

“A Corinthian Sensorium: Paul’s Use of the Senses in his Corinthian Correspondence”

Paper presented at the 2024 Stone-Campbell Journal

Dr. Alisha Paddock

Within his discourse on spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12, the Apostle Paul declares that just as the physical body is one, yet has many members, so it is with the body of Christ. Each body part, each member, is important in making the whole function properly. Someone with a certain spiritual gift cannot assume s/he is not important to the body of Christ, just as a foot or ear cannot say they do not belong to the physical body because they are not a hand or eye. In verse 17, Paul asks a series of rhetorical questions: **SLIDE 2** “If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?” It is through the senses that one experiences the world around them, and as Paul works to unify the fractious Corinthian believing community, one of the tools in his arsenal is to employ the bodily senses to correct misunderstandings and clarify what it means to be the body of Christ.

In the ancient world, “[t]he senses were not seen as passive conduits through which perceptions flowed, but rather as directly influencing the physical body. The body, the mind, and the senses were all, therefore, interconnected.”¹ Within the study of anthropology, the senses have long been understood as cultural phenomena. According to Constance Classen, “sensory perception is a cultural, as well as a physical, act. That is, sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell are not only means of apprehending physical phenomena, but also avenues for the transmission of cultural values.”² In order to embark on a study of the senses within Paul’s Corinthian Correspondence, one needs to ask what kind of culture Paul was attempting to create in the Corinthian ἐκκλησία and how his use of the senses help him accomplish this. “For the senses and sensory stimulation to be efficient in strategies that aimed at the implementation of a system of collective values ... there must have been a collectively shared and socio-culturally

¹ Jerry Toner, “Introduction: Sensing the Ancient Past,” in *A Cultural History of the Senses in Antiquity*, ed. Jerry Toner, et. al. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 1-22.

² Constance Classen, “Foundation for an Anthropology of the Senses,” *International Social Science Journal* 49 (2010): 401-412.

determined framework of intersubjective meanings.”³ It is this framework of intersubjective meanings that we seek to discern in Paul’s Corinthian sensorium.

The term “sensorium” is “a cultural construct that can be learned, that emphasises the importance given in a community to some senses over the others, that establishes relationship between the senses at different levels”⁴ On the one hand, Paul makes clear in 1 Cor 12 all the body parts and their senses have a purpose, a role within the body of Christ, but are there senses which are more important for the edification of the ἐκκλησία than others? This paper examines Paul’s use of the senses throughout his correspondence in an attempt to determine a Corinthian sensorium which would help create a healthy, functioning Body of Christ.

While the Aristotelian model distinguishes five senses, if one were to count “sense” words and their correlated body parts in the Corinthian letters, we find, at least, seven sensory perceptions: **SLIDE 3** listed in order of least importance to greatest – tasting, touching, kinaesthesia (movement of the body), smelling, hearing, seeing, and knowing. Within the Pauline corpus, Colossians 2:21 is the only place Paul uses the verb γεύομαι (to taste), in order to push back on the slogans the false teachers seem to be promoting. While there is much discussion on eating and drinking in 1 Corinthians, whether it is Paul bemoaning the fact the Corinthians are not ready for solid food in chapter 3, or eating meat sacrificed to idols with unbelievers in chapter 8, or eating the Lord’s Supper (improperly) with believers in chapters 10 and 11, Paul’s teaching does not revolve around the savouring of the meal, the tasting of it. Instead, the focus is on the proper behaviour between those partaking.

The sense of touch (ἅπτω) is only mentioned twice in Paul’s Corinthian Correspondence, both times dealing with purity issues. In 1 Cor 7, Paul strives to correct the Corinthians’ antipathy toward the haptic sense, “Now concerning that which you wrote, “It is good for a man not to touch a woman.” Within marriage, Paul discourages an ascetic lifestyle, which could lead to temptation due to lack of self-control. Instead, deprivation should only occur with mutual consent. Paul takes a different tack in 2 Cor 6, when he alludes to Levitical law: “...come out from them and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean.” As the temple of the living God, the Corinthians should keep themselves separate from that which defiles and

³ Antón Alvar Nuño, Jaime Alvar Ezquerra, and Greg Woolf, eds. “Introduction.” Pages 1-34 in *SENSORIVM: The Senses in Roman Polytheism*, ed. Antón Alvar Nuño, Jaime Alvar Ezquerra and Greg Woolf, RGRW 195 (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 1-34.

