THE NEW TESTAMENT SPEAKS TODAY:

A STUDY GUIDE FOR A SERIES ON THE MESSAGES OF THE NEW TESTAMENT BOOKS

BY DR. JAMES THOMPSON
Missionaries who planted a church in St. Petersburg Russia faced the dilemma: how do we initiate new converts who come with no prior knowledge of Christianity into the faith? Where do we begin to give them basic knowledge of the faith and of the basic expectations for all Christians? They chose the Gospel of Luke and 1 Thessalonians.

a. The gospels are important because they describe the basic story of Jesus.

b. 1 Thessalonians, however, is an obscure little book near the end of Paul’s letters that one could easily read in 15 minutes. Why this letter?

To understand why one would choose 1 Thessalonians, we need to recall the circumstances when Paul wrote it.

a. The Thessalonian Christians were primarily Gentiles who “had turned to God from idols” (1:9-10); hence they came with no prior knowledge of the faith. They knew no stories and no expectations. [Note that the foundation of the church is described in Acts 17:1-9, and we learn that there were some Jewish converts. However, 1 Thess. mentions only Gentile converts.]

b. Knowing that one does not plant a church and walk away without enculturating the converts into the new community, Paul spent the first days forming the community: “like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory” (2:12).

c. Paul’s visit was cut short (cf. Acts 17:1-9), but he was still concerned about the development of the Thessalonian church. He sent Timothy to continue the work of teaching (1 Thess. 3:1-5).

d. 1 Thess. was written when Paul received a good report about their continued faithfulness (cf. 1 Tim. 3:6).

e. Since the occasion for writing the book is Timothy’s return (1 Thess. 3:6, and event recorded also in Acts [18:5]), we are able to establish that 1 Timothy was written from Corinth when Gallio was proconsul–around AD 50. 1 Thess. is likely Paul’s earliest letter.

f. Paul’s challenge is to speak to a church that is doing well. No crises, no doctrinal disputes, etc. Thus we expect 1 Thessalonians to provide a model for a) speaking to new Christians and b) speaking to people who are doing well.

g. Paul expects the letter to be read in church (1 Thess. 5:27).

h. **Discussion:** One might anticipate the actual message of the letter by asking the basic questions: a) what do you tell new Christians? b) How do you turn individual new converts into a community? c) By what criteria do we determine that a church is doing well? 1 Thess. might be called “now that I’m a Christian.”

Note the answers as we follow the message of 1 Thessalonians.

a. In 1:2-3:10 Paul reminisces, recalling several good things about this church.

i. In the opening thanksgiving (1:2-10), he expresses hope for their “work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope” (1:2-3)–the measure of
their success.

ii. In 2:1-12 Paul recalls that he was a model of the behavior he expects of the Thessalonians.

iii. In 2:13-3:10, he recalls that Timothy’s report mentioned their “faith and love” (3:6).

b. Paul’s prayer in 3:11-13 also indicates the sign of a good church. Note especially that he prays a) for their increase in love (3:12) and for their increased holiness (sanctification, 3:13). Note that Paul has expressed thanks for their “labor of love” (1:3); now he prays for their increased love.

c. In the first three chapters, Paul has been building the case for the actual purpose of the book, expressed in 4:1-2: Keep doing what you have been doing. He tells the church what they already know! That is, these are the instructions that he had given them soon after their conversion (cf. 2:12). Note also that he prays for their sanctification (3:13), and then gives instructions on how to be sanctified (4:3, 7; 5:23).

i. The new community is expected to live up to expectations of marital fidelity: not to behave as the pagans do (4:3-8).

ii. Although Paul has already congratulated the community on its love (1:3-4; 3:6) and prayed for their love (3:12), he instructs them to practice “familial love.” [Remember that converts had broken with family, and Paul is now trying to recreate a family.]

iii. He instructs the community to “encourage each other” in view of the return of Christ (4:18; 5:11).

Discussion: 1 Thessalonians raises questions about what happens after a church is planted. It also raises questions about the need for a planned curriculum that all of the church will know. Note the cohesiveness of moral expectations expected in 1 Thessalonians. One of the most repeated phrases in 1 Thessalonians is “you know” or the equivalent (cf. 3:3; 4:1-2, 9; 5:1). Discuss the importance of instruction that tells us what we already know. Do you know of instances where churches have been intentional about educating the entire community, as Paul does in 1 Thessalonians.

