

FIRST CORINTHIANS



MAKING THE TEAM

A Seven-Session Bible Study for Men
by David R. Lewis

First Making the Team Corinthians

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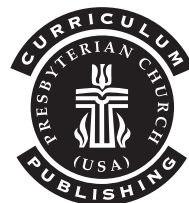
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introduction

Men's BIBLE Study

The Reasons for This Study

*We trust in God the Holy Spirit,
everywhere the giver and renewer of life. . . .*

*The same Spirit
who inspired the prophets and apostles
rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture . . .*

These words from “A Brief Statement of Faith,” adopted officially by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1991, state a primary conviction of Presbyterians. Presbyterians believe that God’s Spirit actually speaks to us through the inspired books of the Bible, “the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God’s Word” to each of us (*Book of Order*, PC(U.S.A.), G-14.0516e(2)).

Recent studies, however, have shown that many men know very little of what the Bible says, yet many do express a desire to learn. To help meet that need, this Bible study guide has been prepared at the request and with the cooperation of the National Council of Presbyterian Men of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its president, Dr. Youngil Cho.

The Suggested Pattern of Study

Men may use this guide in a variety of weekly settings: men’s breakfasts, lunches in a downtown setting, evening study cells in homes, and many others. The material provides guidance for seven one-hour sessions. To facilitate open discussion, it assumes a small group of men (no more than twelve), one or preferably two of whom might be designated as leaders. Each session is Bible study; there must be a Bible for each man. The Bible, not this study guide, is the textbook.

The men are not required to do study outside the group sessions, though suggestions are given for such study. To be enrolled in this study, however, each man is expected to commit himself to make every effort to attend and participate fully in all seven sessions.

The pattern of study is to be open discussion. Agreement by all to follow seven rules will make such study most effective.

1. We will treat no question as stupid. Some men will have more experience in Bible study than others, but each man must feel free to say what he thinks without fear of being ridiculed.

2. We will stick to the Scripture in this study. The group has gathered for Bible study, not to pool their own ideas on other matters, however good those ideas are.

3. We will regard the leader(s) as “first among equals.” Leaders in these studies are guides for group discussion, not authorities to tell the group what the Bible means. But following their study suggestions will facilitate learning.

4. We will remember that we are here to hear God speak. Presbyterians believe that the Spirit that spoke to the biblical writers now speaks to us through their words. We do not come simply to learn about the Bible, but with minds and hearts expecting to receive a message from God.

5. We will listen for “the question behind the question.” Sometimes a man’s gestures and tone of voice may tell us more of what he is feeling than his words do. We will listen with sympathy and concern.

6. We will agree to disagree in love. Open discussion is an adventure full of danger. Men will differ. None of us will know the whole truth or be right all the time. We will respect and love and try to learn from each other even when we think the other person is wrong.

7. We will make every effort to attend and participate faithfully in all seven sessions of this study. Participation will involve making notes in the spaces provided for your own answers to questions relating to the study and from time to time sharing with others your answers, even when you worry that they are not the “right” answers.

Some Suggestions for the Leader

Those who lead groups in this study should be especially aware of the foregoing seven “rules.”

Though two leaders are not required, having a team of leaders often helps to open up the group for freer discussion by all its members. One leader might be responsible for introducing the study at a given session and for summarizing other parts of the study where such summaries are suggested. The other leader might take more responsibility for guiding the discussion, helping to see that each man who wishes to has a chance to speak, helping to keep the study centered on the Scripture, and moving the group along to the next subject when one has been dealt with sufficiently. The leaders might also alternate in their responsibilities or share them equally.

This material is a guide for study within the group. The study material for each session is to be distributed at the time of that session. The study guide for each session is in the form of worksheets. Each man should have a pencil or a pen. Spaces are provided for each student to make brief notes for his answers to questions on the passages to be studied. A good deal of the time may be spent as the men quietly, individually, decide on and note their own answers to these questions. Some are designed simply to guide the students in looking at key passages. Others are intended to help the student think about what these passages mean to us today. The real basis for this study should be the ideas that come in the times when the men are quietly studying their Bibles and deciding individually on their answers to these questions. If a man has made a note on his sheet concerning his answer to a question, he has had to do some thinking about it. And he is more likely to be willing to tell the group his answer.

There should also be time, of course, for the group to share and compare answers to these questions. In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit seems most often to be manifest within a group. God speaks to us authoritatively through Scripture, but often what God says to us in Scripture becomes clearest when voiced by a Christian friend. We learn through each other.

Each session ends with an Afterword. During the session the leader may call attention to things in the Afterword when they seem appropriate.

Among the many characteristics of a good discussion leader are these: (1) He tries to give everyone who wishes a chance to speak without pressuring anyone to speak who does not want to. (2) He does not monopolize the discussion himself and tries tactfully to prevent anyone else from doing so unduly. (3) He is a good listener, helping those who speak to feel that they have been heard. (4) He helps to keep the group focused on the Scripture. (5) He tries to watch for signs that show that the group is or is not ready to move on to the next question.

This kind of study can generally be carried on much more effectively with the participants sitting informally in a circle or around a table rather than in straight rows with the leader up front. Frequently, especially in a large group, you may want to divide into groups of three or four, or simply let each man compare his answers with those of the man sitting next to him.

Often, more questions have been given than some groups are likely to cover in one hour. If you don't answer them all, don't worry. Pick the ones that seem most interesting and let the rest go.

The questions in this study guide are phrased in various ways and come in different orders, but basically they are intended to help the participants think through three things: (1) What does this passage say? (2) What does it mean? (3) What does it mean now to you? It is our conviction as Presbyterians that when believers study together God's word, in an atmosphere of prayerful expectancy, God will speak to them.

Throughout each study you will find Scripture quotations. These are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. While this version is used throughout this study guide, it may prove beneficial for each participant to use the version with which he feels most comfortable.

Testing has shown that the discussion that arises in each study may cause the session to last longer than the intended sixty minutes. A clock figure has been placed in each study to suggest where it might be divided into two sessions. Discussion is at the heart of these studies and should not be sacrificed for the sake of presenting the lesson exactly as suggested in this study guide.

In the letter inviting the writers of these studies to attempt this work, Dr. Marvin Simmers, having recognized some difficulties, added, "Remember, we are not alone!" The leader also may take courage from that assurance.

First Corinthians

INTRODUCTION

The Home Team

About twenty years after the death of Christ, the first fragments of written history appear that tell about the “Christians.” Still related to Judaism, these Christians had spread in small numbers all around the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. Among the earliest such documents are several letters (epistles) written by the apostle Paul to various churches he had founded on his missionary journeys. One of these, written from Ephesus (16:8) around A.D. 54, was what we call First Corinthians. It was, however, not the very first letter Paul had written to this church (see 5:9). It was part of an extended correspondence between Paul and one of his earliest and most beloved congregations.

Paul founded the Corinthian church in about A.D. 50 and stayed for some time with them—perhaps as long as two years. At the end of First Corinthians (16:5), he promised to return for another extended visit. If you look at a map of the area you will see that Ephesus is a bit more than 200 sea miles directly across the Aegean Sea from Corinth on a major sea route. But Paul planned to take the longer land route through Macedonia (16:5), the site of his first churches.

Corinth was a communications and transportation hub. Located on an isthmus, it had ports facing both Roman and Greek markets and was bisected by a north–south land route as well.

It has been called a “sailors’ town” and was famous for “its sacred prostitute–priestesses of Aphrodite.”¹ Old Corinth had been destroyed and then rebuilt as a new city by the Romans, so traditions were weak and experimentation was rampant. It has been suggested that the population was polyglot, without deep roots and from all over the empire.

This study suggests that the congregation at Corinth may have been Paul’s “home team”—the church with whom he was on most intimate terms. Because of his extended correspondence with them, we know more about this church than any other. Paul wrote to them in a pastoral mode and interacted with them on a personal, as well as a theological, basis. He referred often to his position as their “father” (4:15), their “builder” (3:10), and

their “judge” (5:3). He alternately praised and condemned them, as might any highly involved parent, and his letters to them are full of personal names, shared anecdotes, and familiar asides and comments.

Coach Paul

Indeed, a fruitful way to see Paul’s relationship to the Corinthian church is to picture him as their coach. He frequently (4:16, 11:1) suggests that the Corinthians should imitate him when they become confused, use him as a kind of mentor or player–manager. He often uses images from sports to illustrate his points (9:24–27).

This study selects a number of brief messages from “Coach” Paul to his home team and uses sports analogies to help clarify what he is trying to say. It sees the Corinthian letters as lively communication, as a continuing and often heated dialogue between a deeply concerned founder and the young and boisterous community for which he felt responsibility.

Usually we read Paul the other way, as a kind of professor of doctrine with fixed and difficult theological abstractions heaped one upon the other. Relatively few sermons get preached about Paul, and those that are produced tend to cluster around special occasions of theological importance—Reformation Sunday (Romans 1), communion (1 Corinthians 11), weddings (1 Corinthians 13), or funerals (1 Corinthians 15 or Romans 8). His letters are often searched for proof texts to support or defend favorite causes; 1 Corinthians 7 is often (mis)used as a traditional defense of both sexism and slavery!

This study avoids all such abstractions and distractions and plunges directly into the locker room hurly-burly of “Team Church.” It sees Paul as passionately caught up in helping his “players” win the “imperishable wreath” (9:25), and it finds in First Corinthians an amazing collection of pithy and profound coaching tips on how the Christian life should be lived in the midst of an urban, secular, and often immoral world—a world not unlike our own. As you read it, you will be asked to “play along.”

1. William M. Ramsay, *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible*. Copyright © 1994 William M. Ramsay (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), p. 407. Used by permission of Westminster John Knox Press.

