do now?

Close the session with prayer.

EVALUATION

At the end of the session ask people the following questions:

- what did you enjoy or like most about this material?
- what did you find most difficult or challenging?
- what would you like to do next?