1. It is now important to step back and ask what 1 Thessalonians is really about; what makes it really tick.

a. The book appears to be the written form of Paul’s follow-up to their conversion; the book does what Paul says that he did shortly after their conversion (2:12); it tells converts how to behave.

b. The heart of the book is 4:1-2. Paul builds up to it in chs. 1-3 and gives specific examples in the remainder of chapters 4-5.

c. The book only tells Christians what they already know.

1. 2 Thessalonians appears to be written shortly after 1 Thessalonians after news of misunderstanding about the second coming reached Paul (cf. 2 Thess. 2:1-2). Here Paul reiterates and clarifies the message of 1 Thessalonians.
THE NEW TESTAMENT SPEAKS: THE THESSALONIANS LETTERS  
DR. JAMES THOMPSON

WEEK THREE  
BUILDING A COMMUNITY IN AN  
INDIVIDUALISTIC SOCIETY: 1 CORINTHIANS

1. The Corinthian Letters remind us of the vast difference between planting a church and maintaining a healthy community.
a. Despite the 18 months Paul spent in Corinth after the founding of the church (Acts 18:11), the Corinthians move from one crisis to another, resulting first in the writing of 1 Corinthians.
b. The immediate occasion for writing 1 Corinthians is a report from Chloe’s people (1 Cor. 1:11); a letter that the Corinthians wrote to Paul (1 Cor. 7:1), and a visit from Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus (1 Cor. 16:17).
c. At the end of 2 Corinthians, Paul anticipates a third visit (2 Cor. 13:1), indicating that the faithfulness of this church is still in doubt.
d. Discussion: The Corinthian letters reflect the challenge of holding a community together.

1. The challenge of holding the community together is a result, in part, of the original demographic composition of the church; i.e., Paul planted a very heterogeneous church.
a. Note that here, as in all of the letters, Paul planted the church in an urban context—one of the great cities of the ancient world.
b. Having been destroyed in 146 BC and rebuilt in 44 BC, Corinth was a new city, composed of new and rootless people of all ethnic backgrounds.
c. Note the demographic composition described in 1:26-28. Although “not many” mighty and well-born were among the Corinthians, some were undoubtedly people of means. Numerous disputes grow out of the claims for privilege exercised by the rich (i.e., Who would use the law courts? Who would receive invitations to eat meat? Who abused others at the Lord’s table?).
d. To build a community among the “new rich,” slaves, Jews, etc. was no easy task. However, Paul chose to build this kind of community.
e. Discussion: One theory of missions is that one should target a homogeneous group. It will have less problems. Discuss Paul’s church planting practice in light of what common sense tells us about the demographics of church planting.

1. Whereas 1 Thess. is written to a church that was doing well, 1 Cor is addressed to a church that had many problems. Although Paul addresses a variety of problems in Corinth (factions, chs. 1-4; sexual issues, 5:1-13; 6:12-20; lawsuits, 6:1-11; marriage, ch. 7; meat offered to idols, chs. 8-10; worship, 11-14, resurrection, ch. 15, most likely these problems are symptoms of a deeper issue: the Corinthians have brought into the church the values of their own society.
a. The factions mentioned in chs. 1-4 were commonplace in Corinthian society, where leaders were in competition with each other; the Corinthians were not divided over doctrine, but over their favorite leaders; i.e., those who could fit Greek values of oratory and wisdom (cf. 2:1-5).
b. At the heart of the problems in 5:1-11:1 are the Corinthians’ celebration of
individual freedom ("all things are lawful" [6:12; 10:23]) at the expense of the community.

c. The problems of public worship resulted from the peoples’ individualistic behavior that undermined the community.

d. The Corinthians’ denial of the resurrection reflected Greco-Roman views.

e. Discussion: Can you draw analogies between the Corinthians’ importing of their own cultural values into the church and our own temptations? Do we face temptations to combine nationalism, materialism, our political views, our definitions of freedom into the church? Focus especially on our emphasis on our idea that we have the rights to have our needs met? How do you maintain community with the focus on the individual?