The (Asia) Minor League

During its first fifty years, professional baseball remained geographically fixed in a collection of eastern cities from which its teams could easily travel to play one another. Not until 1961 did its scope expand to most of North America. Major and minor league teams represented the growing urban areas of the east and gave them a source of pride and identity.

Travel limitations and urban pride were also the defining characteristics of the cities caught up in Paul's missionary outreach. All were centers of commerce and trade, all were on major roads or sea lanes making an arc throughout Asia Minor, and in most of them, Greek remained the *lingua franca* while Rome was everywhere the imperial presence. Most were not major cities—Rome, Athens, Jerusalem or Alexandria—but were instead the smaller, busy, often new, commercial centers, full of recent immigrants and alive with new ideas, religious as well as cultural. They were perfect for a minor league franchise!

In 1993 the Northern League of Professional Baseball started playing in midwestern cities such as St. Paul, Sioux Falls, Duluth, and Madison. It was remarkably well received in such places, especially the next year when Major League players went on strike, stopping the season in August, so that for the first time in ninety years no World Series was held! It rode a little-noticed rising wave of interest in hometown sports. "Attendance at minor league baseball games topped 30 million in 1993 for the first time since 1950, when there were three times as many leagues and twice as many clubs."²

The world of contemporary sports seems amazingly close to this world Paul confronted in Corinth and Asia Minor. Their great strength was enthusiastic creativity. The great danger in both worlds was pride, status, or being "puffed up" (4:6)—division. And the antidote or alternative to such divisive status-seeking was and is team play, cooperation, and unity. "Your boasting is not a good thing," Paul writes (5:6), and his repeated emphasis on unity is captured in the theme statement of the letter (1:10): "Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, . . . that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions, among you . . ."

One feature of Greco-Roman culture was an educational system based on rhetoric in which speech training was used to define and separate the upper classes from those below them. Recent studies of First Corinthians have focused on its rhetorical form as a "homonia speech"³—a prescribed way of appealing for unity and cooperation in the face of discord and social chaos. Paul is recognized as skillful in this style and dedicated to supporting cohesion or team play in response to the status-seeking and individual self-aggrandizement of some of the Corinthian Christians. Just as a coach cajoles and inspires his team to play together and win, so Paul in First Corinthians argues with his friends in Corinth to find common purpose, to use everyone's unique skills, and to play as a team—or, to use Paul's favorite term, as a "body" (12:14).

First Corinthians as a Coach's Handbook

The easiest way to outline First Corinthians is to divide it into two large chunks—an opening statement of its thesis about unity in chapters 1 to 4 and then a lengthy section of specific applications (chapters 5—15) responding to reports brought to Paul by "Chloe's people" (1:11) and addressed to him in a letter full of questions (7:1).

This study follows a different outline. It finds throughout the letter seven brief "coach's messages" or bits of advice on how to deal with the many problems faced by the new Corinthian congregation. Each message will be looked at in its original context to give an overview of the letter, but the emphasis will be on specific advice or direction from "Coach" Paul as to how Christians are to play the all-important game of life. The title of the study, "Making the Team," has at least two meanings: First, it suggests the requirements expected of an individual team member in order to "make the team." Second, it outlines the overall wisdom and inspiration needed by a coach if a successful team is to emerge (be made). Both could apply to you, the reader, as well as to the Corinthians.

These seven messages are summarized in the outline below. Chapter 8 on food for idols, chapter 11 on Worship, and the closing in chapter 16 receive minimal attention in this plan, and the ever-popular chapters 13 on love and 15 on resurrection are considered only in their broader contexts.

2. Stefan Fatsis, *Wild and Outside: How a Renegade Minor League Revived the Spirit of Baseball in America's Heartland* (New York: Walker and Company, 1995), p. 16.

3. Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 40.

1. God's Draft Pick (1:10—4:21)

“Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth” (1:26).

2. Training Rules (5:1—6:20)

“All things are lawful for me, but not all things are beneficial” (6:12a).

3. Finding Your Position (7:1—40)

“ . . . let each of you lead the life that the Lord has assigned, to which God called you” (7:17a).

4. A Winning Game Plan (9:1—11:1)

“For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them” (9:19).

5. Talents (12:1—13:13)

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit” (12:4).

6. Team Building (14:1—40)

“Let all things be done for building up” (14:26b).

7. Victory (15:1—58)

“But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (15:57).

Some Useful Resources

On First Corinthians

William A. Beardslee, *First Corinthians: A Commentary for Today* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1994).

Alexandra R. Brown, *The Cross and Human Transformation: Paul's Apocalyptic Word in 1 Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1995).

Robert Jewett, *Paul the Apostle to America: Cultural Trends and Pauline Scholarship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994).

Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995).

Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984).

Margaret M. Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993).

William M. Ramsay, *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994).

On Men and Sports

Stefan, Fatsis, *Wild and Outside: How a Renegade Minor League Revived the Spirit of Baseball in America's Heartland* (New York: Walker and Company, 1996).

Mickey Herskowitz and Steve Perkins, *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sports* (New York: New American Library, 1977).

Roger Horrocks, *Male Myths and Icons: Masculinity in Popular Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc. 1995).

Phil Jackson, *Sacred Hoops: Spiritual Lessons of a Hardwood Warrior* (New York: Hyperion, 1995).

John Madden, *One Knee Equals Two Feet (And Everything Else You Need to Know About Football)* (New York: Jove Books, 1986).

John McPhee, *Levels of the Game* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969).

Timothy Morris, *Making the Team: The Cultural Work of Baseball Fiction* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

session *one*

God's DRAFT PICK

1 Cor. 1:10—4:21

Introduction

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

“Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth” (1 Cor. 1:26).

Remember when you used to choose up sides to play games as kids? Usually the two best players took turns until everyone was chosen. It was a useful and democratic process, but it hurt to be last! All the players in a professional sports draft are talented and experienced, yet even there the attention is focused on the first few picks. Only a wise coach, carefully building a complete team, pays close attention to the later choices. A successful team needs stars, but it also needs variety and depth at each position.

Some of the Corinthian Christians saw themselves as All-Stars. Their young church was growing and doing remarkable things—which “Coach” Paul recognized (1:4–9). But instead of pulling together, success was pulling them apart. They were focusing on their own skills and positions (1:10–17); they needed a coach to help them see the big picture.

“Coach” Paul sat them down for a serious talk. He had to use a written letter since he was away from them, but the tone of chapters 1 to 4 is as colloquial and personal as if he were right there: “I appeal to you, brothers and sisters” (1:10); “I fed you with milk . . . for you were not ready for solid food” (3:2); “Do not deceive yourselves” (3:18); “Am I to come to you with a stick, or with love?” (4:21).

And the clincher, “Consider your own call” (1:26). Paul here introduces the central idea behind the first chapters of his letter. It is God that has the power, it is God that is in charge, and it is God’s game that is being played. To prove it, God did the most remarkable thing. When it came time to choose up sides, God started at the end of the line—with the leftovers and castoffs—rather than with the stars (1:27–31). It is not the Corinthians who are successful; they have nothing to boast about. It is their owner who is the source of their life and talent (1:30). Even though Paul uses traditional

speech patterns, his claim here is audacious and, still today, revolutionary. In the game of life, God has chosen the lowly, the foolish, the weak to shame the strong (1:18–27)!

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Read 1 Cor. 1:10–31. Line up your group as if in a locker room and ask someone with a firm voice to read the passage forcefully as if it were, indeed, a coach’s message. Write here your emotional responses to the coach’s message—how it made you feel. When the coach has finished, compare your notes with those of your teammates.

Discuss what a congregation would look like if it were operating on the basis of God’s “foolish” draft pick. How would it choose officers—and pastors? How would it advertise? How would it train new members? Jot your notes here and then discuss as a group.

As a child, where were you when sides were chosen? Do a personal assessment as suggested by “Coach” Paul. On a standard bell curve (a few at both ends of the curve and most people in the middle), where do you see yourself—intellectually, physically, and socially? Write down your assessment here and then discuss in pairs what you have to offer your church as an individual, as a team member, as someone empowered by God.

The Corinthians seemed more committed to pastors (1:12–17) than to God. Former ministers can still interfere with the current life of a congregation. If the authority of your pastor were being undermined by a former pastor, what would you do? If you were “coach,” what course would you suggest for a divided church?

The Oldest Sports Story

How many sports stories and movies have you seen with this same plot? Coach is assigned a motley crew of misfits who have no chance of winning. Coach uses inspiration and cooperation to build a team that comes from behind to win the big prize. In *Cool Running* a tropical island produces a championship bobsled team! In *The Mighty Ducks* a mixed bag of misfits learn to win by playing together. In *Eddie* an enthusiastic fan becomes the (female!) coach of a professional basketball operation and turns the self-centered stars into a winning team. Sports literature for children repeats this story endlessly.

But is it true to life? Is it an adult story as well? Many sports stories for adults deal with the darker side of sports—the possibilities for corruption, greed, or selfishness. Is Paul accurate in his assessment of his team and its chances when they decide to “play” for God? Chapters 2 and 3 spell out his underlying arguments.

When we use the measuring devices from “this age” (2:8) or “the world” (2:12), “Team Church” does not measure up well. But when we see ourselves through the hidden lens of God’s Spirit (2:12–16), something unexpected shows up! Gifts that can only be spiritually discerned (2:14) come into play. Paul’s job as coach is to help them see their own fullest potential.

Apparently the Corinthian Christians thought that human wisdom (*gnosis*) lay beneath their success. Many Greek sects were active in Asia Minor and were certainly present at Corinth (Gnostics, Cynics, Stoics, etc.). They all understood correctly that the truth about life was hidden, not obvious, but they thought they could gain insight into this hidden truth through secret or philosophical practices. The Corinthian Christians apparently thought that they had gained the secret *gnosis* needed to release God’s power—in the name of Jesus Christ!

