

EXPOSITORY NOTES

1 CORINTHIANS

Gordon Lyons

Expository Notes

1 Corinthians

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1 Corinthians

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Introduction and Background

Author

Written about AD55, 1 Corinthians is one of a few letters that the apostle Paul sent to this church. When Paul wrote this letter, he was living and serving the Lord in Ephesus, where he remained for over two years. (Acts 19:8,10).

The apostle promised the Corinthians that he would pay a personal visit to their church whenever circumstances permitted. At the time of writing, however, the Lord had opened a door of opportunity for Paul in Ephesus, and he desired to continue his ministry there, in spite of much hostility and opposition. Nevertheless, the apostle remained anxious to visit Corinth, especially in view of the problems and divisions that had arisen in this fellowship.

Purpose

The church at Corinth had a number of disturbing practices that Paul felt needed urgent correction. Among other sins, the Corinthian believers were guilty of causing divisions within the fellowship. In addition, some of them had been threatening to take other believers before the law courts. Others in the church had been guilty of tolerating blatant sexual immorality. Others again had been guilty of desecrating the Lord's Table. Yet others had been holding to a faulty doctrinal view of the resurrection in the last day. Some were even denying the possibility of a resurrection. Probably, more than one of these faults or gross sins was being held or practised by specific individuals or groups within this local church.

Although the apostle Paul loved these believers dearly, he recognised that the Corinthian Christians showed many signs of serious spiritual and doctrinal immaturity. In addition to the matters already mentioned, these believers were placing undue emphasis on the gifts of the Spirit—a fault arising from their inadequate understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit. Instead of *producing the fruit* of the Spirit, they *pursued the gifts* of the Spirit. Additionally, some of their number emphasised and exalted certain spiritual gifts, such as tongues, and tended to neglect other more important spiritual gifts, particularly, those of a teaching nature. Consequently, they tended to downplay sanctification and holiness of life.

The Corinthian believers were still God's people, but they had strayed from sound doctrine in order to seek uplifting experiences in their lives. However, these experiences were leading them away from close fellowship with their Lord and Saviour, and were leaving them open to all kinds of erroneous or false teaching.

Each one of us needs to learn from the mistakes of the Corinthian church. These believers claimed to have received a special measure of the Spirit, and they strove earnestly for the gifts of the Spirit. This, however, was their mistake. The Holy Spirit *never* draws attention to himself—either for imparting spiritual gifts, or for any other reason. On the contrary, if the Holy Spirit is genuinely working in a believer's life, or in the life of a local church, he will *always* draw attention to Christ and glorify him. Thus, the Lord Jesus himself said, *He will not speak of himself, but he will take of what is mine and reveal it to you.* (John 16:13-15)

Let us, then, turn our attention to the Word of God, as recorded in Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth. Let us learn and profit from everything that God is saying to us by his Holy Spirit, and for the glory of his Son, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians Chapter 1

Paul's Thanksgiving to God

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

1 Corinthians 1:1

In his opening salutation to the Corinthian church, Paul points out that he did not take the office of apostleship upon himself. Contrary to the unfounded assertions or implications of certain people within the Corinthian fellowship, God had *called* Paul to be an apostle and to proclaim the Gospel. This calling was in accord with the will and purposes of God. It was his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who had appeared to this former persecutor of God's church—Saul of Tarsus—on the Damascus road. Following his dramatic experience and conversion, the risen glorified Lord Jesus had appointed Paul as an apostle to the Gentiles. (Acts 9:3-22)

It was the purpose of the original apostles to proclaim the Gospel, to establish local churches and to instruct and nourish the believers in the faith. However, unlike other servants of the Lord Jesus, the apostles' teaching was given directly by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Thus, everything that they declared in their official preaching, teaching or writing capacity was divinely inspired, and therefore was to be received—not as the words of men—but as the Word of God. (1 Thess. 2:13) Only the holy prophets of the Old Testament had been similarly endowed by the Spirit of God to speak in the name of the LORD authoritatively and inerrantly under divine inspiration.

In addressing this letter to the Corinthian church, therefore, Paul was not acting on his own initiative, or by his own authority. Rather, he was acting as God's officially called and appointed representative and teacher of the Gentile churches (including Corinth). As such, he wrote and acted with the full apostolic authority with which the Lord Jesus had invested him. (Gal. 1:1; 1 Tim. 1:1) Again, every word that Paul declared in his preaching, teaching and writing capacity was declared by divine inspiration of God's Holy Spirit—and therefore was to be received as the Word of God or holy Scripture. (1 Thess. 2:13; cf. 2 Pet. 3:15-16)

Joining with the apostle Paul in greeting the church at Corinth is a Christian brother known as Sosthenes—possibly, Paul's amanuensis on this occasion. Apparently, the Corinthian church knew Sosthenes.

