All right, let’s go ahead and get started. Last class period, actually, last week we started looking at the Paul's letters, one of the more significant corpuses in the New Testament or sections comprising the letters of the apostle Paul, a figure that we’re introduced to in the book of Acts. We began looking—last class period at the book of First Corinthians, this is one of the books that we’ll slow down and look at a couple of sample texts in a little bit more detail—actually, three or four chapters or sections of First Corinthians to examine what the issue or problem was that Paul's addressing, and how he addressed that, and how our ability to uncover what may have been the problem or issue at stake, how that can make a difference in the way we actually interpret the text. And in a couple instances, it may actually result in an understanding that is very different than what it looks like at first, a reading that you may be used to.

But let’s open with prayer, and then we’ll look more specifically at certain sections of First Corinthians. Father, we realize we face a daunting and humbling task and that is attempting to understand and analyze and wrestle with what is nothing less than Your very words, in Your very speech and communication to us. So Father, I pray that we will be willing to wrestle with the text and ask the difficult questions about the text and about ourselves, and that, Lord, we would take the greatest pains and do whatever's necessary to understand them as clearly and accurately as possible. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

All right, we ended by looking at the First Corinthians from the standpoint of First Corinthians being only one part of an ongoing communication between Paul and the Corinthians. You can read in Acts chapter 18 more detail about the background to Corinthians, and Paul’s first visit to Corinth, where he spent roughly a year and a half
establishing a church there, and then due to certain factors and certain issues arising in the church, Paul finds it necessary to address those problems and issues in writing a series of letters. We said technically our First Corinthians is really Second Corinthians. First Corinthians refers to a letter that Paul had apparently written previously, that we don't have any longer; we have no access to it. So First Corinthians is technically our Second Corinthians. What we call Second Corinthians is technically Fourth Corinthians, because Second Corinthians mentions—we’ll look at Second Corinthians later—but Second Corinthian's mentions a “severe letter” that some persons actually feel has been combined with another letter into Second Corinthians; we’ll talk about that later. But in assuming that the “severe letter” mentioned in Second Corinthians is a separate letter, we know of at least four letters that Paul wrote to the Corinthians—that we know of. And again, only two of them exist or are extant in what we call First and Second Corinthians.

So what that means is it's going to be even a little more difficult to try to reconstruct what was going on, because there is also so much interaction already between Paul and his readers. He simply is going to assume, obviously, that they know what's going on, and he will respond to them. But again, we have to do the hard work of attempting, based on First Corinthians and based on what we can know historically, to try to reconstruct what were the issues that Paul was addressing in the church at Corinth.

There are actually two ways to divide the book, or to think about the book of First Corinthians; there are two ways to consider its plan, how it's put together. One of them is: you could divide the book into the manner in which Paul received the information about the Corinthian church; in other words, after Paul had left Corinth after spending a year and a half there and establishing the church, how did Paul find out about the different problems that arose? Well, the first six chapters seem to address problems that came to Paul via word-of-mouth report. So he heard by report from someone telling him that certain problems had arisen. In the first six chapters, he deals in order and kind of takes each problem in turn that he has been made aware of, and deals with it, whereas in chapters 7 through 16, Paul seems to respond to written reports. So for example, chapter 7, in verse 1,
Paul says: “now concerning the matters about which you wrote”—so whether it was a letter or whatever—perhaps then, the Corinthians also wrote Paul a letter, but now Paul seems to respond to a series of issues that he is been made aware of through a letter.

Another way to divide the latter is to divide according to the way that Jews during this time would have frequently characterized Gentiles, and that is according to two major sins. You find this in the Old Testament, you find this in Jewish literature also and you find this elsewhere in the New Testament that it was a common Jewish understanding that Gentiles were basically characterized or guilty of two sins: sexual immorality and idolatry. Again, it appears all through the Jewish literature, and so chapters 5 to 7 could all be seen as addressing a series of issues related to the problem of sexual immorality, again putting those under the category of a common sin that Gentiles, according to Jews, were guilty of. Then chapters 8 through 14, address the issue of idolatry—another characteristic sin of Gentiles, according to many Jews. So then chapter 15, at the climax of that, deals with the hope of the resurrection. So those are two ways to understand how First Corinthians was put together.