Not so, says Paul. Jesus Christ is not the star player who will win it all for you. Jesus was the weakest draft pick of all—the little kid at the end of the line! Jesus died as a tortured criminal on a

crudely made cross! It was this rejected “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (2:2) that Paul came preaching, and he was as frightened and timid as anyone could be (2:3–5) as he put forth this amazing claim for God.

“Team Church” does not depend on any human strength, secret wisdom, or worldly power, Paul explained. Even Christ would be “dead meat” apart from God! It is God’s Spirit alone that makes all the difference—turns dry bones into living armies. Without it we are nothing!

It was Jesus’ willingness to rely totally on God that led to his resurrection. To have this “mind of Christ” is what “Coach” Paul came to Corinth to teach. No wonder he was frightened! It was a claim that turned all of human wisdom and power on its head, a claim that “none of the rulers of this age understood” (2:8). Just as the first disciples did not understand Jesus, so these new Christians at Corinth did not yet understand Paul.

The game of life they were being asked to play went counter to everything they thought they knew, and Paul had to “start them out with milk, not solid food” (3:1–4). It was back to the basics.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Think about the “bible” these Jewish first-century Christians knew (our Old Testament). What were the “basics” that it taught? Jot down your answers and build a group list.

Jesus was a faithful Jew. What were some of the key elements in his teaching that echoed Old Testament basics?

What do you think are the “basics” of Christianity that you need to “practice, practice, practice ’til you get them right.” What do they include?

While some of the new Christians in Corinth were Jews, others were not. Why do you suppose there were misunderstandings about Paul's teaching?

Many New Age religious activities are popular today. Discuss some that you know about and decide as a group whether they use hidden "wisdom" of the kind Paul condemns? What might "Coach" Paul say about today's religious scene?

Basic Training

Session 2 will focus on "Coach" Paul's team training rules (chapters 5 and 6). Here, under "Basic Training," we look at those things from Jewish tradition that Paul assumed everyone would know and understand—even though they obviously didn't! Like basic moves in sports—learning to tackle, hit the ball, or shoot fouls—these three basics are so essential to play that it is unthinkable to go on until they are mastered. They need to be reviewed and practiced constantly.

Do you not know that you are God's temple, and that God's Spirit dwells in you (3:16)? The Hebrews had no word for *temple*; it was simply the "house of _____." Starting with the Tabernacle (*tent*) in the wilderness, it took many forms, but it always focused on God's "Presence" or *Shekinah*. This is a later Jewish term to describe the "goodness" (Ex. 33:12–23), "light" (Acts 26:13), "glory" (1 Kings 8:11), or "Spirit" (1 Cor. 3:16) of God.

It was central to Paul's conversion experience (Acts 9:3) and to his belief in God's abiding presence. The human creature is pictured by Paul as the container or temple for this divine Spirit. Looking at oneself as anything less is sinful!

Basic fact number 1: *You contain God!*

"What do you have that you did not receive? (4:7).

Paul pictures himself as the "steward" of God's mysteries (4:1). This is an Old Testament position of trust, a person who represents his master in any business transaction. Like Paul, all Christians are given everything they have in trust, to be used for God's purposes alone. This provides no basis for boasting because nothing belongs to them.

Basic fact number 2: *Everything belongs to God!* We are fools for the sake of Christ . . ." (4:10).

Here Paul draws the Corinthians' attention to himself as their model and states for the first time his oft-repeated admonition, "Be imitators of me" (4:16). The way of discipleship appears foolish to the world. As with judges, prophets, and sages of old, it involves doing whatever God commands with no thought about human opinions or worldly consequences. While it is basic to faith, it is never easy, and Paul realizes he is offering these new Christians a hard life: "When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of the world!" (4:12–13). Imagine the silence that settled over the "Team Church" locker room as these words were read.

Basic fact number 3: *We are to do whatever God asks!*

Paul ends this section with words of assurance: "I am not writing this to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children" (4:14). These are the basics of the Christian life. Until you understand them and can internalize them, you are not ready to go out into the world and play on God's team. So practice, practice, practice!

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

We hear a lot today about high or low self-esteem. How do Christians view the "self," and what gives it "esteem" or "worth"? Discuss your answers together.

How would your behavior change if you took seriously the idea that you were God's temple, the container for God's Spirit? How might others see you differently? The "you" here is plural in the Greek; you are all God's temple! How might this affect team play at your church?

Have you ever thought of not taking care of yourself as a form of sin? What might this mean in terms of diet, rest, exercise, and time for meditation? How do traditional roles of masculinity fit with this picture?

The primary activity of Christians is to give thanks for God's gifts. How can you do this at work, in your family life, and at worship? Give specific examples.

When you talk about stewardship as giving a tithe (10%) to God, is this too little? How might Paul talk about stewardship?

Try to write a brief prayer of thanksgiving to use with your team before you go out to play on the field of life.

How can "real men" act foolishly for Christ? Can you think of examples of men you know who have done this? What are the problems involved and how might you meet them? Does it make a difference if you operate as a team rather than alone?

Afterword

One of the tasks of sports in America has been the assimilation of immigrant youth into a mostly urban and American culture where merit, rather than status, is rewarded and where the team comes ahead of individual players and their backgrounds. An advantage of this has been the teaching of a new kind of social democracy where hard work, rather than class, can pay off and where the rule of law is experienced firsthand. A disadvantage of this is the loss of ethnic character and culture and the imposition of social values such as competition over other gentler values.

Assimilation

In baseball novels, players join to and meld with their teams, assimilating from the country to the city, from the experiences of the second-generation immigrant to those of the unmarked "American," from the south to the north, from black to white experience, from speaking Spanish to speaking English, and from the insular regional culture to cosmopolitanism.¹

Paul's Christian community may have had a similar influence on the growing urban centers of the Greco-Roman world. It certainly offered young people from different backgrounds a lifestyle that challenged the existing social structure and a value system that improved upon the prevalent morality.

In the coming week, let your mind play with the ways in which sports and Christianity have been culturally challenging and morally uplifting. Where does the similarity break down? Is there a shadow side to sports—and to Christianity—that is not often recognized?

Looking Ahead

In the next session we will take a long look at the "Training Rules" posted by "Coach" Paul in 1 Corinthians 5 and 6. If you get a chance, read them over and see how you are doing with them.

1. Timothy Morris, *Making the Team: The Cultural Work of Baseball Fiction* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), p. 4.

session *two*

Training RULES

1 Cor. 5:1—6:20

Introduction

“‘All things are lawful for me,’ but not all things are beneficial” (1 Cor. 6:12).

As we look at the Training Rules posted on the “Team Church” locker room walls, we begin to get hints about the radical nature of the game we are being asked to play. At a kind of ultimate level, there are *no rules at all!* Paul, trained as a Pharisee in all the intricacies of Jewish law, was the most clear about this new freedom in Christ because it had radically changed his life. The congregations he founded would have heard much of this freedom (Rom. 6:20–23; Gal. 5:1). They were apparently practicing it to excess (sexual immorality, 5:1; greed and drunkenness, 5:11; lawsuits and grievances, 6:1). They—and we—might overlook the corollary. All things are lawful *but*, not all things are *beneficial!* This is one of Paul’s most common counterbalancing statements (see 10:23). We are set free for a purpose; law is replaced by grace—for a reason. The premise of Paul’s training rules is clear, remarkable, and—unthinkable! We are playing a win/win game!

In a win/win game, anything that does not benefit you or your opponent is not beneficial! In contrast, nearly all ordinary sports are win/lose games—at least as many losers as winners are always involved. You can imagine the confusion in the locker room when they hear that they have to play in such a way as to benefit everyone, not just themselves or their team! They are free to play without any restrictions, and Paul often mentions the more obvious restrictions of the past—gender, race, creed, social status. They are to play as if these things no longer matter!

Imagine the impact of such a teaching in a place like Corinth. It was teeming with every opportunity for perversion and temptation. It was rigidly divided by class and status (aristocratic, educated citizens on one end and menial slaves on the other). Paul drew converts from all levels of this society, but particularly from the lower classes. The idea of freedom from all restrictions was a heady one—only surpassed by its balancing idea that freedom was to be practiced lovingly, for the benefit of all, not just for the individual or his or her group.

Remember the basics learned in Session 1: Everyone is a container or temple for God’s presence or Spirit; nothing belongs to us apart from what God has given us in trust; and we are to do whatever God wills despite worldly ridicule and opposition. God does not give us any rules to limit or proscribe our behavior except the rule of love, to benefit all in whatever we do!

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Imagine yourself the teacher on duty on an elementary school playground. You tell the children there are no rules. What happens? Instead, you establish one rule—no one can be hurt or left out. How would you go about helping the children learn such a general concept?

Move from the playground to the workplace. What kind of rules are needed to ensure that all workers and businesses can practice freely but that no one has undue advantage? Do you know of any successful win/win businesses?

Feminist critics of our society say that males automatically have certain advantages built into society and that women are not allowed to live in the freedom of Christ. Some men feel hurt by such charges. What do you think?

Churches can often become very legalistic. Why do you think this happens? How might they be freed up to play a more creative game? Does this present the same risk faced in Corinth? How would you “coach” such a team?

Paul is clear that life in Christ involves one in a new kind of community. The question has to be raised, Do these community or church rules apply beyond the community? Are we really to engage in win/win relationships outside the church, as well as within? How universal is Christian ethics? After jotting down your own thoughts, hold a debate on this issue in your group. Be sure to probe beneath statements as to why you and others believe as you do.

We need now to look at three specific training rules that emerge from this general background.