Although it cannot be established with certainty, Sosthenes may have been the former synagogue ruler at Corinth. Some Greeks had assaulted a man of this name. (Acts 18:12) If this is the same person, Sosthenes must have become a Christian—possibly, while either Paul or Apollos was preaching at Corinth. (Acts 18:18; 19:1)

In verse 2, Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 1:2

Paul's letter continues in verse 2 by addressing the church of God, which meets in the city of Corinth.

The (true or invisible) church is the community of believers worldwide whom the Lord has called out from the mass of mankind to belong to himself through the redemption that is in

Christ Jesus, and through faith in the risen glorified Redeemer. (Acts 20:28; Titus 2:14)
The church, therefore, belongs to God and to his Son—not to any man or body of men.

Although the church worldwide forms one single church or body of Christ, it is made up of many local churches around the world. Local communities of saints will usually gather in a church building, or occasionally, if the situation demands—as was the case with Priscilla and Aquila—they may meet in a private house. (Rom. 16:3-5) However, one of the distinguishing features of a true church is that it regularly observes the means of grace, including the preaching and teaching of the Word, prayer, the breaking of bread, and baptism. (Matt. 28:19-20; Acts 2:42) Everyone who believes on the Lord Jesus Christ with all their heart and soul, and who is indwelt—and being sanctified—by the Holy Spirit, belongs to the church. (Rom. 8:9; 10:12-13)

The community of believers at Corinth formed one such local church. In spite of all their faults and failings, and in spite of the gross sins that they were tolerating among some of their members, the apostle Paul recognises that the church at Corinth is still a genuine church of God. As in all churches, there would be some false professors among the people of God. Overall, however, Paul recognised that the Corinthian church formed an integral and essential part of the body of Christ.

The apostle emphasises their union with Christ by addressing them as—

those [who are] sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy.

In virtue of their calling in Christ Jesus, they had been set apart from the world, cleansed from sin and impurity, and consecrated to the Lord and to his service. In accordance with God's purposes from before the creation of the world, they—together with all the other people of God—had been called to be holy (KJV, *called to be saints*). Holiness of character and conduct was an essential indicator of the new birth and new life in Christ Jesus. (Eph. 1:4; 5:25-27)

However, we should observe that not everyone who professes faith in Christ belongs to Christ. Not everyone within the (visible) church belongs to the (invisible or true) church. Not all who appear to be the saints of the Lord, or the children of God, are actually his redeemed and holy people. The Lord knows those who are his; and only those whom the Spirit of God is sanctifying and who are bringing forth the fruit of the Spirit in their lives, can be assured most definitely that they are among those whom God has called to belong to him in Christ Jesus. (2 Tim. 2:19)

Paul adds that the Corinthian saints had been united in Christ Jesus; together will all others everywhere who called upon the name of the Lord—for he is Lord and Saviour not only of the Corinthian church, but also of the church worldwide. Thus, the apostle is emphasising the union and communion of the church worldwide, and the fact that all believers around the world form the same redeemed body of saints through their calling and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. (cf. Eph. 4:4-6)

In verse 3, Paul concludes his opening greeting with the words:

1 Corinthians 1:3

Here, Paul prays that the Corinthian believers might continue to experience the grace of God—the undeserved and abundant favour or benevolence of God in their lives. This divine grace or favour might be taken to comprehend all the blessings that God had bestowed, and would continue to bestow, upon the saints—through Christ Jesus.

God bestows this grace or favour together with his eternal peace. This is the peace of God that comes to God's children through the reconciliation effected for them by the blood of the cross. (Col. 1:20-22) It is a peace from God that is guaranteed to ensure harmony

and tranquillity in the hearts of his redeemed people, even in the midst of spiritual warfare: For it is the peace of God that passes all understanding. It is the same comforting and sustaining peace that the Lord Jesus gave to his disciples shortly before his departure. It is that settled assurance of the presence of God at all times, and under all circumstances. (John 14:27; Phil. 4:7)

The peace of God is a blessing that we experience when we are walking with the Lord in wholehearted love, trust and obedience. Some of the Corinthian believers, however, were in danger of losing their peace with God because they were failing to live in conformity with the pattern of God's Word.