When you read First Corinthians, it becomes very important or very clear that Paul just seems to take a number of issues and a number of problems, and deals with them, and they’re often introduced by this phrase “now concerning”: now concerning meat offered to idols, now concerning spiritual gifts, now concerning this, now concerning the matters about which you wrote. So Paul seems to deal with a series of issues. But again, they could be categorized according to one of these two schemes, so that’s one way of organizing and understanding what's going on in First Corinthians. I find this one very compelling, because interestingly, Paul is going to address many of the Corinthian problems from the perspective of the Old Testament. It’s almost as if he’s putting an Old Testament spin on the problem[s] of the Corinthians and his, his solution to those problems. Now, when we asked the question then why.

We’ll talk a little bit about chapters 1 through 3 and what's going on there. But why did—why did Paul have to write First Corinthians in the first place? In other words, what
were the issues, or some of the problems that caused Paul to have to sit down and write this letter? And, as I said, Paul had spent a year and a half establishing a church in the city of Corinth, the capital of the Achaia in Greece, and after leaving, certain issues and problems arose that had infiltrated the church that now Paul had heard of, by word-of-mouth and through written form, and now he sits down and composes this letter to respond to these series of problems. Again, this is the second letter that Paul has written that we call First Corinthians. So why did he have to write it? What were some of the major problems going on in Corinth?

Well, I want to highlight two of them, although there seems to be many, and the way that these could be summed up is simply this: it seems that the Corinthian culture had now infiltrated the church. In other words, the way that things took place or the way people did business or what was going on in the way people thought in Corinthian secular culture now infiltrated the church and caused a number of problems that Paul is now going to address. One issue was a crisis in leadership. Remember, way back about the first week or two of this class—of course you remember that far back—we talked a little bit about some of the cultural values, and one of those being the patron-client relationship; that is, a patron was a wealthy member of society, of some significant status, who would usually bestow some kind of a benefit on a poor member of society, someone of lower social status, usually in exchange for that person’s support, politically or otherwise. Others had to pay the patron back by going around and telling everyone how wonderful he was or something like that. So Corinth was steeped in this cultural value. It had its share of patrons, wealthy individuals of certain social status, and social status was very important. The Corinthians would've viewed their leaders in Corinthian society in terms of their social status, and that would've been very important to them. There was also the possibility of the influence of what is of[ten] called sophists, that comes from the Greek word sophos, meaning “wisdom.” A sophist was a wise teacher, and sophists would have been these wise teachers who would have competed for a following. So this is this competition among leaders, this political wrangling, promoting status, vying for status, emphasis on social status and
wealth—this would've been a very important factor. The social factor in first century Corinth, and in my opinion, was one of the issues that would've raised a number problems. I think this explains some of the problems we’re going to read about in First Corinthians.

Another one that we've already talked about was the problem of sexual immorality, though in the Greco-Roman empire, there were certainly limits and boundaries, certain sexual activities that they would have looked down upon and would've been unacceptable. The Roman attitude toward sexuality was obviously much more open, and much more free, and loose, than Christians would've had. So especially at times in connection with certain religious practices, and certain religious celebrations with pagan religions, adding that altogether if a number of the Corinthian Christians, during that 18 month period Paul spent in Corinth, if they came out of that environment and now still find themselves in that environment, that's obviously going to be a problem for them. A number of issues that Paul addresses, I think, relate to a number of the Greco-Roman views toward sexuality. So, those are two of the very important issues or viewpoints or values in the Corinthian society, in the Greco-Roman world, that had infiltrated the church and had began to cause a number of problems. Now Paul will begin to address those in First Corinthians.

So what I want to do is, I want to look at just a handful of important passages in First Corinthians, and to try to reconstruct what—given what we know about the letter of First Corinthians, and also what we know about the city of Corinth and some of the things we said—we can perhaps reconstruct the situation that would've caused Paul to write what he did, and how might that help us make sense of what we read in these different sections of Corinthians. A couple of these I’ll just touch on very briefly, but a couple I’ll linger on, spend a little bit more time on, and dwell on in a little bit more detail.