Rule One: “Your boasting is not a good thing” (1 Cor. 5:6)

Paul is very clear about how “Team Church” is to deal with sexual immorality of the kind reported to him (5:1). The contemporary church has fixated on this particular problem and almost completely overlooked the next problem that is brought up (litigation). While Paul takes seriously all these reported problems, he quickly looks beyond the specifics to the underlying issue. Immorality, litigation, and prostitution are examples of a deeper problem—what Paul calls “boasting.” It is the whole issue of taking sides against others and feeling that your side is right. The only such “boasting” Paul allows is “in the Lord” (1:31). Having given up his own ego and rights and having replaced them with “the mind of Christ,” Paul condemns all willful behavior that fails to reveal Christ to the world.

To claim the personal “right” to immoral sexual behavior, litigation, damaging another person for personal gain, or joining with a prostitute is to step beyond the Christlike behavior expected of all team members.

There is a great deal of boasting associated with team sports today: “Our side is Number One,” or “I am the best.” Rather than using the games to bring honor on all who participate, they are used to divide and separate players and put down opponents. Phil Jackson, head coach of the

amazingly successful Chicago Bulls basketball team, struggled with the same problem and concluded this: “There *has* to be another way, an approach that honors the humanity of both sides while recognizing that only one victor can emerge. A blueprint for giving your all out of respect for the battle, never hatred of the enemy.”¹

Jackson developed a style of play called the *triangle offense*, which allowed his plays to flow freely into whatever formations worked best. Such creative freedom was also at the heart of “Coach” Paul’s strategy. It was not boasting or bragging; it was playing as creatively as possible for the sheer joy of playing well.

We will see later that Paul has an entirely different understanding of winning and victory than that of most athletes. Here, we need to realize that taking sides on the basis of personal opinion or will is destructive to the game of life. The first rule of “Team Church” is to do nothing that would affirm personal privilege at the expense of others.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

The Corinthian Christians found it extremely difficult to replace self-interest with Christ-interest. We certainly find it no easier. As a group, try to set up a code of sexual ethics for Christians. Keep in mind that it is not sex that is being condemned; it is taking personal privilege at the expense of another. We play, not to beat others or to brag, but simply to fulfill ourselves.

Jot down some reasons that you might find yourself “boasting.” Do not overlook the whole masculine area of boasting about sexual exploits. What kind of relationship develops when you say such things?

What are some behaviors that might be the opposite of boasting?

1. Phil Jackson, *Sacred Hoops: Spiritual Lessons of a Hardwood Warrior* (New York: Hyperion, 1995), p. 136.

**Rule Two: “Why not rather be wronged?”
(1 Cor. 6:7)**

Grievances, arguments, and litigation separate people from one another in ways it is hard to overcome. Paul asks the obvious but impossible question: “Why not rather be wronged?” If our goal is to live as the body of Christ, then how can we take sides, divide self against self, crucify the body again? Our calling is to help others grow! Paul here refers to “Team Church” as “the saints” (6:1) and develops the ancient idea that the saints will one day “judge the world” (6:2; see Dan. 7:27) and need a generous spirit in order to do so.

Paul uses traditional Greek lists of sinful activities to illustrate his argument in 5:10 and 6:9–10. It is ironic that so many Christians have turned to these lists and used them as proof texts against others—the very kind of grievances against which Paul warns! Paul’s point is that the body cannot be divided against itself in this way. Those who pollute the body by sinful behavior and those who take them to court for doing so are both dividing the one body of Christ and destroying its integrity. Better to keep the deciding “between one believer and another” (6:5) inside the fellowship as an activity of loving concern than to let it become cause for litigation and division. Paul reminds the team members that once many of them used to play by those old rules—but no longer! The new rule suggests acceptance of wrongdoing and fraud as more desirable than division!

This is difficult ground for any coach: to put team concerns and unity ahead of personal concerns of the players. Yet without it, the team will never learn to play together. Training rules have always been used to limit the private desires of team members in favor of the needs of the team (and often in these same areas of sex, food, and violent behavior against others!).

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

What kinds of discipline is appropriate for a church to impose on its members? How can this be handled lovingly? Share your ideas.

Why do you think the church has put so much emphasis on sexual immorality and overlooked the equally dangerous and divisive area of arguments, grievances, and litigation?

Assertiveness and insistence on one’s rights are often pictured as typical of masculine traits. How could you translate “Coach” Paul’s training rule into language understood by men and boys?

Rule Three: “Your bodies are members of Christ” (1 Cor. 6:15)

When we use the term “body,” we think in very individualistic terms. Athletes engage in body-building activities to be able to play well. Paul is aware of this use of the term and the way athletes discipline their bodies (9:27). But he extends the concept far beyond our ordinary usage. Our individual body extends in two directions, he says. First, we extend toward the whole “body” of the church of which it is a part (12:14)—it is an individual in community. Second, we extend toward Christ’s “body” in the world. We do not belong to ourselves alone; we belong to Christ. What we do with our individual bodies—and this includes our minds and emotions—has direct and profound effects on its extended “self” in both these directions. To lie with a prostitute is thus to bind both fellow church members *and Christ* into such a union! It is not a private act of an individual alone. You begin to sense how radical these training rules are!

Could they be practically followed? In several places Paul deals with exceptions to his rules and thus implies that they are not being uniformly kept. The entire section we have been studying (chapters 5 and 6) recognizes that the Corinthians not only are not keeping the rules, they do not even fully understand them! You will have to assess how well they are being kept in today's churches. They are, nevertheless, a remarkable set of directives that create a powerful community impact when observed. The church as the "body of Christ" has survived for centuries and in all manner of settings because it does have this set of rules that are not legalistic. Instead, they are futuristic—looking toward fulfillment in an evolving future. And they are idealistic—based on a picture of reality that is large enough to lead us constantly toward growth and improvement.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

The Greek historian Strabo reported that the temple to Aphrodite in Corinth was serviced by a thousand prostitute-priestesses. Not only might the Christians in Corinth have been concerned about food offered to idols (chapter 8), they and Paul might have been equally concerned about sex performed before idols. Why do you think prostitution has remained a part of all cultures? What kind of sex might be acceptable in "your body . . . a temple?" (6:19). Why?

How well are "Coach" Paul's training rules being observed today? Since they are not laws that can be enforced, but rather are principles for living, how might men illustrate them in life?

Afterword

In *The End of Manhood: A Book for Men of Conscience*, John Stoltenberg writes, "You never feel more real than when someone else is completely real to you."²

And again he states, "When you act toward others as if they are as real as you, you come to feel as real as a human being can be."³

Paul was trying to help the Corinthian Christians feel real or fully human. He knew that to treat others as objects was to divide the human family and sin. In the week ahead, look for the places where you feel most human, most in contact with others as a human.

Looking Ahead

Once you know the rules of the game, you are ready to play! But where do you fit in with the team? What is your unique role? To find out, read 1 Corinthians 7 and be prepared to discuss it at your next session.

2. John Stoltenberg, *The End of Manhood: A Book for Men of Conscience* (New York: Dutton, 1993), p. 13.

3. Stoltenberg, *The End of Manhood*, p. 14.

session *three*

Finding Your POSITION

1 Cor. 7:1–40

Introduction

“Let each of you lead the life that the Lord has assigned, to which God called you” (1 Cor. 7:17).

In the first two sessions we saw that “Coach” Paul put nearly every issue in terms of the team rather than of individual players. Here in chapter 7, he begins to respond to specific questions asked in a letter from the Corinthian Christians (7:1), and he proceeds to deal with the individuals who made up “Team Church” in Corinth.

The opening phrase begins, “Now concerning . . .” and it moves immediately into relationships between men and women: marriage (7:2, 10), the unmarried and widows (7:8), those married to nonbelievers (7:12), and finally changes to another “Now concerning . . .” that includes those who were virgins (7:25) and the unmarried (7:32). Just as we saw in chapters 5 and 6, the temptation is to move directly to a consideration of these topics as though they were a new code of law and to quote specific texts as proof texts for contemporary application to today’s issues. We learned in Session 2, however, to look beyond the topics to the basic points that they illustrate, and that remains a good practice here. When we do so, we find that the real focus in the passage moves away from gender concerns to the more basic question of individual positions on the team. Since the Corinthian church was made up of all the categories listed and since they were asking how they were to relate to one another, Paul comes up with a general principle that he applies to all cases—and in all his churches (7:17)! It was a basic policy of acceptance, of living with what is given and filling that position with new meaning and power derived from Christ.

The famous Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) begin with the first and most difficult step—acceptance: “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.”¹ This is a proper perspective from which to look at “Coach” Paul’s directive to accept the life assigned to him or her by the Lord. A longtime friend of Alcoholics Anonymous,

Dr. Harry M. Tiebout, described such acceptance in this way:

“Acceptance appears to be a state of mind in which the individual accepts, rather than rejects or resists; he is able to take things in, to go along with, to cooperate and be receptive.”²

We are always tempted to think that rearranging the external circumstances of our lives will improve our situation. “Coach” Paul, and AA, see this as avoidance of the more difficult task—changing our internal attitudes. The issue is not marriage or singleness; it is relating to all those with whom we live in a mutually satisfying way.

Here we find Paul turning to one of his favorite sports terms, “self-control” (7:5; 7:9; 9:25). “Athletes exercise self-control in all things,” he observes (9:25), and Christian “athletes” ought to do the same. If sexuality tempts you (7:5) or makes you “afire with passion” (7:9), then use the social conventions of marriage to bring your desire under control. Such marriages must be entered into with mutual resolve by both partners since “the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise, the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does” (7:4). Here again, our bodies are not seen as limited by our own skin—they extend into those we marry!

Paul goes on to say that if self-control is such that marriage is not required, it would be just as well to stay single.

Because the real issue is not sexuality but rather acceptance and self-control, Paul illustrates his thesis by pointing to two totally different human conditions—circumcision and slavery (7:19, 22). In both cases, these external conditions are not the important thing. What really counts is that “in whatever condition you were called, brothers and sisters, there remain with God” (7:24).