In verses 4 to 6, Paul expresses his heartfelt gratitude to God for the church at Corinth: a church, which—by the grace and power of God—he had been instrumental in establishing.

Thus, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 1:4-6

With an honest and sincere heart, the apostle Paul declares his gratitude to God for each of the believers at Corinth. Because of God's grace toward them—a grace demonstrated through the redeeming work of Christ Jesus—these Corinthian believers were now the children of God.

Since God has shown his unbounded grace and mercy toward them and claimed them as his own, he has also enriched them in every way possible. When they speak, they speak of the things of Christ—for he is the one who fills the thoughts of their hearts. When they utter words of knowledge, they reveal something of their knowledge of God's eternal Word: That is, their utterances were based on their comprehension of the truths of God's Word as the Holy Spirit had enlightened their minds and revealed the significance of these truths to them.

Granted, in a number of respects, their speech, knowledge and behaviour ran contrary to the teachings and principles of God's holy Word. The apostle Paul, however, would deal with each of these matters later in his letter. Now, he wants to assure the Corinthian believers of God's continuing grace toward them, and to point out to them that this grace was confirmed in their lives when they believed and accepted the apostles' testimony about Christ. (v.6)

For all the patently obvious faults in the Corinthian church, then, it is evident that they were still seeking to serve the Lord—although, perhaps in some cases, with a partisan and over-zealous spirit. It seems apparent, however, that—in the absence of the apostles—this church lacked firm leadership. Consequently, it also lacked teaching in sound doctrine. In addition, it lacked discipline—both self-discipline and church discipline. Paul, therefore, writes to instruct these dear fellow Christians more fully in their faith, and in the need for mature and godly living.

It was well known, of course, that the church at Corinth placed great emphasis on the gifts of the Spirit. However, they had misunderstood what the apostles and the Scriptures had meant by the gifts of the Spirit. Their stress on certain of the Spirit's gifts had led them to an unbalanced view of the nature, person, and work of the Holy Spirit.

The apostle Paul does not decry spiritual gifts as such—as long as their true nature and purpose is clearly understood. The apostle's desire is to correct abuses and misuses of those gifts. Therefore, in verse 7, Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 1:7

As we shall see in due course, the Corinthian believers stressed the importance of certain gifts of the Spirit—usually, those of a more spectacular nature—to the virtual exclusion of other much more important spiritual gifts or graces. However, in the Bible, the gifts of the Holy Spirit are assumed to be superadded to the fruit of the Spirit, and to qualities such as humility, faith, knowledge [i.e., a full awareness and understanding of God's Word], holiness and virtue. These qualities or characteristics had been given to the Corinthian believers in abundance, and they ought to have been more in evidence. However, although they possessed these spiritual gifts, the Corinthian fellowship was laying greater emphasis on the more extraordinary gifts of the Spirit.

The apostle Paul observes one matter in the Corinthian's favour: although their understanding and practice of spiritual gifts was greatly flawed, they appeared to have a genuine desire to be actively serving the Lord. Paul acknowledges that these believers were zealous for the things of God, even as they waited eagerly for the appearing of the Lord Jesus.

It had come to Paul's attention that some in this church were denying the possibility of a resurrection. By implication, therefore, they were denying not only the resurrection of believers and of mankind generally, but also the resurrection of Christ. These individuals, therefore, were placing serious doubt on the teaching of the atonement, and of the Second Coming of Christ. Consequently, their false and dangerous opinions were disturbing the faith of God's people at Corinth. (1 Cor. 15:12) Paul would deal with this fundamental matter in its place. At present, however, the apostle is content to encourage the church to continue living as though Christ might appear at any moment.

(In his other letters, Paul makes it abundantly clear that certain events must first be fulfilled before the Lord's Second Coming. (2 Thess. 2:1-4))

In verses 8 and 9, Paul continues by assuring the saints at Corinth of their eternal security in Christ Jesus:

1 Corinthians 1:8-9

Despite their spiritual immaturity and many shortcomings, the Lord Jesus would keep the Corinthian believers strong in their faith to the end. (Phil. 1:6; 1 Thess. 5:23-24) No matter what problems or difficulties assailed them in the way, the Lord would one day present them faultless and blameless before the throne of Almighty God with great rejoicing. (2 Cor. 1:21-22; Eph. 5:27; Col. 1:22; Phil. 3:20-21) Their perseverance in the faith was guaranteed by the Word of God, by the explicit promises of his Son, and by the sanctifying, sealing and preserving power of God's Holy Spirit.