1. Paul’s challenge is to build a community among competing values and interest groups.
   a. The thesis statement of 1 Corinthians is 1:10-11: To “speak the same thing.”
      i. NB: This passage is commonly misused. It does not call for uniformity on all disputed issues. The issue is harmony in the community rather than partisanship. The phrase was common in contexts of political infighting. It is a call for harmony, not uniformity.
      ii. The entire book is about overcoming anti-communal tendencies (e.g., those who insist on their own freedom); this passage introduces that concept.
   b. Paul’s description of his message of the cross in 1:18-25 indicates how we can “speak the same thing”: this is a call for the inversion of our cultural values—those individualistic values that undermine community. The message of the cross gives a new way of thinking that the culture does not understand.
   c. In 3:10-17 Paul responds to the partisanship by indicating that all leaders are in the process of constructing a building; i.e., what matters is the corporate community as a building, not private or individual partisanship.

1. Paul addresses the major issues in the Corinthian church, applying the message of the cross to specific situations. He addresses individualism/individual freedom with a cruciform approach.
   a. In response to the man who is living with his father’s wife, Paul reminds the church that a) “Christ our paschal lamb has died”; i.e., we place issues within the context of Jesus’ cross; and b) that the health of the community demands the removal of the man. That is, the community is prior to the individual.
   b. In response to lawsuits, he says, “Why don’t you be wronged” rather than insist on your own rights (6:7)—an application of the message of the cross.
   c. In issues of sexuality, he says, “You are not your own; you have been bought with a price” (6:20); i.e., the cross undermines insistence on individual freedom.
   d. On the issue of meat sacrificed to idols, Paul insists to those who insist on their freedom that their task is to defer to “the one for whom Christ died” (8:9), just as Paul does not please himself (ch. 9; 10:22-23).
   e. Paul addresses issues of public worship by indicating that the well-being of the corporate community is more important than individual interests.
      i. The image of the church as a body (12:12-28) refocuses the attention from
the individual to the community, indicating that a) even the least insignificant is indispensable; and b) the community has priority over the individual.

ii. Within its own context, 1 Cor 13 is a challenge to self-seeking behavior.

iii. In ch. 14, Paul reaches the climax of the discussion of worship, indicating that *edification* is the standard for worship.

(1) Note the repetition of edification in 14:5, 12, 17, 26) and synonymous references in 14:6, 19.

(2) *Edification* is a building metaphor taken from 3:10-17 (cf. 8:1). It does not refer to the edification of the individual, but to the well-being of the community; i.e., everything should be aimed toward the health of the whole community.

f. **Discussion.** Note that the central threat under all of these issues is that the cross leads us to deny our individual preferences and think of the other. What are the challenges we face in thinking that way? In worship styles? Church programs? Discuss the thought that community works only when we are all somewhat unhappy.

1. Ch. 15 responds to those who “say there is no resurrection of the dead” (15:12) with the reminder that all had originally believed in the resurrection of Christ (15:11). [The Corinthians were not denying the resurrection of Christ, but were probably expressing the Greek view that the bodies of others will be raised.]. Paul gives a variety of arguments for the resurrection of all.
WEEK FOUR

SECULAR OR CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP: 2 CORINTHIANS

1. In 1 Corinthians, we noticed that the root of the numerous problems in Corinth was the fact that the Corinthians superimposed the secular values of leadership and freedom upon their Christian faith. As a result, the insistence on rhetorical skill and individual rights undermined the community. In 2 Corinthians we follow a congregation’s history, noting that some old issues remain, and other new issues have emerged. That is, congregational history can follow a path from issue to issue that forces a congregation to ask difficult questions about its identity.

1. A series of events after the writing of 1 Corinthians finally led Paul to write 2 Corinthians to address old and new issues.
   a. Paul sent Timothy with 1 Corinthians (1 Cor. 4:17) and promised to come later and spend the winter with this church (1 Cor. 16:5-6).
   b. Timothy evidently returned to Paul with the bad news about new problems in Corinth, leading Paul to make a painful visit (2:1) and then to write a letter “with many tears” (2:4), sending it with Titus.
   c. Paul hoped to meet Titus in Troas to learn about the Corinthian situation (2:12-13), but did not find him until he went on to Macedonia (7:5). Paul wrote 2 Corinthians after he received news from Titus.