1. *Alcoholics Anonymous*—Third Edition (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., 1976), p. 59

2. *One Day at a Time in Al-Anon* (New York: Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, Inc., 1983), p. 135.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Acceptance and self-control are also common contemporary terms. We are used to a great deal of autonomy and control over our personal lives. Jot down a few things that these ideas might mean in your personal life. Think of a situation that might cause you to change your current life position in order to keep yourself under control. How do you normally respond to change?

Masturbation has been a guilt-producing reality for most men even though Kinsey reported in 1966 that 92 percent of male respondents practice it.³ Does it fall under the self-control or the acceptance parts of Paul's teaching? Outline what you might say to your son or another young man about this issue.

What "position" are you being called upon to play right now in "Team Church," and at home? How would you interpret Paul's advice in terms of these "callings"? What circumstances might allow for external changes in your life?

Social activists might feel that Paul is not being radical enough here. When do you think external conditions warrant working for change? Recall Paul's advice in Session 2 about benefiting everyone. How could such a concept be used to support needed changes?

This Championship Season (1 Cor. 7:29–31)

Did you ever notice that each new sports season brings a clean slate? For a prescribed and limited period of time everyone has a fresh start on winning the championship. The past is irrelevant, the future unknown. Once the season starts, time begins to run out and every move counts. Dramatist Neil Simon uses lots of sports situations in his plays because time is so important in both drama and sports. Simon writes: "In some ways basketball and football have the elements of farce. The main element of farce is timing. In a farce the characters always have the feeling that time is running out. In basketball and football time is always running out."⁴ In sports and in life it is important to live fully in each and every minute because the end is clearly in sight.

The apostle Paul operated from a variation on this concept of the present "season." He felt that the world as we know it was "passing away" (7:31). The technical descriptive term for this kind of thinking is *apocalyptic*. It reveals a very Jewish side of Paul because it grows out of Jewish thinking.

In apocalyptic thinking, the individual "self" of the moment is a kind of pawn in a cosmic battle between Good and Evil. For Paul, the coming of Christ signals the approaching victorious end to that battle—marked by Christ's triumphant return. We will look further at this "victory" for God's team in Session 7. Here it is important to point out that Paul sees time as coming to an end, and he encourages the individual to accept his or her present status because it will not be for long. In a long sentence, he includes marital status, emotional states, monetary possessions, and indeed, all worldly dealings as unimportant when compared with the great cosmic game being played out between God and Satan (7:29–31).

Today, we do not think in this apocalyptic way. We have a very vague sense of the end of time. Perhaps the nearest we can come to it is the idea of a sports season. For now, for the present, we are to play as hard as we can with what we have, confident that this season will end in victory.

3. William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson, *Human Sexual Response* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1966), p. 197.

4. Quoted in Mickey Herskowitz and Steve Perkins, *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sports* (New York: New American Library, 1977), p. 48.

Popular philosophy argues that we must learn to “live in the present.” In what ways is this similar to or different from Paul’s apocalyptic thinking? What is gained when you learn to live in the present? What is lost?

Discuss as a group the difference between “submission” and “acceptance.” Jot your own ideas here. Many men are stoic about life: they take it the way it comes. Can you illustrate acceptance as a manly virtue, which is somehow different from mere stoicism? How is it tied to victory as you understand that term in your life?

How might you accept your present possessions as sufficient for this “season”? Is there a kind of “victory” in such thinking? Or does it seem like “giving up”?

Afterword

It was common to speak of love in marriage in Paul’s time as in ours. If we are a bit put off by Paul’s not doing so, we may well be stimulated to ask whether we do not too easily confuse various meanings of love. Surely there is room in marriage for the spontaneous generosity of which Paul will speak in chapter 13. But marriages are not built solely on this, nor do they endure on it. They endure, as Paul rightly saw, on some form of mutuality. . . . Paul was wise enough not to offer an oversimplified or romantic solution to this question.”⁵

Read and think about the foregoing excerpt in the coming week. What are the foundations for a long-lasting marriage? In their book *Lasting Marriages: Men and Women Growing Together*, Richard Mackey and Bernard O’Brien list the following seven areas as important: initial attraction, relationships, conflict, intimacy, decision making, parenting, and marital satisfaction.⁶ Referring to this list in light of Paul’s comments, what would you advise a young couple about to enter marriage?

Looking Ahead

Once we have been selected and trained, and we know our place in the game of life, what will be our game plan for winning? Look ahead to chapters 9 and 10 to see what “Coach” Paul might suggest.

5. William A. Beardslee, *First Corinthians: A Commentary for Today* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1994), p. 77.

6. Richard A. Mackey and Bernard A. O’Brien, *Lasting Marriages: Men and Women Growing Together* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995), pp. vii–viii.

session *four*

A Winning GAME PLAN

1 Cor. 9:1–11:1

Introduction

“For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them” (1 Cor. 9:19).

The older brother of one of my friends was the best athlete in our school. When we chose up sides to play sandlot ball of any kind, he always joined the weakest team. I think he had an innate sense of fairness and possibly also a glimpse of the winning game plan that Paul is suggesting here. The only way for the inequalities of the world to be leveled is for those at the top to join those on the bottom. It is the only way to achieve the win/win outcome Paul is seeking.

Great Players

Oscar Robertson once told me that the really great player takes the worst player on his team and makes him good. Phil [Jackson] convinced Michael [Jordan] that that was the route to his true greatness and the only path to reaching the championship—the prize that surpasses individual stardom.

—Senator Bill Bradley¹

This message speaks directly to the hearts of men who are raised to compete and win in win/lose games. As this study is being written, retired General Colin Powell has mobilized President Bill Clinton and all living former presidents of the United States and many of the nation’s corporate leaders for a President’s Summit for America’s Future, to passionately attack what they call the greatest threat to the United States at the turn of the century—young people left out of or disengaged from the American dream. At the opening ceremony on television, General Powell raised his arms in the air as a victory signal. His smiling face exclaimed, “I have an army again!” Clearly, win/win games can be played as passionately as can win/lose games!

“Coach” Paul seems never to tire in his efforts to “win more” in the game of life. And he spells out his game plan in very specific detail. It requires walking in the moccasins (or sneakers?) of any group in order to join and understand them from the inside. Find out what life in that group is like. To win Jews, become a Jew! To win those outside the law (the ritual or cultic laws of Jews), move outside legalism of any kind. And in an echo of my school chum’s older brother, “To the weak I became weak” (9:22). Without giving up any of his status as a free person in Christ, Paul’s game plan is to voluntarily move beyond that freedom to engage those who are still caught in a more confining understanding of life’s possibilities.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Describe a time when you joined the side of the weaker or underdog in a situation (sports or otherwise). What was the outcome? Share your stories with another man.

Contemporary evangelists love to use Paul’s language of “winning some” to describe their work. To what extent does your congregation “become” various categories of people in order to extend its evangelistic outreach to them? Could your social witness ministry fit in here? How about your theological ministry? Discuss as a group.

1. From Bradley’s introduction to Phil Jackson, *Sacred Hoops: Spiritual Lessons of a Hardwood Warrior* (New York: Hyperion, 1995), p. xiv.

Think of some individual you would like to see inside your Christian community. How might you practice Paul's winning plan to reach them? Share your ideas.

Can you think of a time when someone came into your world to reach out to you? What did it feel like and how did you respond? What do you think are the secrets for doing this well?

How would you go about teaching your own children or other children this idea of win/win activity? Would it be un-American to move beyond win/lose competition to some kind of cooperation? How might competitive sports be included in such an effort?

Play Hard!

Some men like to think that they can separate their spiritual life from their everyday business. They can do win/win on the weekends. But the end of chapter 9 and all of chapter 10 are Paul's strong retort to such idolatry (10:7). The entire winning game plan is threatened when we think we can step aside from its seriousness to "indulge" ourselves (10:8), put Christ to the test (10:9), or "complain" (10:10). The whole of Old Testament history is given to us as a warning of what happens when we try to play by two sets of game rules simultaneously. Idolatry (worship of idols—anything other than God) happens when we let other sets of rules get between us and God's master plan for life.

Paul sees this clearly in terms of athletics. All run to win the prize—but only one wins. It is when we get to the ultimate game of life that we get to win/lose—as individuals. To lose in this game is to let some lesser god rule any part of our lives. The question raised in 10:22b needs to be always in our minds, "Are we stronger than he [the Lord]?" Any form of yes to that question is what the Bible calls idolatry.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

"Play hard!" admonishes "Coach" Paul. Punish your body (9:27), control your desires (10:6), watch your every step (10:12). God will not test you beyond your ability to endure (10:13) but the race is hard and there are many ways to disqualify yourself (9:27)!

Christianity is sometimes seen as "wimpish," yet it is pictured here as the strongest possible kind of self-control. Which do you think is true, and why?

Read as a group 10:12–13. Discuss your personal experiences of temptation or "falling" (going "beyond your strength") and what resources have been available to you to keep you on your feet. How can you help each other, as men, in such moments?

What types of spiritual discipline help you practice the kind of self-control that Paul suggests? Share with the group the kinds of things that you do to avoid temptation.

The Imperishable Wreath

Athletes in ancient times competed for a wreath or garland rather than for blue ribbons or trophies. These wreaths lasted but a brief time. Victory was fleeting.

The First Olympics

The first Olympiad occurred in 776 B.C. and consisted of only one event, the 200-yard dash. The first to cross the finish line won the honor of taking a torch from the priest's hand and lighting the sacrificial pyre at an altar to Zeus. That first winner was a cook named Koroibos. His trophy was a laurel wreath from the sacred olive grove at Olympia. He was absolved from ever paying taxes and received free food and lodging for life.²

2. Mickey Herskowitz and Steve Perkins, *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sports* (New York: New American Library, 1977), p. 185.