No matter what was happening in their church at the present time, God had called these Corinthian believers into fellowship with his Son. They were his. They were precious in his sight. He would continue to feed and nourish them on his Word. He would bless them through their trust in, and obedience to that Word. He would direct their steps and correct their ways. He would discipline them—with the rod if necessary. However, he would never withdraw his love from them. He would never abandon them—for he had loved them with an everlasting love, and he had redeemed them to himself with the lifeblood of his own Son. He had promised to keep them eternally secure in Christ Jesus, and God must remain faithful to his word and to himself. (Cf. 2 Thess. 3:3; Titus 1:1-2)

Report of Divisions

1 Corinthians 1:10-17

Paul now begins to address the issues that urgently needed correcting in the Corinthian church. Firstly, he deals with the report that he had received from the members of Chloe's household concerning divisions or factions within the church fellowship. (v.11)

In verse 10, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 1:10

Paul begins by saying:

I appeal to you, brothers... (NIV)

The term, *brothers* (Gk., ἀδελφός, *adelphos*) means literally 'a male from the same womb'. However, *when used in its present context*, it need not refer exclusively to male believers but to all brothers and sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ.¹

The apostle addresses the Corinthians by or in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Of course, everything that Paul taught was taught in the name of the Lord. Here, however, he is emphasising that he was speaking in the name, and by the power and authority of the Son of God himself. The Corinthian believers should have remembered that Christ was the supreme Head of the church, and they should have submitted to his rule and authority over them.

The apostolic authority that the Lord had invested in Paul—and in other apostles—meant that he could have directed, or even commanded, the Corinthian believers to resolve their differences. However, like a true pastor of the flock, Paul appeals to them, or beseeches them, as one who recognises his own weaknesses and who cares for God's redeemed people very deeply. (1 Cor. 4:16)

If the Corinthian believers will take heed to his entreaties toward them for unity within the fellowship, there will be no need for Paul to deal with them more directly. However, as an apostle of the Gentile churches, Paul reserved the right to apply discipline to any church fellowship that departed from sound doctrine or godly practice. (1 Cor. 4:21)

What, however, was the precise nature of the conflict, which had led to these reported divisions among God's people? What was it that had brought about this disunity and disharmony within God's church at Corinth?

In verse 11 and 12, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 1:11-12

Disturbing news had reached Paul from Chloe's household. A party spirit had developed within the church; disagreements had arisen; quarrels had occurred, and cliques were forming around certain teachers and leaders. The local church was in danger of being torn apart. (Cf. Gal. 5:15)

One of these groups claimed allegiance to *Paul*. They asserted that he must be the over-all leader of the Corinthian church since he was the apostle to the Gentiles, and since a number of them had been converted under Paul's ministry in that city.

Another group within the church, however, claimed allegiance to the influential Jewish convert, *Apollos*. Apollos, too, had ministered at Corinth, and he was recognised by the church as an outstanding Christian debater and public speaker. (Acts 18:24-28)

Yet another faction within the church claimed allegiance to *Cephas*; i.e., Peter. Unlike Paul or Apollos, Peter had the distinction of being one of the original twelve apostles. In

¹ cf. BDAG

addition, along with the apostles James and John, Peter was one of the recognised leaders in the church at Jerusalem. Again, Peter might have been favoured by Jewish Christians within the predominately-Gentile Corinthian church.

Yet another group at Corinth claimed allegiance to *Christ*. They may have been correct theologically in their views, since Christ is the only Head of the Church. However, it is possible that they made their claims with a certain air of superiority, rather than in humility toward God and love toward their erring brothers and sisters. If so, then this group too was at fault.

Whatever the rights and wrongs of the individual parties, Paul did not intend to allow Satan to take advantage of a divided church. There was no place for pride in men, or party spirit within the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, as soon as he learned of it, the apostle acted immediately to remind the Corinthian believers of their indivisible unity in Christ.

To this end, Paul asks rhetorically in verse 13:

1 Corinthians 1:13

Paul points out to the Corinthians saints that it is impossible to contemplate any divisions in the body of Christ. That body is one. The Church is one. Christ is the Head of the body, and Christ is the Head of the Church.