1. The thesis statement of 2 Corinthians 1:12-14 indicates the primary issue in Corinth and Paul’s purpose in writing.
   a. Paul’s defensive statement in 1:12 indicates that he—his integrity as well as his ministry—is the issue. Hence most of 2 Corinthians is in the first person (mostly plural, but Paul uses the plural to speak of himself). Note the criticisms he seems to be answering.
      i. He is fickle, promising one thing and doing another (1:15-23).
      ii. He has no letters of recommendation, as others do (3:1-2).
      iii. He is “humble” and “weak,” and his “speech is of no account” (10:10-11; cf. 11:6).
      iv. He will not accept their financial support (11:7-11); something suspicious here, especially since he is involved in a fundraising campaign (chs. 8-9).
      v. Paul’s reference to the “thorn in the flesh” (12:7-10) may be his response to criticisms of his physical appearance. A man of God who cannot heal himself?
   b. In 1:14 Paul speaks positively of his purpose in writing: that you (the church) can be “our boast” just as we are “your boast” at the end; i.e., to overcome the suspicions so that he and the church can be “proud of” each other.

1. The criticisms that the Corinthians have made of Paul indicate that they have a “secular” understanding of ministry and Christian leadership. They look for leaders who are strong, demanding, effective speakers, and have a good physical presence.

Discussion: What are the characteristics of a Christian leader? Write a job
description for a minister, elder, etc. How do the qualifications compare with expectations of leaders everywhere? How are our expectations to be compared to secular standards of leadership?

1. In contrast to Paul, others exemplify “secular” leadership in their approach.
   a. The criticisms of Paul suggest that they represent courage, physical appearance, and good speaking ability.
   b. The others demand pay for their work.

1. Most of 2 Corinthians is made up of Paul’s “boasting” in the hope that the Corinthians will ultimately accept his ministry.
   a. In 1:15-2:13 he justifies his change of plans by indicating that his decisions were all for the sake of the Corinthians (cf. 1:23-24; 2:4, “because of love”).
   b. In 2:14-4:6, he contrasts himself to the “peddlers” (2:17), insisting that in his ministry he is in God’s triumphal processional as a captive on his way to death (2:14); unlike the marketers, he stays with the same message (4:5-6), whether he is successful or not.
   c. In 4:7-5:10, his ministry is characterized by weakness (“treasure in earthen vessels,” 4:7). In his ministry his strength comes from weakness; he carries around the “dying of Jesus” (4:10) in order to receive divine power. That is, what distinguishes his ministry is that he lives by the cross—not by secular definitions of ministry. Note: Here is the first of three major lists of Paul’s sufferings in 4:7-10 (cf. also 6:3-10; 11:23ff).
   d. In 5:11-6:2, he shows that his ministry is determined by the “new world” (5:17) of the cross, not by secular standards. “One died for all” (5:14) determines his ministry.
   e. In 6:3-10, he offers his resume again; his sufferings define his ministry.
   f. Note the constant theme of Paul’s refusal to accept money (2:17; 12:14-15) because he devotes himself to others.
   g. In exasperation, Paul makes the “fool’s speech” in 11:1-12:10—foolish because the Corinthians forced Paul into boasting of his attainments. At the end (12:11), he says, “You forced me to do it.” In 11:23ff, Paul again offers his resume; what defines his ministry is the very weakness for which he is criticized. Note the importance of the theme of strength through weakness in 11:30; 12; 9-10; 13:3-4. He is the opposite of his competitors, who are pretentious and demanding (cf. 11:20-21).
   h. **Discussion:** Reflect on the implications of Paul’s rejection of secular standards of ministry and his insistence on the cross as the symbol of weakness. What implications does this message have for our ministries? In what sense have we made choices that reflect Paul’s view that God’s power is available in our weakness?