Paul is building a case for an eternal victory that we will look at in more detail in the last session—resurrection. To get to such an ultimate victory in our lives we need to redirect our energies toward a new goal—what Paul calls “the glory of God” (10:31).

Many artists and writers preface their work with the Latin phrase, *Soli Deo Gloria*—All for God’s Glory. It is a way of directing all our skills and talents back to their source—God. Our next session will look more extensively at the variety of our personal gifts and how we are to use them. Here Paul simply builds the transition from winning to the ultimate goal of our winning—God. At the heart of this winning game plan is a revised personal life plan. We move from winning for our own gain and glory to winning to honor God, our Source.

In everyday terms, this is best stated in Paul’s directive, “Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other” (10:24). In whatever you do, give no offense. As we have seen over and over, the game of life that “Coach” Paul bids us play is not a private nor an individual game—it is team play. Our goal is always to include others, to strengthen the whole human fabric, to lift everything up to its fullest glory—in God. When we want to know specifically how to do that, Paul again tells us to imitate him, just as he imitates Christ. Christ is the Ultimate Coach and Paul always sees himself as an imitation or copy, an apostle with nothing to brag about except his calling to follow Christ. That, he says, is glory enough for anyone!

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

The American psychologist, Abraham Maslow, developed a hierarchy of human motives in which we move from basic needs (food, shelter, sex) to higher needs (safety, belonging) and finally fulfill ourselves in esteem and self-actualization. These highest human motivations are often pictured in religious terms as peak experiences or mountaintop moments. At such times, we see most fully the meaning of life. Paul would probably agree with this hierarchy but insist that it happens when we help others climb up this pyramid, not simply when we climb it ourselves. How would you describe the purpose of life? What specifically do you do to fulfill your own life goals?

How can you do all things to the glory of God without sounding like a “Goody Two-shoes”? What is a manly way of pointing beyond oneself to one’s Creator and Source?

What do you suppose happens to your “self” when you replace it with Christ? How do you keep your own individuality? Share with others how they see this process taking place.

Afterword

It was Leo Durocher who reportedly said, “Nice guys finish last.”³ How would you compare this statement with those of Paul? How important is winning for each of the apostles? How would each understand the term *nice guy*?

Suppose that you were on a committee to devise a Life Achievement Award for Christians. Think about the kinds of awards you might create and the ceremony you would establish. How might you point the whole experience toward God rather than toward the person(s) receiving the award? In the coming week think about the concept of winning.

Looking Ahead

Only when the team rules and plans are fully understood does Paul turn to the individual players and their talents. We will look at these talents in our next session. Read 1 Corinthians 12 and 13 as preparation.

3. Quoted in Timothy Morris, *Making the Team: The Cultural Work of Baseball Fiction* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), p. 14.

session

TALENTS

1 Cor. 1:24–12:3

Introduction

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:4).

Sports history is inevitably dominated by the stories of individually talented people. When you can drive a golf ball like Tiger Woods, throw a football like Joe Namath, or shoot baskets like Magic Johnson, your skills and talents will not go unnoticed. Children and adults alike, especially those who have tried these activities, stand in awe of someone who does them to perfection. Thousands play—and play well—but only a few stand out as superstars.

While sports figures have a central place in American fame, talents of all kinds are rewarded in what Michael Young has called the American “meritocracy.”¹ We applaud the musical talent of a Yo Yo Ma, the creative genius of a Bill Gates, and the power of a wordsmith like Maya Angelou. Even schools and businesses have their superstars—the whiz kid, the class clown, the sports hero.

It was no different in the Corinthian church. In its brief life, some people had exhibited awesome accomplishments—speaking in tongues, prophesying, showing healing skills, performing remarkable acts of leadership and selfless generosity. The power of Christ had been evidenced in wonderful ways. But, apparently, they had also begun to rank themselves in terms of these accomplishments—to see them as *personal* accomplishments.

And therein lies the danger in meritocracy! It masks inequality by focusing only on the winners, the top performers. As soon as some are picked out for notice, others are hidden from view. Paul saw the danger at Corinth not in their successes, but in their inequalities. As stars at praying, giving, or healing emerged, the rest fell aside. The team began to suffer and the coach began to worry.

What he needed was an analogy—an illustration that would picture the way in which all the various skills and talents worked together “for the common good” (12:7). He found it in a term he had already

used often to describe “Team Church”—the figure of the body. It was not made up of one member—all head, feet, or heart—but of many parts, all working together to accomplish its goals.

Chapter 12 is “Coach” Paul’s impassioned response to the Corinthian’s questions about “spiritual gifts.” And he uses “spiritual” in a very inclusive fashion to cover all kinds of activities needed by a successful church—from deeds of power, assistance, and leadership to abilities in prophesying, interpretation, and tongues. He breaks the great variety down into three general categories: gifts, services, and activities (12:4–6). He even pushes the analogy to an unusual outcome: those parts of the body that are weaker or “inferior” need the greater honor and respect because they are indispensable! If there is any special honor to be bestowed, it must go to those least visible and most likely to be overlooked.

Finally, he makes the point toward which he has been moving in the whole letter, “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it” (12:26). The body is one unified nervous system that feels everything that happens to it throughout the whole. And that feeling, responding, and caring system or body is Christ (12:27)!

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

It is helpful to compare the three lists of spiritual gifts Paul recognizes (12:8–10; 12:28–31; 13:8–10). Which items appear over and over? Why do you think this happens?

1. Quoted in Timothy Morris, *Making the Team: The Cultural Work of Baseball Fiction* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), p. 6.

What gifts, services, or activities do you bring to your church? Build a list and then build a composite list with the others present. Where are the strong points? What gifts are missing?

Read 1 Cor. 12:28–30 out loud. Paul says that it is God’s appointed ranking! Why do you think he introduced this ranking after affirming that all gifts were equally needed?

Who, in your church, might be overlooked or under rewarded? What might you do to include them as equals? Is church a meritocracy?

Team Play

What kind of a baseball team would you have if all members were pitchers? The essence of team play in the body or in sports is the interplay of many different parts. A body that cannot eliminate waste will die just as one without brains or lungs. The coach uses every example he can think of to show us how our team needs to play together—without hierarchy or rank—if we are to win.

The Corinthian church fell into a trap common to all churches—seeing some gifts as more spiritual and desirable than others. Three gifts in particular seem to have been prized by their members: speaking in tongues, prophesying, and having wisdom. They failed to ask what kind of a church it would be if everyone were to speak in tongues. How long would it hold together? Who would make dinner? As it was popular to say in the heady days of the 1960s communes, “Someone’s got to buy the groceries.”

Church life today still needs to be team play, a skillful blend of gifts that use and support all participants equally. In his book *Effective Church Planning*, Lyle E. Schaller writes,

Too often a planning model is chosen which causes the members to feel inadequate, overwhelmed by their problems, or depressed by a comparison of today’s statistics with the enriched recollections of yesterday. . . . The dynamics of simply identifying and listing all the problems can be a very depressing experience Such an exercise is also vulnerable to the counterproductive diversions of scapegoating, second-guessing the past, and trying to live yesterday all over again.²

When a church focuses on its problems rather than its potentials (what Paul calls the “manifestation of the Spirit” [12:7]), the self-esteem of members declines and the probability of backbiting and division increase.

Instead ask, How can a coach help his team develop into an effective, performance machine? Clear team training rules help (Session 2). So does having a winning game plan (Session 4). But most coaches will still fall back on practice as the key. To run smoothly a team needs to run a lot—to try out every possible play over and over, to look at the tapes only so that better plays can be devised.

Many churches today are experimenting with temporary task groups with a clear mission goal rather than standing committees. These teams continually practice specific mission tasks that they can accomplish. Individuals are added to task groups based on their skills and interests. Success builds interest in further challenges. Paul seems to support such an approach when he writes, “All these [gifted individuals] are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses” (12:11). The common goal brings out the best in all the variety of folks involved.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

What was the best group you ever worked with? Why? As a group, try to define what it takes to build an effective and integrated team.

2. Lyle E. Schaller, *Effective Church Planning* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), p. 104.

Both Paul and Lyle Schaller focus on self-esteem as critical to group success. It binds the group together. What activities build spirit and strengthen self-esteem in your church? What activities destroy it?

Evaluate the task group approach to church organization. What are its strengths and its weaknesses?

Lyle Schaller writes, “Churches that display a clear goal orientation . . . tend to be especially attractive to adult males.”³ Do you agree with this assessment? What is it about males that might make this true? How can you build a ministry with men on such insights?

One for the Record Books

Why do most college sports facilities line their walls with pictures and statistics about great players and teams? Why are statistical records so important in most sports? The answer is clear. These are the benchmarks against which current and future athletes measure themselves. In chapter 13 Paul defines the “more excellent way” (12:31) that God uses to measure human success. When you look at the Hall of Fame for Christians, its honored positions belong to those who have learned to love unselfishly.

In the starkest possible terms he again lists the spiritual gifts mentioned most often in chapter 12—tongues, prophecy, knowledge, faith, generosity—and declares them all *nothing* without love! These famous “if” sentences are so well known to us that we roll them off the tongue without really hearing them. “If I speak . . . have prophetic powers . . . have all faith . . . , but do not have love” (13:1–3), then I have nothing! None of the gifts, spiritual or temporal, by which we recognize each other’s individuality is of any value without love! And the kind of love described moves beyond the individual, drawing the individual into a community or team as part of a greater whole.

3. Lyle E. Schaller, *The Seven-Day-a-Week Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), p. 142.

The form used in chapter 13 is that of Hellenistic Jewish Wisdom writing—a common form for praising a human virtue.⁴ It is even possible that this section was written separately and once stood alone. Neither God nor Jesus Christ are mentioned! Instead we find described, in both positive and negative aspects, a human virtue that anyone, talented or not, can use daily. It is a simple mixture of patience, kindness, humility, and truth. About such love, Paul makes two incredible claims.