Paul reinforces his argument by asking,

(13b) ...Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptised into {Or in} the name of Paul? (NIV)

Paul's argument seems to be that, if any of these believers set up man as head of their church—even although that man might be an apostle—then, by their actions, they were inferring that this man had been crucified on their behalf! Again, by setting up any man as head of their church, they were inferring that they had been baptised into that man's name, and into everything that his name represented! In fact, it inferred that they recognised that man as their 'Lord'!

Of course, no man can be head of the church (local or universal); for Christ alone is the sole and supreme Head of his church.

Naturally, the Corinthians did not intend to place any of their preferred leaders in such a highly exalted position. However, by their actions in elevating certain teachers within the church, and forming groups around one or other of those teachers, they were effectively magnifying, exalting or even deifying man. This happened because they had failed to acknowledge that these men were only Christ's *servants*—his ambassadors—sent by him to accomplish the task of preaching the Gospel and teaching the church. The Corinthians had paid more attention to the preachers, than to the One whom these preachers proclaimed—namely, the Lord Jesus Christ. By associating themselves with one particular teacher, and effectively dissociating themselves from other God-appointed teachers, they were rending asunder the body of Christ.

In passing, we should observe that Paul is not arguing here against the appointment of God-ordained leaders within the church, such as pastor and teachers, and elders, etc. However, such men are called and equipped by God and appointed by the church to *serve* the church. The exalted Lord Jesus Christ is—and forever remains—the one and only supreme Head and Ruler of his Church (locally and worldwide).

In verses 14 to 16, the apostle Paul continues:

1 Corinthians 1:14-16

(Cf. Acts 18:8; Rom. 16:23; 1 Cor. 16:15,17)

The Corinthian believers were claiming allegiance to Paul, Apollos, or Peter on purely human and sinful grounds. Some claimed allegiance to Paul because he was the apostle to the Gentiles, and had been instrumental in leading them to Christ while ministering at Corinth. Others claimed allegiance to Apollos because he too had led people to Christ while preaching at Corinth, and because of his eloquence and power as a speaker. (Acts 18:28; 19:1) Others claimed allegiance to Peter because he was the apostle to the Jews, and some of the Corinthian believers may have come from Jewish backgrounds. Thus, Paul realised that—had he baptised any great number of Corinthian converts—many of them would have claimed allegiance to him *on this ground*.

Such worldly, bickering and party spirit within the church did not honour the name of Christ. Indeed, it had succeeded only in dividing the church, creating disharmony, quarrelling and disunity among the people of God, and setting the worst possible example to outsiders.

In verse 17, Paul states the nature of his apostolic commission:

1 Corinthians 1:17

When the Lord Jesus Christ had ministered on earth, he himself had not baptised anyone, but had commissioned others to fulfil that task. Thus, no one was ever able to boast of having been baptised by the Lord Jesus Christ personally. Likewise, Paul had not been sent to baptise, but to preach the Gospel.

The apostle adds:

(17b) ...not with words of human wisdom² ... (NIV)

Perhaps Paul had in mind the sophistry of the false teachers who were beginning to arise. Alternatively, he may have been thinking of those Corinthian believers who had claimed allegiance to Apollos. Apollos was a true servant of the Lord, and a noted debater and orator. He could preach the Gospel of Christ powerfully and effectively, and he could mightily refute his opponents.

The power of the Gospel unto salvation, however, does not reside in, or derive from, the preacher, but from the message preached: i.e., the message of the cross, delivered in the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the power, wisdom and glory of men was set aside and confounded by the power, wisdom and glory of God—displayed in the preaching, or message, of the cross. (Cf. 1 Cor. 2:1-5)

The apostle Paul, of course, recognised that a world that is lost in spiritual darkness cannot but completely fail to understand the wisdom of God. In its blindness, the world exalts human wisdom and human sophistry—as if man's finite wisdom is superior to God's infinite wisdom, or as if man's finite intelligence surpasses Almighty God's infinite intelligence!

