

SUPPLEMENTARY WEB RESOURCE 5



WORSHIPING WITH THE CORINTHIANS

Is serious Bible study a priority for your church congregation? One way to involve more persons in your congregation in a study of 1 Corinthians is to focus on this letter for a series of worship services concurrent with the simulation study. Among the many possibilities for such a series, here are texts for each of six worship services to portray Paul's vision of Jesus' upside down kingdom over against Caesar's top-down empire. How can these texts and topics be used as a model for Christian living in the American empire today?

One congregation used as its overarching theme, "Church Under Construction," a useful image found in 1 Corinthians 3. Given this theme, the Worship Arts Committee prepared the worship space by placing four Greco-Roman columns decorated with artificial ivy in the front of the sanctuary. These were made from heavy cardboard carpet rolls taped together, some in fours and some in twos, painted white, with simple capitals above and below. Concrete was poured in the bottom of the rolls to keep the columns upright.

Beside the Greek columns, the committee set up a cross and surrounded it with boxes, which they covered with a painter's drop cloth. They hung a tool belt on the cross and set up a saw, lunch box, toolbox, and other tools at its foot. On the left arm of the cross they hung a jester's hat, to symbolize the "foolishness" of the cross (1 Corinthians 1).



Photos by Jim Bishop

KEY TEXT

Since Paul always ends his teaching with ethical exhortations, 1 Corinthians 16:13-14 was chosen as a "construction litany" useful throughout the series. Constructing an alternate church requires courage and endurance.

Keep alert, stand firm in your faith,

Be courageous, be strong,

Let all you do be done in Love.

To involve youth, have a middle or high school group memorize this litany and create motions to go with it. On the first Sunday of the series, they could teach the lines and motions to the congregation.

Sing the chorus, “We Are the Church,” as the “song of invitation” at the beginning of the children’s time each week and/or at the end of each service (*United Methodist Hymnal*, 558).¹

THEMES AND IDEAS FOR WORSHIP SERVICES AND SERMONS

Be sure to refer to the book *Creating a Scene in Corinth* for additional ideas and appropriate background material.

1. *The foolishness of the cross*—1 Corinthians 1:17-25

In this text, Paul serves as holy jester, showing how Jesus’ cross makes no sense to citizens of an empire governed by the wisdom of honor acquired through wealth and social status. In this context, a crucified Messiah is pure irony. This gospel (good news) represents a challenge to the earthly powers, who think they have won. To what authorities do we unconsciously give allegiance in our lives today? What worldly wisdoms separate and divide us? What does it mean that God’s “foolish” wisdom and “weak” power will triumph in the long run?

2. *Building on the foundation*—1 Corinthians 3:5–4:21

Because Paul’s initial reason for writing this letter was the report about all the divisions and quarrels in the house churches, this service can emphasize internal unity. Though different social groups follow different leaders, such as Paul or Apollos, Paul insists they are not rivals. This is an opportunity to discuss competition or one-upmanship that can happen among church leaders at any level of authority. How can we learn to respect and encourage each other to be the leaders God wants?

Paul’s image of the house church as a temple built on the foundation of Jesus Christ stands in sharp contrast to the multitude of pagan temples crowding the city of Corinth. The values of boasting, public honor, and the Domination System that they represent should have no part in the unity of purpose that the church needs to build on Jesus’ foundation with the proper materials. Using Paul’s images of gardening and architecture from this text, this service could communicate, “We’re all field hands, all subcontractors, all minor artists contributing to God’s design. We all have a role to play in constructing the alternative way that the church should be pioneering.”

3. *Where are our women prophets?*—1 Corinthians 11:2-16

The setting for this text (and the next two) is the regular evening worship service of a Corinthian house church. 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 is one of the difficult Scriptures that we usually ignore. In the past it was used in churches with strict dress regulations, as well as in churches that emphasize women’s subordination to men. Here is a chance to see it in its cultural context within a lively, charismatic worship service situation along a busy street in Corinth. Various themes can be emphasized:

- This text is the most confusing one Paul wrote in our New Testament, for he speaks of gender hierarchy and then backtracks. It suggests that Paul is a person in progress when it comes to women. The former conservative rabbi now relates to many women co-workers.
- Women are prophets! We wish we could hear their side of the story. Paul’s only restriction is that women keep their heads covered as culture expects while they are publicly praying and prophesying. In fact, our role-plays have demonstrated how hard it is for a veil to stay on when the Spirit takes over!
- To add to the confusion, Paul insists men should *not* cover their heads in worship, even though Roman men always did so when sacrificing at a pagan temple.
- The cultures of the Roman Empire view women as less rational and less human than men. But Christian history includes examples of strong, committed, counter-cultural women who influenced the growth of the church. Besides the sermon, find stories of early church leaders such as St. Marcella and St. Paula, and ask a couple women in the congregation to read or tell them.