First, it never ends! (13:8). All other aspects of human consciousness “will cease” (13:8). All those things we use to define ourselves and that we contribute to “Team Church” will disappear. The games will end, the records will be forgotten, except for this one perfect virtue—self-giving love for others.

Second, it is “complete” (13:9–10). We still play at it like children, still see it only dimly, but it has within it the potential for all encompassing completeness. It will “abide” because all the lesser things will be absorbed into it. Chapter 13 on love points directly to chapter 15 on resurrection—not the survival of a corpse, but the eternal existence of a divine attribute made available in the simplest human activity. Eventually we will all see this one thing “face to face” (13:12).

If heaven is a great sports arena where the records of the game of life are kept, the trophy room will display nothing but acts of self-giving love done by otherwise unknown people who saw in the life of Jesus the Christ a model life worth copying.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Many churches have memorial books of remembrance or put metal plaques on donated items. It is a way of remembering the lives of loved ones. But all these gifts and lives will eventually “cease.” Imagine creating a book of remembrance where acts of love are remembered. Think of three “remembered” acts of love that influenced you. Share them with one other man in the group.

4. William A. Beardslee, *First Corinthians: A Commentary for Today* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1994), p. 122.

Chapter 13 captures the essence of all that comes before and points ahead to the resurrection. Can you summarize in your own words “Coach” Paul’s pep talk in chapter 13 as it relates to you?

Think of all the things you have loved deeply in life. When you are finally “fully known” by God, only these things will be seen. This is all that gets in the record book about you. From God’s perspective, write your own epitaph or obituary.

Paul suggests that faith and hope will also “abide.” How are these two virtues like love and unlike the other spiritual gifts discussed in chapter 12?

Afterword

In the infamous baseball strike of 1994–1995 an unresolved split between the players and owners also created an unexpected split between the entire game of baseball and its fans. The three-way stool—players, owners, and fans—was broken and it has been hard to put it back together, even several years later. A similar kind of fracturing goes on when a married couple decides to get a divorce. Children, other family members, and their friends and community all suffer from the split. A church fight can have similar repercussions. In each case, the needs of individuals become greater than the needs of the whole.

Paul saw such danger looming in Corinth and wrote two chapters on how teams have to operate if they are to stay together. Each particular talent has to be equally recognized and incorporated and all the parts need to reach out toward each other in love if anything is to “abide.” It is easy on paper, but lies at the very heart of the game of life we struggle each day to play. Sometimes the coach has to show a vision of victory that the players know to be beyond their present capacity to achieve. It sits there in the record books to challenge and inspire them. First Corinthians 13 and the life of Christ it illustrates are the “perfect game” we strive to play—one for the record books. Amazingly enough, it does not take super human talent, it only requires the simplest kind of human behavior—faith, hope, and love.

Looking Ahead

Between chapters 12 and 13 on spiritual gifts and chapter 15 on resurrection is a chapter that gives specific advice about team building. It deals with the little things we confront each day. It ends with the famous “Presbyterian” plea that everything be done “decently and in order!” (14:40). Read chapter 14 in preparation for the next session and ask yourself why “Coach” Paul sandwiched it in between these other three blockbuster chapters.

session

SIX

Team BUILDING

1 Cor. 14:1–40

Introduction

“Let all things be done for building up” (1 Cor. 14:26).

Once each player knows his position and a game plan has been sketched out, the actual game has to be played rapidly and with minimum discussion. Circumstances affect the way the plays actually happen. Teams develop secret signals or signs to converse amongst themselves as the game progresses. In baseball, hand signals are often used; in basketball, numbers sometimes represent plays or formations, and in football, “audibles” from the quarterback adjust the play to the actual situation on the line. The quarterback will call out a color and a number; if the color called is “live,” then for that sequence of plays the players will switch to the play number called. Any other color and they will stick with the play called in the huddle.

Chapter 14 is like a series of audible calls suggested by “Coach” Paul. The key issue in the whole chapter is the “building up” of the team, the ongoing play of the game. Paul makes a clear distinction between messages that build up and those that don’t. When a person speaks in tongues, the communication is with God only and does not build up “other people” (14:2) or the “church” (14:4). When a musical instrument gives an indistinct note, listeners get confused (14:7–8).

But who are these “other people,” “foreigners” (14:11), or “outsiders” (14:23) about whom Paul seems worried. Here again we see Paul’s topsy-turvy game plan. His audibles are designed to include all those newcomers and unbelievers who might not yet be on the team. As we have seen before, in a win/win game it is those who are *not* on our team whom we are trying to reach. Secret team language will confuse them, so Paul is asking the Corinthians to make their “plays” clear and understandable to non-team members!

The major focus in this chapter seems to be on the Corinthian’s worship practices. The phrase, “Let all things be done for building up” (14:26) is applied directly to their worship. Apparently, Corinthian worship was fairly free form and each

person brought something to contribute. Paul’s advice is to do only those things that build up, things that instruct the mind (14:19). If someone speaks in tongues, be sure to interpret what the speech means. If someone prays, be sure even outsiders can understand it and add an affirming “Amen” (14:16). God is not a God of disorder but of peace. It is in this sense that “Coach” Paul invokes the famous line of Presbyterians, “all things should be done decently and in order” (14:40). The purpose of your play in the game of life is the *inclusion* of others and anything that *excludes* is indecent and out of order!

A comment has to be added here about an “audible” call of Paul’s in 14:34–36. It has to do with the suggestion that “women should be silent in the churches.” This is particularly confusing because in 11:5 clear directions are given for women’s praying and prophesying, and Paul speaks often of the leadership of women in “his” churches. In his commentary on First Corinthians, William Beardslee gives four common explanations for this confusing comment and chooses the fourth one: That it is a later addition to the book from a time when the church was suppressing women’s leadership.¹ As you discuss it, be aware that this saying from “Coach” Paul might be a false audible that *excludes* rather than *includes*!

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Between major theological statements on spiritual gifts and on resurrection, Paul takes time to call some “audibles” on team building. How would you summarize them? Which ones might apply to your church?

1. William A. Beardslee, *First Corinthians: A Commentary for Today* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1994), pp. 138–39.

Paul sees team building as focused outward, making sure that outsiders felt included inside. What might this suggest for church growth activities today at your church?

At the exit to one church was a sign that read, “You are entering the mission field!” Next to it was another sign, “Please turn off the lights!” What kinds of secret signs, language, and signals might your congregation use that would put off visitors? What can you do about this?

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has legislated inclusion of women (and other groups) into church leadership. The United States Supreme Court has ruled that state-supported schools give equal funds to men’s and women’s athletic programs. Would “Coach” Paul approve? Why or why not? How do you feel about such rules?

Recruiting

A thriving team needs a steady supply of new recruits. Professional baseball depends on farm clubs for its basic recruitment strategy. Professional football turns to colleges and universities for its primary source of recruits. Basketball recruiters go wherever teams are playing—three on three in the park as well as at full games in high school and colleges.

How does your church recruit? In the Corinthian situation Paul was concerned that the players saw themselves as being the team forever. They were not looking into every situation for the chance to pick up a new recruit. For Paul, giving a blessing at a meal was a chance to recruit. If you did it with your listeners in mind, their heartfelt “Amen”

might be the beginning of their involvement in your game (14:17). If everyone used every opportunity to prophecy, outside listeners would see it and say, “God is really among you” (14:25).

Kennon L. Callahan has written a most helpful book, *Effective Church Leadership*, which argues that the days of a “churched-culture” are over and that our churches find themselves in the position of “mission outposts” again, just as they were in Corinth.² He sees successful pastors and members as focused “on sharing the good news of the kingdom and on winning persons to Christ” rather than on institutional maintenance.³ This is the same game plan that Paul saw: outreach is at the heart of everything we do! To “win” is not to maintain the institutional church; it is to “build it up” by recruiting and involving new believers in Christ. “A mission outpost is more a people than a place. It is a grouping—a team of people—gathered at the front lines of human hurts and hopes.”⁴

What kind of leadership is called for in such a mission situation? Coach John Madden tells a story about quarterback Kenny Stabler (“Snake”) who often called unexpected plays that were not supposed to work in a standard situation. Someone would say to him, “Snake, we can’t run that!” To which he would reply, “Easy to call, hard to run. Let’s go!” One player told Madden later, “Just the way Snake called it, you’d think, ‘Yeah, it’ll go.’”⁵

Callahan says that this is more than charismatic leadership, this is “life [as] a pilgrimage and “leadership [as a] discovery.”⁶ In such a mission outpost there are no standard plays; you try to search out something that will work—just then, just in that situation. Or as “Coach” Paul liked to put it, “Let all things be done for building up!” (14:26).

2. Kennon L. Callahan, *Effective Church Leadership: Building on the Twelve Keys* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1990), p. 22.

3. Callahan, *Effective Church Leadership*, p. 24.

4. Callahan, *Effective Church Leadership*, p. 28.

5. John Madden, *One Knee Equals Two Feet (And Everything Else You Need To Know About Football)* (New York: Jove Books, 1986), p. 39.

6. Callahan, *Effective Church Leadership*, p. 65.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

How does your church recruit? Build a list of ways and evaluate each one as though you were the general manager of this franchise.

Try to envision your community as a mission field. Where are the places of greatest opportunity? Who are your allies and how might you best work together? How will you know you are winning?

How are church leaders identified and recruited in your congregation? What are the attributes you look for, and why are these being sought? How might this change if your church saw itself as a mission outpost?

In some mission situations, Christian leaders are methodically imprisoned, threatened, or killed. Why might opponents choose such methods? How might a mission outpost church respond? (Remember “Coach” Paul’s win/win strategy.)