The first one is chapters 1 through 3. In chapters 1 through 3, this is where Paul addresses the issue of how the Corinthians are treating other apostles and other church leaders. So, for example, this is how Paul begins in chapter 1. In chapter 1 and starting with verse 10; this is kind of the first problem that Paul addresses, and in a way, what he says in these chapters helps explain a number of other problems as well. It’s indicative of
Corinthian thinking, and Greco-Roman thinking, and how it had affected the church. So, this is chapter 1, verse 10: “Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people.” That seems to be the source by the word-of-mouth that has reached Paul about some of the problems in Corinth. He says: “it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.” And so that raises the question: what kind of quarrels? What are they fighting over? What's causing this division that now has Paul so concerned?

He goes on and says in verse 12: “what I mean is this: each of you says ‘I belong to Paul,’ or ‘I belong to Apollos,’ or ‘I belong to Cephas,’ or ‘I belong to Christ.’ Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you, or were you baptized in the name of Paul?”

Now, what appears to be the problem, and what he's going to address through chapter 3 is that these verses suggest that the division and quarreling had been caused by dissension, crystallizing around these key figures: “I belong to Paul, I belong to Apollos, I belong to Cephas or Peter.” Now as you read this—again, you wonder, “Well, why would they do that?” Given what we just said, it appears that the Corinthians were treating their church leaders in the same way that they would have been accustomed to treating leaders in Corinthian society; that is, this emphasizing social status, this whole patron-client dynamic, the way they treated the sophists, as the sophists being wise teachers competing for followers. If all of that somehow factored into it, you can see how the Corinthians may now have been treating their church leaders and dominant church figures like Paul and Apollos and Cephas (or Peter), the Corinthians may have been treating those persons in the same way that they were accustomed to treating leaders in the city of Corinth, who were vying for attention and treating them in terms of their political squabbles and their social status etc.

So perhaps then—now Paul recognizing that is now going to address that problem by—and basically his response is, if you treat us that way if you treat your church leaders
that way, you may be reflecting the wisdom of Corinth, but the wisdom of Corinth is actually foolishness when it's measured against God’s standard of wisdom, which revolves around the Gospel and be crucified, humiliated, and a suffering Lord who died on the cross. So, Paul basically says this clamor for political status, treating church leaders like you do your leaders in secular Corinth, in terms of social status, and rallying around and causing division, that all reflects the wisdom of Corinth, but when measured against God's wisdom in the Gospel of a crucified and suffering Lord, that wisdom actually turns out to be foolishness. So he calls on the Corinthians to stop treating their leaders in the same way as they’ve been accustomed to treating their leaders in secular Corinth. But instead they were to treat them more in line with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. So that’s problem number one in the first three chapters, Paul's not just addressing division in general, or that the human propensity to quarrel and compete; again, he seems to be addressing a very specific problem that has come about because of Corinthian culture and the way that the Corinthians treat their leaders—the social status, and treating leaders in light of that—the patron-client relationship.

This also may be why or one of the reasons why Paul, and this becomes clear later on in First Corinthians, but this may also be why Paul refused the financial support of the Corinthians. While he was quite willing to receive financial support from most other churches, he did not in Corinth; instead he set up his own business to make a living, and perhaps because he wanted to distance himself from receiving financial support, he could be perceived in light of this whole political wrangling, and the social status and the patron-client relationship, etc. So he wanted to avoid that, and so it seems that with the Corinthians, he takes on a different strategy. If you read the letter to the Philippians, that we’ll look at later, he gladly received their financial support so he could devote himself completely to spreading the Gospel on their behalf. But when it came to the Corinthians, because of some of the problems, Paul worked for his own living.