1. Words & Music: Avery and Marsh, Carol Stream, Illinois: Hope Publishing Co., 1972.

4. *A Jesus-Supper for everybody—1 Corinthians 11:17-34*

Our most commonly used communion text of 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 is set in a context of hunger and disunity. A common “agape meal” is part of each evening’s worship experience. However, wealthy people eat early, and most of the food is gone before manual laborers and slaves can arrive. Thus, they are not “discerning the body.” This meal is not a Supper of the Lord unless all eat together and all have enough.

Set the stage for the sermon by asking one person from each of the four factions to wear a Roman costume and briefly explain their feelings and concerns about the daily common meal that was not working well. Follow the sermon by sharing the Lord’s Supper (equally!) or have a potluck meal after the service where the bread breaking and cup sharing are part of the meal.

5. *Unity in the body of Christ vs. the Pax Romana as Domination System—1 Corinthians 12*

This text links to the previous one in Paul’s letter. Comparing the church to the human body is a common illustration often used today to describe how the church should be working together in harmony and appreciating each other as equally important to the total mission.

But Roman orators also frequently used the image of the physical body to persuade their audiences that *inequality* is necessary for the peaceful, unified working of the empire. Greco-Roman understanding of the body is hierarchical in that the head is the most important and honorable, and the feet are the least. The body politic should imitate this structure, and everyone should stay *in their place*, whether peasant, slave, or senator. For the Empire, democracy and equality mean anarchy and chaos.

How can the church better embody Paul’s vision rather than that of stratified empires? To address this question, review the congregation’s organizational structure or more publicly value the hidden tasks that often hold everything together.

6. *Resurrection as the necessary climax—1 Corinthians 15*

Just as Paul begins his discourse on Christian ethics with “Christ crucified,” so he ends with a triumphant “Christ resurrected.” Jesus is the first fruit of all those in Christ who will be bodily resurrected to share in God’s coming kingdom on earth. What is the point of living by these counter-cultural values if God ultimately does not vindicate Jesus and his faithful followers and redeem the world for unity, justice, and peace?

Paul’s Jewish theology again threatens the elite, educated church members, who tend to keep one foot in the values of “this world,” and who disbelieve in *any* afterlife or hold a Platonic view that only the immaterial soul is immortal.

Since many Christians today hold the platonic view that the body will decay and only the soul survives to live in an immaterial heaven, this service may be unsettling for some. Others may welcome the idea of a solid, physical heaven on earth, which can encourage Christians to care for and protect God’s material creation on this planet, as well as challenging destructive empire values.

A note on hymns and songs in the Corinthian Christian spirit

It is challenging to find hymns that reflect the Christian mission to challenge the Lord Caesars of our day, the oppressive “principalities and powers”.

A number of hymns speak of peace, even world peace, but rarely to the militarism, xenophobia, poverty, and exploitation that are barriers to world peace. A few hymns directly speak about justice, but more than likely not in specific terms.

Try to search out hymns that name and unmask the causes of injustice. Locate ones that invoke God’s strength and guidance to work for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation. Such hymns would meet a deep need many feel to connect their faith to God’s work of transformation, not only personal, but social as well. You could begin by searching hymnals for categories like “justice,” “peace,” “unity,” “reconciliation” and “social holiness.”

Fortunately, in recent decades more hymn writers are addressing these larger concerns in their lyrics. In *The United Methodist Hymnal*, Brian Wren realistically confesses to be “half-free, half-bound by inner chains, by social forces swept along, by powers and systems close confined. . . .”² This pairs well with Harry Emerson Fosdick’s older, but still fresh “God of Grace and God of Glory,” in which we ask God to “Save us from weak resignation to the evils we deplore.”³

A variety of new hymn and song collections with searching lyrics of social implication have been appear-

2. Brian Wren. “Lord God, Your Love Has Called Us Here.” *The United Methodist Hymnal*. (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989). 579.