1. In the thesis statement, Paul indicates his desire to “be proud of” the Corinthians at the day of Christ; i.e., that they make progress toward the goal.
   a. They will demonstrate their progress by turning away from Paul’s critics and turning toward him. Note Paul’s invitation in 6:11-7:4; cf. ch. 13.
b. Their participation in the collection is the prime example of the progress that Paul asks for.
   i. The Macedonians provide an example of a mature church, inasmuch as they devoted themselves to the collection (8:1-6).
   ii. Jesus Christ provides the example of giving that the Corinthians should emulate (8:9).
   iii. By giving, they will manifest their love and Paul’s boasting on their behalf (8:24-9:5).
   iv. Discussion. Two topics come to mind. 1) Discuss the characteristics of a good church that we would be “proud of.” 2) Discuss the role of giving as a demonstration of the quality of our discipleship. How do we overcome skepticism about financial appeals?
1. In Thessalonica and Corinth, Paul planted churches among Gentiles, and he wrote letters in order to provide further instruction that will result in a cohesive community.

1. Although the Galatians, like the earlier converts, are also Gentiles, the recipients of this letter are not limited to one city; instead, Paul writes to the “churches of Galatia” (1:2).
   a. Writing to “the churches of Galatia” indicates that the letter circulated in several cities in a region, and indication of the networking that took place among churches.
   b. Scholars are not sure precisely who the “Galatians” are. Ethnic Galatians lived in what is today central Turkey. The border of Galatia extended into southern Turkey and included the cities mentioned in Acts 13-14 (Paul’s first missionary journey).

1. The crisis in Galatia was so profound that it determined the future of Christianity; i.e., whether Christianity would be an ethnic or multi-ethnic religion. Perhaps, because of Galatians, we are Christians!
   a. The crisis in Galatia occurred when visitors arrived and said something like this: Welcome, Gentile converts to the people of God. Apparently Paul forgot to mention that Gentiles have always been welcomed into the people of God if they keep all of the commandments, including circumcision (Gen. 17:11-14). Indeed, Abraham is a good example of a Gentile who came into the people of God by being circumcised. Now, if you want to come into the people of God, just do what Abraham did: be circumcised and enter the covenant. Paul does not have the right to change the rules (cf. Gal. 6:12).
   b. Note that the term “Judaizer” is our common term, but it does not actually appear in Galatians.
   c. They would have said: “If you do not keep the entire law, you are not yet in the people of God.”
   d. We should also recall that, in the second century BC, Jews had died for circumcision when persecutors attempted to stamp out the manifestations of Judaism. As the elect people of God, Jews feared assimilation into the larger culture. Circumcision was a badge of identity.

1. Galatians is the answer to that question: Who are the people of God? Do Gentile converts need to adopt the badges of ethnic Jews? Paul’s first answer is given in chapters 1-2.
   a. The lengthy salutation introduces Paul’s theme: 1) Paul’s apostleship is from God [his right to change the rules]; 2) Christ “delivered us from the present evil age” (1:3); i.e., you Galatians were already liberated before anyone mentioned circumcision. Note the major theme of freedom and slavery in Galatians. This is the first reference.
   b. Galatians has no thanksgiving. Paul calls the opposing view “another gospel” (1:6-9) and shames the Galatians for accepting it.
c. **Discussion: What is “another gospel?”** This passage is much abused. “Another gospel” is the suggestion that the Galatians, in their response to Christ, need to do something extra. Undoubtedly, there are parallels to “another gospel” today, but one should be cautious of using this language on areas of disagreement.

d. Paul’s autobiographical reflections in 1:10-2:10 indicate what gave him the right to change the rules.

i. His conversion indicates his authority (1:10-17): He received a prophetic call (cf. 1:15 and Isa. 49:1).

ii. The fact that he was rarely in Jerusalem (1:18-24) indicates his independence; that he acted according to divine revelation (1:16; 2:1).