⁴ Nuño, Ezquerra, and Woolf, “Introduction,” 2.

figuratively touch nothing unclean, i.e., not be unequally yoked with people or ideas that are contrary to the believing way of life. “Sacred things had to be protected from the threats of the outside world, and even seemingly innocuous contact might pose a potential threat to their sanctity.”⁵ In order to maintain proper relationships with both outsiders and insiders (including your spouse), it was necessary for the Corinthian ἐκκλησία to understand how the sense of touch should, and should not, be used.

Swinging to the other end of the sensorium spectrum, the sense of knowing would, by far, be the most prominent sense Paul presents in his letter to the Corinthians. **SLIDE 4** Of the verbs of knowing I considered (and I’m sure my list is not exhaustive), οἶδα (to know, be acquainted, understand, experience) is the most frequent: used 35 times in his extant letters to the Corinthians and focuses more on head knowledge, whereas γινώσκω (to know, ascertain, comprehend, perceive, recognize), used 20 times, focuses more on heart/experiential knowledge. A good example of the two types of knowing is found in 1 Cor 2:11 **SLIDE 5** -- For who knows (οἶδεν) the things of mankind except the spirit of mankind which is in him? Thus also no one knows (ἔγνωκεν) the things of God except the spirit of God. **SLIDE 6** Other verbs of knowing used throughout the correspondence are λογίζομαι (to reckon, calculate, consider, think), φρονέω (to hold an opinion, judge, set one’s mind on, have thoughts on) and σωφρονέω (be reasonable, sensible, keep one’s head, be in one’s right mind). Adversely, Paul wants the Corinthians not to be unknowing or ignorant, using ἀγνοέω six times.

SLIDE 7 Along with verbs, I examined various nouns of knowing. The most frequently used knowing noun, unsurprisingly, is γνῶσις (knowledge). In his commentary, Thiselton points out this term “mattered greatly at Corinth.”⁶ Compared to the 2 times it is used in Paul’s letter to the Romans, once each in Philippians and Colossians and never in Galatians, γνῶσις is used 15 times in the Corinthian Correspondence. While νοῦς (mind) is used in 1 Corinthians, Paul prefers νοήματα (thoughts) in 2 Corinthians. Φρήν (thinking, understanding) is used twice and its antithesis, ἄφρων/ἀφροσύνη is used six times, warning the Corinthians not to be fools and foolish in their thinking.

⁵ Jack Lennon, “Contaminating Touch in the Roman World,” in *Touch and the Ancient Senses*, ed. Alex Purves, *The Senses in Antiquity 5* (London: Routledge, 2018), 121-133.

⁶ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1101-1102.

It is clear the ideas of understanding, reasoning, having knowledge, not being ignorant or foolish are crucial to Paul for grasping how to be the body of Christ, but I am more struck with how Paul synaesthetically combines the sense of knowing with other senses. “Synaesthesia represents a mixing of the senses, whereby different senses are used to stimulate each other.”⁷ As mentioned above, the ancients viewed the body, the mind, and the senses as all interconnected and Paul is no different. **SLIDE 8** Above, we mentioned briefly Paul’s use of ἄπτω in his discussion of marriage, but he concludes his teaching with the statement, “For do you *know* wives, if you will save the husband? Or do you *know*, husbands, if you will save the wife?” He encourages spouses to remain married to unbelievers, because their very souls are at stake and who knows how their example can influence those around them.

In 2 Corinthians 2, Paul expresses frustration and regret for not finding Titus in Troas, so decides to leave and move on to Macedonia. But, even with this change of plans, Paul can still express thanksgiving that God uses him and his co-workers. Within the kinaesthetic metaphor of being led in triumphal procession by God, the aroma (ὄσμή) of God’s knowledge (γνώσις) is being revealed through them in every place, because they are the fragrance (εὐωδία) of Christ.⁸ In this passage, the diffusion of knowledge is equated with the scent of incense that would have accompanied a triumphal procession, wafting through the crowds.

SLIDE 9 At the end of 2 Corinthians, Paul acknowledges that if he does wish to boast about his visions (ὄπτασία) and revelations, he wouldn’t be ἄφρων, he wouldn’t be foolish to do so, because he would be speaking the truth. Instead, he chooses to refrain so that no one will credit (λογίσηται) him with more than that which one sees (βλέπει) in him or hears (ἀκούει) from him (2 Cor 12:6). “Often seeing and hearing together constitute the totality of sensual and spiritual perception which underlies eye-witness, personal experience and individual certainty.”⁹ Paul acknowledges that what one sees and hears will influence how one understands and knows another person, so Paul will take care with how he presents himself to others.

⁷ Toner, “Introduction: Sensing the Ancient Past,” 2-3.