First Corinthians chapter 5, again, we’re going to skip ahead; we won’t touch on every chapter, I’ve just selected a handful of them. Chapter 5 is a very interesting text, and
I think one that can only be explained when we understand, again, some of the background, and the problems that would've precipitated the issue in First Corinthians 5 and caused Paul to have to address it. This is how chapter 5 begins; it's a rather bizarre text, at least for us in some ways. He says—starting with verse 1: “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not even found among the pagans.” In other words, what he's doing—basically what Paul’s saying, and this is not just rhetoric, he's describing a situation that even in the secular Corinthian society would be condemned, and looked down upon. He says “of a kind that is not found even among pagans, for a man is living with his father's wife.” This is probably is a clear reference to his stepmother, and not his biological mother, “and”—but here's the kind of astonishing thing, if you think that's astonishing Paul goes on and says: “but you are arrogant about it, or you are boastful about it. Should you not rather have mourned?” Mourning being—not being sad because of what is happening, but mourning in the Old Testament was a sign of repentance. So he’s basically saying, rather, you should have repented over this; but instead, you’re boasting and you’re arrogant because there's this person in your midst. By “in your midst”, he’s referring to the church—there's a person in your church who is sleeping with his father's wife, his stepmother, and you’re boasting about that rather than repenting! “And doing so that he who has done this would have been removed from among you.” So instead of dealing with this person, they're boasting about it and tolerating it. So that raises a number of questions: What one is going on? What would cause this person to do this thing? Why in the world with the church tolerate it and boast about it? It is something that Paul says that even the secular pagan Corinthians look down on this, and don't even tolerate this, yet you do. First of all the problem clearly seems to be that—and notice that Paul does not so much address the man himself, or the woman, the man’s stepmother. Instead, what his issue is, and yes, he would have been upset about that, but what really has Paul upset is not so much the man's sexual sins, but the fact that the church arrogantly tolerates it. So the key issue here is the church tolerating it instead of dealing with the situation, by, as he says, removing the person from their midst. We'll talk more about that in a moment as well. So
again, his solution to the problem is that the Corinthian church should expel this immoral person in order to preserve the purity of the church.

Again, it’s so interesting, Paul says very little about this individual, but he says everything about the way the church is treating the situation, and the way they’re tolerating it and not doing anything about it.

Now, to address a couple of questions. First of all, the first question is why would this individual in the first place do what he did, and it's not clear in this text whether he has actually married his stepmother or whether he's just living with her outside of marriage, but in any case, Paul is upset about it. We’ll see why in just a moment why that would've been forbidden—but again, this individual is doing something that even the Greco-Roman society would look down upon. Why might he do this? There may be a couple explanations, and I'm not sure which one. But one of the explanations may be that the reason why this person would marry his stepmother is perhaps the father has passed away and died, or they may have been divorced. What might have happened is, if this stepmother married someone else, then the father's inheritance would go with her. So in marrying his stepmother, he may be doing that just to try to keep the money in the family, instead of her marrying someone else and some of it or all of it going to her new spouse. So that may be one reason why he would marry his stepmother, to try to keep the money in the family. There may be other reasons as well; I'm not sure because the text is silent, but there could be an explanation for that along those lines.

But the other question is: why would the church tolerated this? Think a little bit about some of the background we’ve been talking about. Why would the church be willing to tolerate and even boast about this person? Again, you’d think, well, it's a church; certainly, they would realize that this is a sexual sin that not even permitted in the secular Greco-Roman world and in Corinth. Why would they be willing to overlook this, and tolerate it, even boast about it?

Okay, they didn’t realize what?

*Student: They didn’t think it was like anything out of the norm.*
Okay, so perhaps they are so used to this, or seeing this that they don't think it's out of the norm for them? Okay. So perhaps that—given all we’ve talked about the rampant immorality in Greco-Roman society. Is it possible that they just didn't think much about this? That's—that's a possibility. What else, anything else?

*Student: Could it be that they were, that they were boasting of their graciousness in allowing this person to stay?*

All right, yeah, maybe they’d heard Paul talk about “we’re saved by grace through faith” and they thought that they were, emphasizing that, over judging this person.

*Student: Maybe this person was really influential and had a lot of clout.*

Okay. What if this individual is an influential person in society, that maybe is a patron? Perhaps this is a portion providing one of the places where the church in Corinth met. Usually they would meet in the home of a wealthy individual, but what if this is a wealthy patron, and influential person of society? That might be the reason, I suspect, why they would let him go and overlook this, is because they don't want to cut themselves off from this financial source, and they don't want to speak out against someone of this social status and standing, so they're willing to let this go, and instead boast of this person as an influential member of society. In other words, chapter 5 may be very close to, or may share features with chapters 1 through 3, boasting in leaders, treating them in light of social status, and political status etc. Maybe this, again, is a wealthy patron, someone of social status, and so no one's going to touch this guy, and they’re willing to overlook it.