iii. In the Jerusalem conference, the pillars of the church recognized him (2:1-10) and his work among the Gentiles. Titus, a Gentile, was a test case for the very issue they are facing. To accept circumcision for Titus was to concede that he was not already fully a child of God, and thus to lose one’s freedom. *Note that the subject of freedom is mentioned here for the second time.*

e. In the incident at Antioch (2:11-14), Paul confronted the critical issue when people from Jerusalem would not eat with Gentiles; having separate tables was a way of indicating that some were “second class” Christians. Such a suggestion was a violation of the *truth of the gospel* (2:14). Having separate tables was a way of having two classes of Christians. **Discussion:** *In what way do we communicate that we recognize first- and second-class believers? What is the significance of potluck meals for communicating the nature of the gospel?*

f. The thesis statement of Galatians is 2:15-21. This can be read both as Paul’s statement to Peter and to the Galatians.

i. In 2:15-16 Paul introduces the principle of justification by faith as a response to those who would not admit that Gentiles are full members; that is all are saved on the basis of faithfulness; there is no privilege to those who have works.

ii. In 2:17-21 Paul answers the question: How does one live ethically without the law? Answer: by dying with Christ. This anticipates chapters 5-6.

1. Paul offers his second answer in chapters 3-4: To be free is to be adult children in the father’s house. To be enslaved is to force Gentiles to keep the law.

   a. In 3:1-6 Paul argues from the Galatians’ experience: If they had already received the Spirit before the teachers came, why would they want to add obedience to the law?

   b. In the difficult argument of 3:7-29, the constant refrain is: those who have faith are Abraham’s children (3:7, 9, 26-28). *The people of God are inclusive!*

   c. In 4:1-11, Paul indicates that freedom involves being the adult child who can say “abba Father” (4:6). Then why become enslaved?

   d. In 4:12-31, Paul focuses on freedom again, indicating that Christians are free already.

   e. **Discussion:** Compare Paul’s view of freedom as the right to be a full member of the household and to say “abba father” with different views of freedom.
that are commonly held today. Some focus on individual rights. Some in other countries focus on the right of the whole society to be free from hunger, poverty, etc.

1. Chapters 5 and 6 describe the meaning of freedom (5:1, 13). One form of slavery is to return to the law (chs. 3-4). Another form of slavery is to use freedom as an opportunity for the flesh (5:1, 13); to let freedom cancel itself out.
   a. In 5:13-15 Paul says that freedom is a form of slavery (“through love become one another’s slaves”). Freedom is “other-directed.” Freedom as the right to do as one wishes results in our “biting and consuming one another.”
   b. The contrast between the works of the flesh and fruit of the Spirit defines the nature of freedom.
      i. The works of the flesh (5:19-21) are basically sins of thinking of one’s own gratification. The sins are either anti-social or sexual. In either case, this “slavery” emphasizes personal gratification.
      ii. The fruit of the Spirit (5:22-26) describes the true freedom that follows Paul’s example of being “crucified” with Christ. That is, it turns away from self-gratification.
   c. Chapters 5 and 6 describe the structured life of this multi-ethnic community that learns to live together by denying the self.
1. Romans has been the most revolutionary of all of Paul’s letters.
   a. The Protestant Reformation is scarcely imaginable without Luther’s reading of Romans’ message of salvation by God’s righteousness.
   b. Many of us discovered the grace of God through our study of Romans. It shifted our focus from salvation as our own doing to God’s gracious act.

1. In contrast to his other letters, Paul writes Romans to a church that he did not found; nor do we know if Paul was acquainted with the situation in Rome.
   a. Some suggest that the content of Romans reflects tensions between Jews and Gentiles (cf. especially 14:1-15:13). Perhaps Jewish Christians, after being expelled from Rome by Claudius (Acts 18:1-2), have now returned when the edict was relaxed and found a church that has adopted Gentile practices.
   b. Because Romans is written at the critical turning point in Paul’s career when he is about to deliver the contributions of the Gentile churches to Jerusalem (15:22-29), Paul’s own situation may be the driving force in the book.
   c. In either case, the dominant issue of Romans is Paul’s call as apostle to the Gentiles (15:16-17) and his explanation of his desire to present the Gentiles as a sacrifice to God at the end.

1. If we note the demographics of the Roman church in the lengthy greetings of chapter 16, we can understand how ethnic tensions could arise. Both Jewish and Gentiles names appear, and they include as many as three “house churches” that comprise the Roman church. These house churches would have been in different sections of town, and each would have its own class and ethnic qualities. The question of Romans is: Can such diverse people be one church? Is Paul’s life work of bringing Gentiles and Jews together going to be for nothing? The question is similar to our own. Can we be one church across the lines of age, education, social status, etc.?