⁸ “Appropriating a metaphor that appeals to the sense of smell, Paul uses the word ‘aroma’ (*euōdia*, 2:15) whose etymology implies a pleasant smell. ‘Fragrance’ (*osmē*, 2:14, 16) is used of both foul smells and pleasant aromas. The ambiguity of the term may be the reason that Paul replicates it as he writes, ‘to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life’ (2:16a). The doubled metaphor is used in reference to ‘those who are being saved’ and ‘those who are perishing.’” (Raymond F. Collins, *The Power of Images in Paul* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), 156.)

⁹ Wilhem Michaelis, “ὄράω...προεῖδον,” *TDNT* 5:315-367.

Set in his discussion contrasting his ministry with Moses' in 2 Corinthians 4, Paul acknowledges that if his gospel message is veiled to certain hearers, it is veiled to those who are perishing, because the god of this world has *blinded their minds* (ἐτύφλωσεν τὰ νοήματα) to keep them from seeing clearly the light of the gospel. But it is God who has shone in the ministers' hearts to give the *illumination* (φωτισμόν) of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. As is typical within the Corinthian letters, the sense of sight is connected with knowledge and understanding: only those who see clearly will truly understand the gospel message. Those whose minds are veiled are essentially blinded, unable to see what God intended for them.

SLIDE 10 It should not be surprising, then, that the sense of sight is the second most frequently used sense within the Corinthian letters. “The fact that there are so many verbs of seeing, and that they cover such a wide and varied range of meaning, is an indication of the high estimation of seeing (among the ancients)...”¹⁰ The two most frequent seeing verbs in the Corinthian correspondence are βλέπω and ὁράω. Βλέπω (used 14 times compared to ὁράω's 8) is usually used in the Imperative: See to it! Look out! Consider! “βλέπω is very much in place to denote seeing processes in the world of empirical phenomena as distinct from religious certainty, which has to do with things invisible . . . In alternation with other verbs of seeing βλέπω can be used figuratively. It can thus mean ‘to perceive,’ ‘to note.’” Paul's commands link action with what the Corinthians see and perceive – 2 Cor 10:7 – Look at what is before your face. If you are confident that you belong to Christ, remind (λογιζέσθω) yourself of this, that just as you belong to Christ, so also do we.

Within our letters, ὁράω is only found in 1 Corinthians and is never applied to the Corinthians. Of its 8 occurrences, 4 of them are found in chapter 15, describing Christ's appearances after his resurrection. Paul includes himself in this illustrious list of epiphanic recipients, yet, he never actually saw the risen Lord. While he did have an auditory experience, the bright light made it so Saul's eyes could not see (δὲ τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν αὐτοῦ οὐδεν ἔβλεπεν). Yet, this blinding was necessary for Saul's worldview to shift. In the same way Paul received (παρέλαβον) from the Lord the tradition of the Lord's Supper which he passed onto the Corinthians, so too did he receive the gospel, and ultimately his commission. Years later, Paul would be able to say – Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus, our Lord?

¹⁰ Michaelis, *TDNT* 5:319.

(οὐχὶ Ἰησοῦν τὸν κύριον ἡμῶν **έώρακα**;) (1 Cor 9:1). Ὀράω “does not necessitate a physical encounter. . . Paul’s language can be read as reflecting an interior experience.”¹¹ This supernatural experience was not one where Paul actually saw the Lord, but rather, as one “untimely born” (1 Cor 15:8), he experienced the breaking in of the divine more as a transformative reality than a physical interaction. “Paul’s encounter with the resurrected Christ transforms Paul from a doomed persecutor to a spirit-filled preacher,”¹² challenging his Corinthian readers that “they must appreciate . . . his special authority to teach among them, something that is divinely ordained through his actual *seeing* of Jesus.”¹³

Even though the sense of sight was crucial for both Paul and the Corinthians – both needed to understand how others viewed them and how they viewed each other, the third most important sense, the sense of hearing, becomes vital within the context of worship. 1 Corinthians 12-14 depicts the proper soundscape of worship – not one that drives people away because of the cacophony, but one that adheres to the sonic boundaries necessary for a sacro-acoustic experience, an experience edifying for both outsiders and insiders.

“Hearing is a crucial sense for humans. Speech is the main means by which we communicate with one another. Music is one of the most important forms of entertainment and recreation, as well as being an important form of communication itself – it allows the expression of powerful emotions. Hearing is, therefore, *central* to the interaction of human beings with other human beings.”¹⁴

While this quote was taken from the 2023 edition of *The Sense of Hearing*, this could have been written with the first century Corinthian believers in mind. In the chapters focusing on worship, not only does the Apostle Paul focus on the importance of being able to understand ecstatic utterances, he also uses analogies with musical instruments to make his point that in order to create edifying interpersonal relationships, people need to understand what they are hearing.