3. Harry Emerson Fosdick. “God of Grace and God of Glory.” *ibid.*, 577.

ing. In her 1987 collection of new hymn texts Jane Parker Huber describes our Christian task as: “Changing life’s oppressive systems / Into ones empowering all.”⁴

In another, she echoes Paul’s core message: “We long to see your reign full-blown . . . Yours is the kingdom! Yours alone!”⁵

A comprehensive 1998 collection from Scotland, *Common Ground*, includes a hymn by Kathy Galloway, bidding us to “Sing for God’s justice / disturbing each easy illusion, / tearing down tyrants / and putting our pride to confusion. . . ”⁶

Carl P. Daw, Jr., in his strikingly titled “Till All the Jails are Empty,” has us sing, “Till age and race and gender no longer separate; / till pulpit, press and politics are free of greed and hate; / God has work for us to do.”⁷

In *Worship and Song*, published in 2011, Shirley Erena Murray helps us address poignant ecological issues: “We who endanger, who create hunger, / agents of death for all creatures that live / God of our planet, forestall and forgive!”⁸

In her 2000 hymn collection of *Gifts of Love* Carolyn Winfrey Gillette reflects on our “daily crosses” and sees Christ with us in all our vulnerabilities: “Christ with people sick or dying, / Loved ones trying hard to cope,” and “Christ in battered women’s shelters, / Looking for a place of peace”⁹

Recent supplements to the Mennonite *Hymnal: A Worship Book* contain a number of newer songs that cry out for justice for those forgotten by earthly powers. Here are a few lines from *Sing the Journey* (2005):

- “God of the Bible...those without status, those who have nothing, you have made royal, gifted with rights.” (Shirley Erena Murray)¹⁰
- “Alleluia, the great storm is over, lift up your wings and fly....Release to the captives and end to the wars....(Bob Franke).”¹¹
- “If the war goes on and the children die of hunger....”¹² (John L. Bell and Graham Maule)

And from *Sing the Story* (2007):

- “God has chosen me to bring good news to the poor...”¹³ (Bernadette Farrell).
- “My soul cries out with a joyful shout....Let the fires of your justice burn, for the world is about to turn....” (Rory Cooney),¹⁴ (from Mary’s song in Luke 1:46-58).
- “Beauty for brokenness, hope for despair...God of the poor, friend of the weak, give us compassion, we pray....(Graham Kendrick).¹⁵
- “So much wrong and so much injustice, so you shouldered a wooden cross....” (John L. Bell).¹⁶

We urge you to search a variety of sources for hymns and songs that undergird joyful, determined Christian resistance against the contemporary powers of Lord Caesar. Even consider writing your own words to make the gospel more alive in your congregation and community. In this way you will be standing in the hallowed biblical tradition of striving to be the body of Christ in the place to which you are called.

4. Jane Parker Huber, “God of Justice, God of Mercy,” *A Singing Faith*. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987) , 63.

5. *Ibid.*, 65.

6. Kathy Galloway, “Sing for God’s Glory,” *Common Ground: A Song Book for All the Churches*. (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1998),111.

7. Carl P. Daw Jr., “Till All the Jails are Empty,” *ibid.*, 132.

8. Shirley Erena Murray, “Touch the Earth Lightly,” *Worship and Song*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), 3129.

9. Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, “Christ, Be with Us,” *Gifts of Love: New Hymns for Today’s Worship*, (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2000), 36.

10. Shirley Erena Murray, “God of the Bible,” *Sing the Journey: Hymnal: A Worship Book –Supplement 1*, (Scottsdale: Faith & Life Resources, Mennonite Publishing Network, 2005), 27.

11. Bob Franke, “Alleluia, the Great Storm is Over,” *ibid.*, 71.

12. John Bell and Graham Maule, “If the War Goes On,” *ibid.*, 66.

13. Bernadette Farrell, “God Has Chosen Me,” *Sing the Story: Hymnal: A Worship Book –Supplement 2*, (Scottsdale: Faith & Life Resources, Mennonite Publishing Network, 2007), 114.

14. Rory Cooney, “My Soul Cries Out,” *ibid.*, 124.

15. Graham Kendrick, “Beauty for Brokenness,” *ibid.*, 115.

16. John Bell, “So Much Wrong,” *ibid.*, 84.