1. In order to understand Romans, I suggest that we begin with the concluding section (12:1-15:13) and note “the answers at the back of the book” before we notice the argument that leads here. 12:1-15:13 describes the consequences of the earlier argument.
   a. Paul introduces this ethical section with the appeal not to be conformed to this world; i.e., the gospel has ethical consequences. The remainder of the section describes this new existence as community existence.
   b. What difference does Christ make? In the opening comment in 12:3, Paul pleads for members “not to think of themselves more highly than they ought to think” (12:3).
   c. The remainder of the argument points to living within one body, even if we come from different ethnic backgrounds. Most of the advice involves thinking of others rather than ourselves.
   d. In the message about the strong and the weak (Jew and Gentile?), Paul describes the sacrifices that are necessary for each in order to live as community.
   e. The climax of the entire argument is 15:6ff: glorify God with one voice. That is,
Paul wants a church where the diverse people can come together and worship with one voice.

1. How did Paul arrive at the conclusion he reached in 12:1-15:13 (esp. 15:6)? Chapters 1-11 provide the foundation for this conclusion.
   a. The thesis statement of the book in 1:14-17 introduces the topic: God’s righteousness is for everyone who has faith; i.e., not for one ethnic group; nor only for those who keep the law. Cf. Rom. 5:1. Paul’s constant use of “every” or “all” (cf. 1:5; 3:9, 22, 23; 4:11, 16; 5:12; 10:4, 11, 13) undermines exclusivist tendencies; i.e., God’s invitation is not to one particular group.
   b. In 1:18-3:20, Paul indicates that all are under the power of sin because no one is righteous.
   c. In 3:21-31 and chapter 4 (on Abraham), Paul declares once more that God’s righteousness extends to all who believe. That is, God loves “the other guys.” The consequence is that there is no room for boasting (3:27-4:2).
   d. Chapters 5-8 point toward the future, describing the significance of God’s grace.
      i. For those who express their belief with baptism, God’s mercy leads not to ethical laxity, but to transformed ethical living (ch. 6).
      ii. One does God’s will, not by living under the law (ch. 7), but under the power of the Spirit (ch. 8).
   e. While chapters 5-8 describe the continuing transformation of (predominantly Gentile) believers, chapters 9-11 declare that God has not abandoned Israel. Whereas Paul addresses Jewish arrogance in 3:27-4:2, in 11:26 he addresses the arrogance of Gentiles who now believe that they are the central figures in God’s plan. Note the phrase, “so that you not be wise among yourselves” (11:25), which provides the transition to 12:3.

1. Chapters 12-15 are the mirror image of 1:18-3:20: the description of a new community without arrogance (12:3) that can live in peace across ethnic lines, caring for each other.

1. Romans confronts all boasting and arrogance in our own achievements (3:27-4:2; 11:25-26; 12:3), teaching us to live in harmony, knowing that we are all saved by God’s initiative.

Discussion: a) Rom. 12-15 presents the question: What are the identifying marks of the Christian. That is, many are good, ethical people who are not Christians. The identifying mark in Romans 12 is the self-denial that is the foundation for community life. Christians live in communities.

What improvements could we make to implement the message of Romans? What forms of arrogance do we have to overcome? What does Romans say about segmenting into different groups along the lines of race, class, and age? What might we do to improve on “glorifying God with one voice?”
1. Paul apparently wrote Colossians and Philemon to house churches in Colossae while he was in prison (Col. 4:18; Philem. 10, 13).
   a. Onesimus, the slave who is the subject of Philemon, is called “one of you” in Colossians Col. 4:9.
   b. With minor exceptions, the companions of Paul are the same in Philemon (23-24) and Colossians (4:10-14).
   c. Paul addresses Philemon and the church in his house (v. 2) as well as the church in Colossae and sends greetings to the house church of Nympha (Col. 4:15) in Laodicea.
   d. These churches are closely related to house churches in the nearby cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis (Col. 4:13, 16), as evidenced by the change of letters and evangelistic work in all of these cities by Epaphras.