The Cross Shows God's Power and Wisdom**1 Corinthians 1:18-25**

² lit, *wisdom of words*; i.e., natural earthly wisdom, perhaps associated with human eloquence. (GL)

Moving on, therefore, to contrast the state of the unregenerate and regenerate mind, the apostle declares in verses 18 and 19:

1 Corinthians 1:18-19

{See Isaiah 29:14}

The message that proclaims Christ crucified as the Redeemer of all who believe, is—to the sin-darkened mind—utter foolishness. According to human reasoning, it makes no sense that one man should die as a substitute for others. Nor, in their minds, can it be accepted that a holy God would allow his Son to die for sinners. At every turn, human reasoning presents a host of arguments against the message of the cross. Glory be to God, however, the apparent folly of the cross is what saves repentant sinners! (Rom. 1:16-17)

God has exposed human wisdom for what it is: wisdom destitute of enlightenment from above. The world cannot understand the wisdom of God because it has perverted God's holy and righteous standards. In its great wisdom, the world pronounces darkness to be light; wrong to be right, and evil to be good. It pronounces the very things that God forbids and condemns, to be acceptable and commendable. This gross violation of God's ways and God's will is reflected in every area of society, and in almost all areas of life. (Rom. 1:18-23)

We must not imagine, however, that—in and of themselves—qualities such as human wisdom or human intelligence are ungodly. These qualities are gifts of God. They only become ungodly when abused: i.e., when used for evil or ungodly purposes or without regard for the One who provided mankind with these gifts.

Those, however, who *abuse* the gifts of God, stand to *lose* the gifts of God. Those who do not use their minds to honour God, will—by God—find their minds becoming susceptible to error, misunderstanding, misjudgment and ever-increasing ungodliness. Let us remember the great intellect possessed by Satan. Let us remember, too, from whence he fell.

Hence, as we shall see also in the following verse, God destroys—or renders misguided, wholly unsatisfactory and futile—the wisdom of this world: And he does this through the preaching or message of the cross.

In verse 20, Paul continues with a series of questions:

1 Corinthians 1:20

Paul now addresses himself to those who set great store on human abilities or achievements. Like all human faculties or abilities, a great intellect is a gift from God. All too often, however, fallen man uses his intellect for his own self-esteem, for his own ends, or in a futile attempt to deny God's existence and sovereign power—instead of using it for God's glory.

This world has its share of wise individuals—men and women filled with wisdom and knowledge in very many matters. These people's wisdom and knowledge may have a place in God's earthly scheme of things. However, what man or women—by the exercise of human wisdom—can find out the ways of the Almighty? (Rom. 11:33-34)

It is utterly inconceivable that the *finite* should be able to comprehend the *infinite*. Yet, in their great wisdom, men presume to make the attempt. They presume to pass judgment upon God. However, is it not folly of the utmost magnitude for any created being to sit in judgment upon his Creator? This, however, is an example of human wisdom in action!

Another individual may be a scholar [KJV, *scribe*], or a legal or literary expert. In his studies, he may have amassed great learning and very considerable knowledge about his particular field of expertise. Nevertheless, for all his great learning in the law, in literature, or in the arts, he cannot teach about God and about spiritual truths without a personal saving knowledge of God. He cannot write in such a way as to explain God's truths to a man's soul—for his own soul has never been touched by these eternal truths.

Again, a philosopher may debate about the nature, purpose and ultimate goal of life, and of the universe. However, all his arguments are as straw in the wind if he does not know the One who created the universe, and who brought the worlds into being for his own purpose and glory.

Therefore, Paul concludes that—for all their undoubted learning and eloquence—the wise of this world have failed to understand the ways of God. God has made foolish the wisdom of this world, or this age. Moreover, the people of this age cannot understand God's ways, because his ways are incomprehensible: i.e., they are past finding out. (Isa. 44:24-25; Rom. 1:22)

Then, in verse 21, the apostle continues:

1 Corinthians 1:21

God—not man, not nature, and not fate—controls the universe. God—not man, not nature, and not fate—holds in his hand the life and destiny of every human being.

The world sought to know God on its own terms—or to explain him away—as it suited them. However, God will not, and cannot, be manipulated by a sinful human race. The world could not discover the truth about God because God prevented them from doing so—on their own terms; i.e., through human intellect, human wisdom or human effort. All of these amount to nothing more than the works of the flesh—i.e., human faculties corrupted by sinful human nature.

God, however, would reveal himself to all those who sought him—on *his* terms. However, none would seek him save those in whom the Spirit of God had created a hunger and thirst for righteousness. Those thus prepared by the Holy Spirit would be brought under the sound of the Gospel. Moreover, by the sovereign grace of God, they would embrace the Gospel message freely and willingly. However, they would embrace the Gospel message through God-given faith—not through human wisdom, or any other supposed virtue, characteristic or faculty.