Now, a couple other things. I think the key to understanding this passage is to understand not only the background in secular Corinth, but also to understand the way Paul describes the situation, and his solution, is clearly rooted in the Old Testament. For example, we just asked why were they willing to tolerate and boast. In Leviticus 18, we find the author condemning incest, one of them is a relationship with the wife of one's father—that would be a stepmother. So Paul seems to be thinking of the prohibitions against incest in Leviticus chapter 18. You also find Deuteronomy also prohibiting incestuous relationships. Second is that he calls upon the congregation to come together
and make a judgment on this—reflecting the Old Testament conception of the congregation, the assembly of God's people, Israel, coming together to make a judgment or decision as described in the book of Deuteronomy. In other words, Paul is looking at the situation through the lens of the Old Testament. He’s calling upon especially Deuteronomy and other Old Testament texts, to provide a lens and perspective for the Corinthians to look at this situation. Another one is, especially the book of Deuteronomy, but other texts emphasize the need to maintain purity within the community, especially for admission into the Temple. It's interesting, back in chapter 3, what is one of the most famous phrases in the First Corinthians, chapter 3. How does Paul described the church in chapter 3? He says “do you not know that” what? “Do you not know that you are the temple of God?” Applying Old Testament temple imagery now to the church of Corinth, not their building, but the people themselves, as they gather for worship. So Paul envisions the church as a purified community, a holy temple, and that’s the reason why he calls for them to expel this individual, or to remove him from their midst—to maintain the purity of this community, this new community, this temple-church in Corinth. So Paul doesn't say a whole lot addressing the individual who’s committing the sin, but he has everything to say to the church by portraying them as a holy community, along the lines of the Old Testament community of God, who were to be pure who were to remove impurity from their midst. By portraying them as a temple to which you can only be admitted if one was pure. By portraying the church in that way, Paul then calls for the church not to tolerate these people, no matter what his social status, but instead to remove him from their midst, in order to maintain the purity of the people themselves. There’s obviously a hint in the text that the ultimate goal is that this person will be restored, but at the same time Paul will not tolerate the tolerance of the church, that is, that they're just going to overlook this, perhaps because of his social status.

All right, so that’s one example of how I think understanding a little bit about the situation in Corinth, the background, might help you. If this is a guy who is an influential member society, now you can see why they might want to let him go. But Paul says you
can't evaluate, you can't respond to the situation in light of the values of Corinthian society. Instead he provides them with a set of Old Testament lenses to look at their situation in a new light, to see it in terms of this purified Temple, the community of God, and the need to maintain purity in their midst.

All right, First Corinthians chapter 7 is another intriguing text. This is from the first of a section that Paul now will apparently respond to issues that have come to him via written form, perhaps in a letter. He says: “now concerning the matters about which you wrote, it is well for a man” or “is good for man not to touch a woman.” Now, let me show you two different translations of this verse. This is an older version of the New American Standard Bible; some you may have that, and there may be other versions that—that would do something similar. This is the New Revised Standard Version. But as you look at this, the wording is very similar, but what's the difference between these two?

Student: The top one, it implies more that Paul is the one saying “it is good for a man not to touch a woman”, and in the bottom one, with it—in the quotation marks, it’s more like “that’s what they say.”

Very good. Did everyone hear that? A very astute observation. The difference is punctuation; the way this is punctuated suggests that this is what Paul said. Paul is going to write to the Corinthians and tell them it's not good for man to touch a woman; therefore, it would appear that Paul's going to address the problem of rampant sexual immorality; he wants it to stop. Understanding “touching” to be—not just physical touch, but the touching as a sexual object, is what the word implies. Whereas this translation, notice the way it’s punctuated: “now concerning the matters about which you wrote”—and notice that this is in quotation marks. “‘It is good for man not to touch a woman.”’ This would be a summary of what the Corinthians were saying, and what they were thinking. So how you punctuate this is going to make a big difference in how you read chapter 7. Is chapter 7 Paul's response to the rampant sexual immorality in the church, or is it a response to something that the Corinthians were saying? They were the ones saying “it's good for a man not to touch a woman sexually.” Again, in that day, it would basically have been that
the man making the advances. So which one is it? And the difficulty is that if you could go
back and read the original manuscripts of the New Testament—which we don't have—but
when, when Paul originally wrote in the first century, what you would've found is—I can't
remember if I put a picture of a manuscript up towards the beginning of the semester—but
in the first century, the way they wrote is—first of all, they would have written with no
spaces between words or letters. Everything would've been run together. Second, they
would have written with no punctuation, no periods, no commas, question marks, or
quotation marks. As you read your new English translation—at least in the New
Testament, all the periods and commas and quotation marks and punctuations are all put
there by the editors and the translators of your Bible. So, interestingly, our modern-day
translations are, to some degree, just as much an interpretation as they are translation.
They’re all interpretations and even the way punctuation is used can influence the way we
read it. I think most are starting to agree that this is the way we should read it, that it
wasn’t Paul that was saying “it's good for man not to touch a woman”, but it was the
Corinthians who were saying that.