What are the similarities between sports stories and church stories? Why are they told? How could your church’s “minute for mission” be more like a sports story?

Afterword

When Tiger Woods shot a record-breaking eighteen under par at the 1997 Masters golf tournament many younger pros started talking about a whole new kind of golf game. When Arthur Ashe and others started playing what is called *modern power tennis*—savage serves and hard net play—reformers started thinking of ways to change the rules. When football coaches started sending in every play based on computer models of what would work best in this situation, some felt that the game of football was becoming too robotic.

Change is as real in sports as in every other aspect of modern life. The church is no exception. As mega-churches proliferate and televangelists establish religious empires bigger than traditional denominations, it becomes important for traditional church folks to adjust to the new and different. As one of the longest lasting of all institutions, this is not new for the church. It has adapted endlessly as history has forced it to change. Where might you look for guidance in this process? One place, certainly, is in the records of fast-growing new churches. Among these churches are those in Asia Minor, which were founded by the Apostle Paul. Is this a time when First Corinthians might be equally addressed to First Presbyterians?

Looking Ahead

Our final session on First Corinthians will look at Paul’s understanding of victory—the resurrection. Read chapter 15 as you prepare. Try not to let later church concepts (in the gospels, for example) get in the way of your reading about this incredible finale to the game of life.

session

seven

VICTORY

1 Cor. 15:1–58

Introduction

“But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15:57).

We have seen this chapter coming since the very first session. It is God’s game that is being played and God intends to win! The weakest players can be chosen, they must play a win/win game allowing no losers, and they may find themselves powerless before the forces against them in this world. But when they are on God’s team playing by God’s rules, they will win. Even when the “last enemy” (15:26) is death itself, victory is sure. All of this we know “through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Why, then, if life is all taken care of, do we play at all? Because, as Paul states repeatedly, not to be a part of this grand game of God is to live “in vain” (15:2, 10, 14). It is to miss the victory that life can hold and consequently to be most pitied (15:19). Resurrection is being sure of the outcome, even as we struggle on day by day.

This long final chapter 15 on resurrection is one of the first written church records about God’s victory in Jesus Christ. It does not focus on a final judgment of those who choose to live in vain. It focuses on the awareness of victory for those who choose to live in Christ. It does not see resurrection as a resuscitation of our present bodies, indeed Paul insists that “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (15:50). It does not mean that we will continue as we are; “we will all be changed,” says Paul (15:51). What exactly is the nature of that change?

Change

I can empathize with players because I, too, have been through painful experiences in this game. The most humbling was when my playing career ended. To me, this was a kind of death. It meant giving up my identity as a warrior, my *raison d’être* since boyhood, and becoming, in my view, a nonperson.¹

The transition from “player” to “has been” is painful for many athletes—and many men. They see themselves so much in the role of participant

that they cannot see anything else about themselves. They need help in making this transition.

Johnny Unitas, who was for many years the Baltimore Colts quarterback, serves us as a good model. When the Colts finally dropped him, he went to San Diego for a season and a half. One day on the practice field he discovered, “The legs just wouldn’t respond.” When asked what he thought when his career was over, he commented, “I’m not philosophical, . . . with me it has always been point blank, yes, no, can you or can’t you. I just couldn’t play anymore. It was time to quit and get out. I was taking up someone else’s time. . . . Your mind is willing but your body just wears out.”²

One suspects that “Coach” Paul would have understood and applauded that transition. As we move through life—and death—we change. It is inevitable and becomes acceptable only when we know that it is not final. The game is not finally about us, it is about God. This body wears out, but God intends that we gain spiritual bodies as we move along.

When we get bogged down in ourselves, our egos, and our win/lose legalism, we are not really living, says Paul, but are actually in the realm of death. In Christ we are shown an entirely different way to play the game. And perhaps the focus should be on the word *play*.

To be on a team, to interact smoothly together as a living unit, to let each player star for the good of all, and to reach out and include even more players until the game is everything—that is Paul’s vision for “Team Church.” That is resurrection life in God’s kingdom. To get there, every lesser thing that tries to rule us or exert authority or power over us has to be destroyed, including death (15:24). Such things are of the “first man,” Adam—a mere living being. We are invited to become part of the “last man,” Christ—a life-giving spirit! (15:45). Christ’s body is corporate, inclusive, and eternal. It’s the only team worth joining.

1. Phil Jackson, *Sacred Hoops: Spiritual Lessons of a Hardwood Warrior* (New York: Hyperion, 1995), p. 54.

2. Mickey Herskowitz and Steve Perkins, *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sports* (New York: New American Library, 1977), pp. 7 and 14.

One of coach Woody Hayes's Ohio State football players analyzed coach Hayes this way: "Coach Hayes is like anyone else. He shows his emotions. When he's angry, he shows it. And when he's happy he doesn't."³ Distinguish between the propensity of most men to not show emotion (except possibly anger) and Johnny Unitas's acceptance of life's changes. How can "manly men" witness to the resurrection?

Work with a partner to build a list of ways in which we often live in vain rather than in Christ. Discuss with the group how your lives could become more intentionally "imperishable" (15:42). Recall chapter 13 on what endures.

Coaching

Some retired players become coaches. They translate playing into teaching. When one forty-eight year-old man heard that the life cycle ended at forty-eight in the Seneca Indian tradition, he asked the shaman who was speaking what lay ahead for him. She answered simply, "You go around again—as a teacher!" So it is for some who have learned life's lessons well enough to tell others; they become guides.

Paul tells how he became a guide by affirming an already established creedal formula "of first importance": "Christ died for our sins . . . he was buried . . . he was raised on the third day . . . and . . . he appeared" (15:3–5). Then Paul lists all those to whom Christ appeared, including himself. Not all of these appearance stories are in our Scriptures, some we have are not in Paul's list, and each appearance story is unique to those who had it. For Paul, it was a loud voice and a bright light (Acts 9:1–9), which others did not see! What they did see, in every case, was a changed person.

3. Herskowitz and Perkins, *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sports*, p. 31.

The old focus of life on the self had been radically replaced by a new focus—on Christ! These apostles felt themselves to be in the body of Christ and set out at once to tell and teach others about this amazing experience.

Of course, Paul was never really a coach in the way we understand this term today. But he did take on a new role in "Team Church," as founder, guide, and advisor—as apostle. This study has sought to look at his words in First Corinthians as a collection of such guidance, rather than to focus on the topics the Corinthian situation forced him to address. He was working from the big picture, which had been shown to him by Christ. It completely changed the way he looked at life—and death. A coach in sports does have to address the specific issues facing his or her players, but beyond that, the coach's job is to help players see the big picture and to accept their part in it. That Paul did!

If you have been helped by "Coach" Paul's insights and want to look further at the possible connections between sports and spirituality, read *Sacred Hoops: Spiritual Lessons of a Hardwood Warrior* by Phil Jackson, head coach of the Chicago Bulls basketball team. Jackson begins, "When I was named head coach of the Chicago Bulls in 1989, my dream was not just to win championships, but to do it in a way that wove together my two greatest passions: basketball and spiritual exploration. On the surface this may sound like a crazy idea, but intuitively I sensed that there was a link between spirit and sport."⁴

Jackson goes on to describe the soul of teamwork as "surrender[ing] the 'me' for the 'we.'"⁵ He comments, "creating a successful team—whether it's an NBA champion or a record-setting sales force—is essentially a spiritual act. It requires the individuals involved to surrender their self-interest for the greater good so that the whole adds up to more than the sum of its parts."⁶ Perhaps you can hear echoes of "Coach" Paul in this statement. Jackson was raised in a strong Christian family and his mother had him memorizing Scripture by the time he was four. His spiritual search took him through many temptations, but eventually he said this: "After searching long and hard for meaning everywhere else, I discovered that the game itself operated according to laws far more profound than anything that might be found in a coach's playbook. Inside the lines of the court, the mystery of life gets played out night after night."⁷

4. Jackson, *Sacred Hoops*, p. 3.

5. Jackson, *Sacred Hoops*, p. 21.

6. Jackson, *Sacred Hoops*, p. 5.

7. Jackson, *Sacred Hoops*, p. 22.

The Corinthian Christians were a young team, full of enthusiasm and spirit but not yet melded into a unified whole. They needed the guidance of a talented coach, someone who had been through the things they were experiencing and who had learned the lessons life had to offer. More than that, they needed a Christian coach—someone who saw the game of life in big-league dimensions, someone who had learned to play under the best coach there ever was, Jesus the Christ!

We today are not unlike those Corinthians. We get excited about parts of the game of life and confused by other parts. We sense that teamwork is important but don't always know how to make it happen. Hopefully, "Coach" Paul's advice to the Corinthians will still speak to us in our particular configuration of "Team Church."

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Which message from your study of "Coach" Paul's teachings do you remember best? Why?

Think of someone who has been a good coach to you on your spiritual journey. What have you learned from them that you still use?

Make a list of topics you would like the coach to address—just as the Corinthians did. Discuss what kind of answers Paul might write to you.

Jot down a few notes about how you plan to replace the "me" with the "we." Where will you start?

Afterword

Though I still have reservations about the more rigid aspects of Christianity, I have always been deeply moved by the fundamental insight that love is a conquering force. In 1 Corinthians 13:1–2, St. Paul writes, "If I speak in the tongues of men and angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic power, and understand all mysteries and knowledge, and I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing."

. . . Love is the force that ignites the spirit and binds teams together.⁸

8. Jackson, *Sacred Hoops*, pp. 51–52.

THE WRITER

David Lewis served for twelve years as an Associate for Men's Ministry with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). After his retirement in 1994, he has divided his time between homes in the White Mountains of New Hampshire and the LaHave Islands of Nova Scotia. He is married to Fran Lewis, and they have four grown sons and six grandchildren. David continues to write resources for church use.

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