Thus, the wisdom of God redounds to the glory of God—for the cross of Christ alone results in sinners being led from darkness to light, and from death to life. The preaching of the cross alone reveals the ways of God to men, and results in the reconciliation of repentant sinners with God. What, then, can the wisdom of this world offer, which compares with the glorious and soul-saving wisdom of God?

But, to many, the message of the cross is a stumbling block, and a rock of offence. Thus, in verses 22 and 23, Paul declares:

1 Corinthians 1:22-23

As proof that a person is bearing a message from God, Jews demand to see miraculous signs—the kind of authenticating signs that God performed in Egypt through Moses. Yet, even when they witnessed such signs, the Jews stubbornly refused to believe what God was saying to them. (John 2:18-22) In spite of the overwhelming evidence, the Jews refused to believe that Jesus was the Christ, even although he demonstrated his mission from God through many miraculous signs. The Lord himself declared that no other sign would be given to the Jews, except the sign of the prophet Jonah. Even this they refused to believe, rejecting out of hand the possibility of Christ's resurrection from death. (Matt.

12:38-40) Again, the Jews stubbornly refused to believe the preaching of the apostles, even although numerous signs and wonders accompanied that preaching.

Greeks particularly, and Gentiles more generally, looked for wisdom; i.e., for rational, natural, scientific or philosophical explanations for all events. They therefore refused to accept the demonstration of God's supernatural and divine power effected in raising Christ from the dead. They were forced, therefore, to deny the resurrection, or to explain it away. (Acts 17:18-21,32)

Believing themselves to be wise in this world, such people have effectively blinded their minds to divine truth, as revealed by God through his Son, through the teaching of the apostles, and through his written Word, the Bible. Thus, the message of Christ crucified, became a stumbling block to the Jews, and foolishness to the Gentiles.

1 Corinthians 1:24

Who, then, can comprehend the wisdom of God? Only those whom God has called into fellowship with his Son (v.9). Only those to whom the Son chooses to reveal himself. (Matt. 11:27) Only those in whom the Spirit of God dwells, and in whose lives he has granted a believing and understanding heart or mind. (Rom. 8:9,14; 1 Cor. 2:9-12)

In this verse (v.24), the word, *called*, does not just mean 'invited' (as it can do elsewhere). 'Called,' in this passage, means *specialy, internally or effectually* called.

In the Scriptures, two 'callings' are to be distinguished:

1. The *outward call* of the Gospel, which contains the command to repent, and the invitation to believe on Christ. This outward call is presented to everyone indiscriminately every time the Gospel is proclaimed. This outward call or invitation, however, may be resisted.
2. The *internal call* of the Holy Spirit, which contains the convicting, convincing and converting power of the Spirit. The internal call is presented to everyone whom God has chosen from eternity. This internal call (effectual calling) cannot be resisted successfully. It is this latter call to which Paul is referring in this passage, as the following context makes clear.

But whom does God call? God calls people from every nationality and ethnic group. Without respect of persons, God calls upon people from among all nations to repent and believe the Gospel.

However, those whom God has called, come to faith in Christ because of the wisdom and power of God which he demonstrated by the cross. When Christ is uplifted in the preaching of the Gospel, men and women of all nations are drawn to him. Thus, the Spirit and the Word are the effective means of drawing sinners to God, and of ensuring their eternal salvation. (Cf. John 3:14-15)

God's wisdom, therefore, confounds the wisdom of the world, and it shows the utter helplessness of man apart from the intervention of a sovereign, holy, and merciful God.

Thus, in verse 25, the apostle declares:

1 Corinthians 1:25

The majestic, holy and righteous character of God does not admit of foolishness or weakness in any sense whatever, nor of any other frailty, failing or shortcoming. God is perfect. Paul, however, is using human criteria in his argument. What, in man's eyes is the foolishness of God—namely, salvation through the message of the cross—is in fact a demonstration of God's perfect wisdom. It is man's wisdom—not God's—which is foolish.

Similarly, what, in man's eyes is the weakness of God—namely, the apparent defeat of Christ on the cross—is in fact Christ's triumphant victory over sin, death, hell and the grave: all to the glory of God. For by his sacrifice on the cross, and by his subsequent resurrection on the third day, Jesus provided an everlasting atonement for the sins of all his people. By his glorious work, the Lord Jesus has effected the reconciliation of the sinner with God. Thus, what the world counts as foolishness and weakness is in fact the wisdom, strength, power and glory of God.

Once more, man's wisdom is shown to be futile in the presence of God's unsurpassed wisdom, righteousness, truth and justice.