Then the question becomes, why in the world the Corinthians be saying that? Why
would at least some of the Corinthians be saying” “it's good for a man not to touch a
woman”; that is, sexually. What in the world would've led the Corinthians to say something
like that? Well, some have suggested that it's because of a platonic type of dualism or a
Gnostic type of thinking. Remember way back to the beginning of the semester we talked
about different Greco-Roman religious and philosophical options? And one of them was
Platonism. Among other things Platonism distinguished between the spiritual and the
physical world, and some may have taken that to the extreme, to say since the ultimate
reality is spiritual, we must deny any physical and bodily appetites. So one of the offshoots
of that would have been to deny any physical relationships. So because of this platonic type
of thinking that might’ve influence the church of Corinth, is some of them would've been
advocating denying any physical pleasure, and instead pursuing the spiritual, which meant
not engaging in any kind of sexual relationships—period. And then Paul’s going to
respond to that.

Now, that's possible; however it's also possible when you go on to read chapter 7, Paul gives all kinds of advice. He addresses husbands and wives who are married, he addresses people who are divorced, he addresses people who are apparently thinking about getting a divorce, he addresses people who are single and are thinking about getting married, he addresses people that are single and are not thinking about getting married. So he addresses a variety of persons, males and females. So it doesn't seem like this platonic dualism between spirit and matter explains all the problems. I wonder if it's not more the fact that because of two other things—Paul has addressed the issue of sexual immorality elsewhere in the letter, or previously in the letter that is technically First Corinthians, that we don't have any longer—that seemed to address issues of sexual immorality. Because Paul addressed the issue, and because it was so rampant in Corinth, I wonder if some of the Corinthians may not have been responding well. Secondly, maybe the best way because of Paul's commands to be careful, and because it's so rampant in Corinth, I wonder if some Corinthians were wondering maybe just better if we avoid it altogether, and that some even within the marriage relationship were abstaining. And although Paul is clear in First Corinthians 7 that the boundaries for sexual relationships are within the marriage relationship, if some though, were abstaining within the marriage relationship, some may have been wondering if they should divorce their spouses, and some who were single were wondering if they should even get married, in the first place. So Paul seems to address, I think, a number of problems in First Corinthians 7 related to this issue, that again, perhaps because of some of Paul's commands about warning against immoralities, and because it was so rampant at Corinth, is why I wonder if some of the Corinthians were saying maybe it's better if we just avoid it altogether and abstain, even in the marriage relationship. So Paul, in chapter 7, provides a variety of instructions for married people, people who are divorced, or are considering a divorce, people who were single and wondering if they should get married, etc. So once again, chapter 7 is not just Paul sitting down and him going off on the topic of marriage, it's—again, he's addressing a very specific issue and
problem that has arisen in the Corinthian church, due to what's going on in the Corinthian culture. There's a lot more we can say about chapter 7, but it'd probably take the rest of the semester.

*Student:* Does it seem odd that they were asking this question about sexual immorality after the problem that he addresses with the man and his stepmother? Does it seem odd that they would go to him asking about sexual immorality when they're tolerating incest?

Yeah, that's right, or the other possibility too, that I'm not sure of, but some have suggested: not all the Corinthians would've thought the same thing on this topic. Maybe Paul's addressing a different group or faction within the church in chapter 7, different than the ones who would been supportive of what was going on in chapter 5. That's a possibility; I'm not sure.