1. As with Romans, Paul did not establish the Colossian church, but commissioned Epaphras to work in that region.

1. In Colossians, Paul faces a new challenge with converts from a pagan environment: a) to demonstrate how Christ fits within their world of powerful cosmic forces; and b) to indicate the ethical consequences of being in Christ.
   a. Like other ancient people, the Colossians were vulnerable to syncretism by which they made Christ one of the many powers in control of human destiny. Warnings in 2:8, 16, 18 may suggest the particular temptations faced by the Colossians: a philosophy that involved reverence for cosmic powers (2:8), ascetic self-denial (2:16), and the worship of angels (2:18). Some philosophies of that period believed that one could find harmony with the universe through ascetic practices. Numerous inscriptions near Colossae involve amulets and good luck charms asking for protection from these powers.
   b. **Discussion. Do we know forms of syncretism today? At one level, we are aware of “new age” philosophies that resemble the temptations faced by the Colossians. At another level, we might consider numerous ways that people honor Christ, but place him with in a pantheon of other deities.**
   c. The primary message of Colossians is the lordship of Christ, who stands above all powers.
      i. Col. 1:15-20 indicates the place of Christ above all of the “principalities and powers.” This “hymn” is probably addressed to the Colossian temptation.
      ii. In Col. 2, Paul gives several declarations of the cosmic significance of Christ (2:9-10, 19).
   d. The cosmic lordship of Christ determines the ethical conduct of believers.
      i. The thesis statement of the letter is 2:6: As therefore you received (the cosmic) Christ, walk in him. . . . Paul moves from declaring Christ’s lordship to discussion of conduct that is appropriate for the Lordship of Christ.
ii. According to 2:11-13, in baptism they were raised with Christ and share his triumph over the powers. Although this passage resembles Rom. 6:4-6, it has a different focus: in Colossians on the fact that you have been raised with Christ to share his triumph. The remainder of chapter 2 give the consequences of being raised with Christ: we do not have to submit to regulations or exercises that will bring salvation. For the Colossians, this means that sharing Christ’s victory releases them from the cosmic powers that they feared.

iii. In 3:1-17, Paul further gives the ethical consequences of the Lordship of Christ (3:1, “if you have been raised with Christ...”) and our baptism into him.

1. In 3:5-11 Paul uses the image of death (“put to death”) and a change of clothes (“put on...”) to describe the radical change in conduct that accompanies baptism.
   a. The list in 3:8 (cf. Gal. 5:19) describes sins of the flesh that one “takes off” like a suit of clothes.
   b. The “new man” is the community that is multi-ethnic (cf. Gal. 3:28).

2. In 3:12-17, Paul describes the positive consequences of being raised with him.

Discussion. Baptism has many dimensions; each NT passage on baptism focuses on a different dimension. Here, as in many other passages, the focus presupposes a radical change of lifestyle that would have characterized first-generation Christians. How do subsequent generations who have grown up in Christian homes relate to this passage when their change is not as radical as it was for those who changed from paganism.

i. In 3:18-4:1 Paul shows how family life comes under the Lordship of Christ. Here he employs the common household code used by ancient writers, but Christianizes it.

1. Philemon, written to the same city, raises the question of the nature of the new community. Note Paul’s statement in Col. 2:11 that there is no longer, “slave, free,” and the reference to Onesimus in Col. 4:9.
   a. Philemon is a remarkable study in persuasion, as Paul builds the case slowly for his request (thanksgiving in vv. 4-7; in 8-14 he introduces Onesimus, indicating that he has converted him and would like to have him continually; in 15-17 he finally makes the request, indicating that Onesimus has been a slave, but Paul wants Philemon to “receive him as you would me” (v. 18).
   b. Philemon offers an insight into the nature of the church as family. It is unclear whether Paul is asking Philemon to give Onesimus his freedom, but it is clear that Paul is asking him to have a new relationship to this slave.
   c. Discussion: A favorite image for church is family. What would be necessary to make image more than an empty metaphor? Discuss the place of Christianity in making social changes. How do we explain Paul’s apparent acceptance of slavery
in Col. 4:1? In what way should Christians be active today in promoting social change?