SLIDE 11 Throughout Paul’s letters, ἀκούω is often the verb used to describe the reception of the gospel message (or the lack thereof). In Romans, Paul asks how unbelievers can make a faith response if they have not heard the gospel message? In Ephesians, Paul makes his statements more personal – declaring they have already heard

¹¹ Brian Schmisek, “Paul’s Vision of the Risen Lord,” *BTB* 41 (2011): 76-83.

¹² Schmisek, “Paul’s Vision of the Risen Lord,” 82.

¹³ Jane Heath, “Sight and Christianity: Early Christian Attitudes to Seeing,” in *Sight and the Ancient Senses*, ed. Michael Squire, *The Senses in Antiquity* 3 (London: Routledge, 2016), 220-236.

¹⁴ Christopher J. Plack, *The Sense of Hearing*, 4th ed. (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2023), 1.

and responded to the gospel message, so their lives need to reflect this decision. In First Corinthians, the verb ἀκούω is never applied to the believers themselves, yet the sense of hearing is crucial to his argument in chapters 12-14. Instead, Paul relies on other “hearing” words to make his point.

As mentioned above, ἀκοή (the act of hearing/listening) is one of the senses Paul uses to make his case that everyone has a place within the body of Christ. In 1 Cor 12:17 Paul asks: “If the whole body were an eye, where is the ἀκοή, the sense of hearing? If the whole were hearing, where is the sense of smell?” According to Maconie, “[t]here are four main types of listening experience: noise, speech, music, and silence.”¹⁵ All four of these listening experiences are reflected in 1 Cor 14.

SLIDE 12 Imagine with me, if you will, an average Corinthian worship service. We are meeting in the tanning shop Aquila and Priscilla share with Paul. The shop is one in a series running along the south side of the forum, near the South Stoa, measuring 2.77-3.20m in width, 5m deep. People are sitting wherever they can find a seat – maybe on a large roll of leather or on stools, work benches, or worktables. Maybe we have standing room only. All of sudden, the spirit overtakes the believing community and those with the gift of tongues commence with ecstatic utterances. Women begin to ask questions and the prophets can’t stay quiet any longer. It is this cacophony Paul addresses in chapter 14 – there is nothing good that is coming out of this noisy, chaotic worship service. Those without the gift of interpretation can’t understand and are put in the place of an ignorant layperson. Those walking by are put off by the noise, declaring those inside mad. All that is left is for Paul to issue stern commands of silence to those overly vocal participants. But before he resorts to these drastic measures, he lays out his argument as to why it is so important to have edifying worship where everyone can hear and understand...which starts in chapter 13.

In 13:1, Paul asserts that if he does not have ἀγαπή, his speaking in the language of men and angels will be as annoying as a sounding χαλκός or a wailing κύμβαλον. The term χαλκός has been much debated. At its basic level, χαλκός can be understood as copper, brass, or bronze, the materials used to make coins. To ascertain what Paul is referring to, some scholars have leaned in on the fact that Corinth was famous for its copper alloy known as Corinthian bronze. Pliny the Elder (first century CE) begins his book on bronzes by saying Corinthian bronze is

¹⁵ Robin Maconie, *The Second Sense: Language, Music, and Hearing* (New York: Scarecrow Press, 2002), 6.

valued more highly than silver and almost before gold (*Nat.* 34.1). In his novel *Satyricon*, the Roman Petronius (ca. 27-ca. 66 CE) writes of a dinner party in Greece in which the host Trimalchio boasts he is the sole owner of “genuine Corinthian plate” (*Satyricon* 50). Vitruvius’ *De Architectura* (first century BCE) describes the bronze “sounding-vases” used in Corinth’s theater (before General Mummius sacked the city) to amplify the actors’ voices (5.5.8). While χαλκός does not ever seem to refer to a musical instrument, the Corinthians would have been familiar with the material and maybe Paul is using “a very generic reference to a metal well known for its capacity to produce a ringing sound. . . . Anticipating the need for clarification, however, Paul has added a more concrete image (in 13:1), ‘a loud-sounding cymbal.’”¹⁶

For the Corinthian ἐκκλησία, the κύμβαλον might have been an instrument more familiar from both their Greek and Jewish heritages. As Hays points out, “The ‘clanging cymbal’ was particularly associated with the cult of Cybele, noted for its wild ecstatic worship practices.”¹⁷ In their article “Sensory Experiences in the Cybelic Cult,” Sierra Del Molino and Campos Mendez want to caution, however, that the presence of musical instruments such as the drum, cymbal, and flute should not be understood “merely as a festive accompaniment for religious events, but rather, as a direct vehicle by which to transmit certain emotions. The stimulation of the sense of hearing through music was established from the very beginning of the cult as a means for generating an encounter between the believers and the goddess.”¹⁸ I think a similar sentiment can be found with the worship at the Tabernacle.