*Student:* Were there many churches in Corinth, or is it that this was the central church?

I don't know. I mean, from what we know, of most larger cities is that there would have probably been several smaller congregations, and whether they got together and occasionally met as a group I’m not sure. I guess I haven’t thought about that enough to answer that for Corinthians. It does seem likely that there were several churches or was there just one or where there several that met together on occasion. I’m not sure how to answer that for First Corinthians; that’s a really good question.

All right, skipping ahead: First Corinthians 11. And I want to look at the second part of First Corinthians 11. In First Corinthians chapter 11, in the entire chapter Paul is addressing issues in the church as they gather for worship, and that's very important to understand. Paul's not addressing what the Corinthians do on their own—although he has things to say about that—but he's not addressing what Corinthians do in their own homes, what they do as individuals or in other groups and societies. He’s addressing, in chapters 11—and 12 through 14, the next section we'll look at—he’s addressing issues that have emerged when the Corinthians gather together for worship. Again, whether that's in
separate houses, or in one house in particular, I'm not exactly certain what Paul's envisioning here. So Chapter 11 addresses the problem of the church when it gathers for worship.

The second half of chapter 11 is what I want to focus on, verses 17 through 34 of chapter 11. Now—here's how he begins, starting with verse 17: he says “now, in the following instructions I do not commend you”—as if he’s had much commendation for them anyway so far—“because when you come together, it is not for the better, but for the worse. For to begin with, when you come together as a church”—I want you to notice the irony or paradox in the way Paul is speaking. “For to begin with, when you come together to work as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you”—So notice the irony or contradiction: they come together as a church, but they're not really coming together, because there are still divisions among them. And so I would propose what Paul's going to say in chapter 11 is still the result of how things go on in day-to-day life in secular Corinth—the division between social status, especially that the division between wealthy and poor, patron-client, those kinds of divisions are now filtering down into the church and causing the problem the Paul's going to address in chapter 11. So he says, you come together as a church, but in actuality you’re not coming together, because there are divisions among you.

Now, in the rest of this, he says—starting in verse 19: “indeed there have to be factions among you, for when you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper.” So this is Paul's main issue: when the church comes together, and they have—they participate in the Lord's supper. You may call it the Eucharist or communion, or other terms that we call it. In this text he calls it “the Lord's supper”. He says “when you come together, it's not really the Lord's supper that you eat.” So he’s saying when they gather together to have communion, or the Lord's supper, that's not really what's taking place. He says “for when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry while another goes and another becomes drunk.” He says, “What, do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God, and
humiliate those who have nothing?” Now what is going on here?

First of all, it's important to realize, the way they did communion in the first century may be a little bit different than we’re used to, at least in all the traditions I've grown up with. Usually it's one Sunday a month—although when I was in Scotland, it was a lot more frequently, and I enjoyed that. But in the churches I've grown up in, it’s usually once a month that we have communion. The service goes on as normal. You have your praise band and your sermon, and at the end the ushers come up and communion takes place, and everyone's still seated, and the cup and the bread is passed. You eat it, and then the cup is passed and you drink it, and then the praise band comes back up and sings something, and you’re out the door. But in the first century it wasn't that way. Usually communion would have been taken place in the context of a meal that the church would've eaten together, and so that's why this reference to eating and some getting drunk, and some eating before others arrived, this would been in the context of a church meal somewhere in there, perhaps towards the end, would've climaxed in the Lord's supper, celebrating communion, or the Eucharist or the Lord’s supper.

Now, the problem is: what is the problem with the Corinthians? What has Paul so upset? How is it that that they have factions, that that—there are—how is it that there's divisions, and then why then does Paul say it's really not the Lord’s supper that you celebrate? So what was the problem Paul's addressing? It seems to me, as I've already said, that this problem of different social levels, such as found in the patron-client relationship and the distinction between the wealthier elite members of society and the poor members, had now infiltrated down into the church. It was now even coming out in the way they celebrated communion. So that is what probably going on here. I think it is a plausible scenario.

When you read a lot of the early Greco-Roman sources, and understand what was probably going on in Corinth it is most likely first of all, the church in Corinth, or churches, would've met, most likely, in the home of a wealthy member. Maybe a patron who would've offered his home and the financial resources to basically, for this house church,
and so we’re probably in the setting of a fairly large house, at least for that day, of a wealthier member of the church in Corinthian society. Now, a lot of the wealthier members probably would not have been as dependent on the need to work, and so they would have been the first ones to arrive and to begin eating. Interestingly, they probably would have been served a full meal by servants. Now, the reason why Paul tells them that “you arrive and you eat before everyone else comes” later on, in verse 33, he's going to say instead you need to wait for everybody else. Why does he say that? Most likely it would have been the poor members would've arrived later, perhaps because they had to work, and the richer members would not have. Furthermore, most of the rich, the persons that came first would have gone to the normal dining spot, which would've had had a limited numbers of seats, and they would've all arrived and been served the meal—a full meal by the servants. The poor members who arrived probably would have had to meet or sit in the atrium of the house, a smaller room, and they would've actually been served lesser food. We might say, leftovers maybe, but it was actually lesser food. Again, this is the way it was in Corinth, with its distinction between rich and poor. And so you have the rich arriving, and they’re eating and drinking and having a good time, and eating the best meal, and being served by servants. Then you have the poor coming later, perhaps after the work, and they’re eating lesser food. And Paul says, “and you call that the Lord’s supper?” His whole point is, you are using something that should celebrate your union and unity in Christ, and the fact that you all belong to the one body of Christ. You are using something that should promote and express your unity yet you're using that to cause division and further express social division within your midst! That's what has Paul so upset.

So towards the end of the letter— this instruction, he tells them, this is chapter 11, verse 27—“whenever therefore, so whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord” that is, whoever participates in communion the way you are, Corinthians, in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord.” And he says, “instead, examine yourselves.” What does he mean by that? Because again, if I can—just referring to my own tradition—so sometime within the communion service, usually a pastor will
read this verse, and we’re called examine ourselves, make sure that we’re not taking of the Lord’s supper in an unworthy manner, which, usually interpreted to mean having sin in your life that you have not confessed. So you have about a 3 minute period to think of everything you committed since the last time you took communion, that may have been a month ago, and for some that may be worse than others. But you’re supposed to ask forgiveness for all these sins you’ve committed the last week or month or whenever, and with the risk that you might forget something. I've actually known people who have refused to take the Lord's supper, and I think I have in the past, because I'm not sure that I'm worthy. I think I have sin in my life, and I’m not worthy of taking the Lord’s Supper. And I certainly don't want to say that's inappropriate, but I'm not sure that that's what Paul meant.

If you read this in its context, what is the problem he's addressing? The problem is not unconfessed sin, the problem is using the Lord's Supper to create division and to perpetuate the social distinctions within the church. As Paul said earlier starting in chapter 11 verse 21: “for when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry while another becomes drunk. What, do you not have homes to eat in, or do you show contempt for the church of God, and humiliate those who have nothing?” The main error that Paul's addressing, or to partake of the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner is to do so in a way that humiliates or demeans, or refuses to acknowledge someone else. That is, to take the Lord’s Supper when there is division, or you are demeaning or humiliating or, or rejecting, or have conflict with someone else. It is using the Lord’s Supper in a way that creates division. So again, there's a venerable tradition that’s grown up around participating in the Lord’s Supper in an unworthy manner, and what that means. Certainly the Lord’s Supper is a time for self-reflection on our attitude towards the Lord’s Supper, in our attitude towards God Himself, but perhaps the priority should be our attitude towards each other. Are we participating in the Lord’s Supper, when in reality we have demeaned or humiliated or created dissension or division, with someone else? That's what Paul means when he says you're taking Lord’s supper in an
unworthy manner, and that’s what we have to examine [in] ourselves. Have we done something that’s created division, have we demeaned someone else? To discern the body and blood of Christ here means to understand that this Lord’s Supper proclaims the unity of God's people as members of the body of Christ, based on the death of Jesus Christ. To use it or treat it in any other way is to participate in an unworthy manner. So, again, I think by understanding the background that created this problem, and paying close attention to the context, at least for me, this a good example of where that actually makes a difference in the way you read the text. All right, I do have a couple other examples, but we’ll save those for Friday.