Within the recounting of the journey of the ark of the covenant to the Tabernacle in Jerusalem, musical instruments were used to express the joy of the occasion. . . .the occasion of settling God in his dwelling place. 1 Chronicles 13 describes moving the ark of the covenant from Kiriath-jearim to the house of Obed-Edom. During the journey, David and all Israel were dancing before God with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and cymbals and (war-)trumpets (1 Chr 13:8). After David is established king over all Israel and defeats the Philistines, he assigns Levites the role of caring for the ark and the Tabernacle, which included appointing singers and musicians – those that can “raise loud sounds of joy on musical instruments” (1 Chr 15:16). Singers were to sound κυμβάλοις χαλκοῖς, some were to play harps,

¹⁶ Anthea Porterier-Young, “Tongues and Cymbals: Contextualizing 1 Corinthians 13:1,” *BTB* 35 (2005): 99-105.

¹⁷ Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, IBC (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), 223.

¹⁸ Rosa Sierra Del Molino and Israel Campos Méndez, “Sensory Experiences in the Cybelic Cult: Sound Stimulation through Musical Instruments,” in *SENSORIVM: The Senses in Roman Polytheism*, ed. Antón Alvar Nuño, Jaime Alvar Ezquerro and Greg Woolf, RGRW 195 (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 267-268.

while others lyres, and still others to blow (war-)trumpets. When the ark finally made its way into Jerusalem and was placed in the Tabernacle, it was accompanied by these instruments as well as much dancing (maybe a little too much from David).

While these religious heritages could have informed the Corinthians in their understanding of the χαλκός and κύμβαλον, Paul wants to make clear when anything is done without ἀγαπή, these instruments no longer are a conduit to drawing closer to other worshipers and with the divine but, instead, do the exact opposite. “These instruments are incapable of carrying a melody, they only make a noise. Paul makes a similar argument in ch. 14, where he reminds readers that an aulos, lyre, or bugle that does not produce distinct tones will not produce a recognizable melody (1 Cor 14:7-8).”¹⁹ Paul commands his audience to pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts that will edify the community, such as prophecy. He goes on to explain that without an interpreter, speaking in tongues only edifies the speaker, and is no better than lifeless things that give a sound, instead of a distinct tone.

For Paul, the sense of hearing, which leads to understanding, is crucial in an edifying worship setting. Rather than having a noisy, cacophonous environment which turns people off and turns people away, speech, such as lessons, interpretations, or revelations; music, such as hymns, and even silence all need to be used in order for the listeners to be able to declare, “God is really among you.”

Conclusion

If the senses are needed for the physical body to experience its environment, it should not be surprising that Paul utilizes the senses to correct misunderstandings regarding what it means to be Body of Christ. Paul wants to create a culture where everyone feels they have a place and a role. He wants to create a healthy, robust, growing community of believers that is not individualistic, divisive, or immature in faith, but is more concerned with others, both those within and without the ἐκκλησία. Paul’s Corinthian sensorium incorporates more than Aristotle’s five senses, broadening to include both the sense of knowing and the sense of kinaesthesia. Paul’s use of the senses of kinaesthesia was combined with the sense of smell when he evoked the image of a triumphal procession to describe his ministry. The senses of touch and taste seem

¹⁹ Richard A. Wright, “The Sounds of Silence: Hearing the Music in Pauline Assemblies,” in *The One who Sows Bountifully: Essays in Honor of Stanley K. Stowers*, ed. Caroline Johnson Hodge, Saul M. Olyan, Daniel Ullucci, and Emma Wasserman, BJS 356 (Providence: Brown University, 2013), 348.

not to be very important for Paul, not adding much to his quest of creating a properly functioning body. Instead, Paul strongly emphasizes the sense of knowing. It is crucial for the Corinthian believers to have sound minds and thoughts, not be foolish or ignorant in Paul's teaching. Followed closely in importance, the sense of sight is employed by Paul to make the Corinthians be aware and on the look out for how the believing community needs to be different from the world around them. Finally, the sense of hearing is key to creating an edifying worship service where ἀγάπη can be shown to all and where all, even outsiders, can declare, "God is really among you." Too often, studying Scripture can be a 2-D exercise, but investigating our authors' use of the sense can hopefully help us, the readers, have a more immersive experience, a fuller appreciation of how our original audience might have experienced their texts.