God Chose the 'Foolish'

1 Corinthians 1:26-31

Paul then asks the Corinthian believers to consider their own backgrounds. In verse 26, the inspired apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 1:26

God does not choose an individual because of his standing in society, or because of his ability. (Nor does he choose them because of their lack of standing, or lack of ability.) God's choice is based on sovereign free grace, and not because of anything that he sees or foresees in the one chosen—otherwise mercy would no longer be mercy, and grace would no longer be grace.

As Paul rightly observes, very few of the Corinthian believers were wise by human standards. Very few occupied positions of influence. Very few could trace their ancestry back through many generations, and very few were born of noble or high-ranking families.

God does not exclude the wise, the noble or the powerful of this world. Many such have been brought to acknowledge Christ as their Saviour and Lord. However, as a rule, the majority of those who are brought to a saving knowledge of God's Son are not from these categories.

In verses 27 and 28, the apostle continues:

1 Corinthians 1:27-28

What the world considered foolish, God chose—to confound and shame those who considered themselves enlightened or well informed. What the world considered weak, insignificant, or inconsequential, God chose—to confound and shame those who relied on human strength, power, or supposed superiority.

God chose deliberately that which the world despised and rejected. He chose the lowly things [KJV, *base things*]; i.e., that which was lowborn or of no reputation. God chose that which the world considered insignificant to render powerless and ineffective that which the world counts as significant or important.

Once again, God's wisdom demonstrates his righteous, just and merciful character. God exalts those whom men debase. God debases those whom men exalt, or who exalt themselves. (Isa. 2:11-12,17-19)

Thus, in verse 29, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 1:29

No one may glory in his own achievements—for God did not choose him on this account. No one may boast of his position in society—for God did not choose him on this account.

No one may boast of his righteous acts, good deeds, or exercise of faith—for God did not choose him on any of these accounts.

God chose whom he would—on account of his own good pleasure. Therefore, as the apostle declares, no one may boast in God's presence, for nothing in us influenced God's decision. He chose us out of love, mercy and grace; and in accordance with his sovereign purposes in election. (1 Cor. 4:7)

Thus, in verse 30a, Paul reminds these dear believers:

1 Corinthians 1:30a

We are in Christ Jesus because of God's sovereign purposes toward us from eternity. (Eph. 1:3-5) God determined that we should be his. He drew us to his Son by his Holy Spirit. By that Spirit, he regenerated us. By that Spirit, he granted us grace to repent, believe on and embrace Christ freely and willingly. By that Spirit of holiness, God is sanctifying us, and by that same Spirit God has sealed us unto the day of final redemption. All this is of God. Therefore, it is because of him that we are in Christ Jesus.

Concerning our relationship to Christ, the apostle writes in the latter part of verse 30:

1 Corinthians 1:30b

Christ is our righteousness, for his perfectly righteous character has been imputed to our account. Christ is our holiness [KJV, *sanctification*], for he has cleansed us, set us apart from the world and consecrated us to the service of God. Even now, his Holy Spirit is sanctifying us and preparing us for the presence of God. Christ is also our redemption, for he has purchased our salvation with his own life-blood, and he will certainly complete our salvation in final glorification. Ultimately, he will deliver us from every form of evil.

All this derives from the wisdom and glory of God!

But, if we are in Christ because of God's will and purposes, what contribution have we made toward our own salvation?

Absolutely none! Our salvation is a gift of God. We received it by grace through faith—and faith too was a gift of God, for the spiritually dead cannot exercise saving faith. Before they can respond by faith, they must be regenerated (made alive spiritually) by the Holy Spirit.

To this end, Paul concludes in verse 31:

1 Corinthians 1:31

{See Jer. 9:23-24}

Do we have reason to glory in our salvation? Certainly—but let us do so only in the Lord.

Do we have grounds for rejoicing in the Lord? Of course we do. However, let us recognise that the ground of our rejoicing is the atoning and finished work of Christ on our behalf. (1 Chron. 16:9-11; Phil. 3:1; 4:4)

With due humility, thankfulness and love, therefore, let us rejoice and praise God for all the wonders of his grace, and for his abounding love toward those who deserved only his wrath.

Great is his name, and greatly to be praised. His greatness is unsearchable! (Ps. 145:3-5)

1 Corinthians Chapter 2

Paul Proclaims Christ Crucified

1 Corinthians 2:1-5

In chapter two, Paul continues to contrast the all-surpassing and infinite power and wisdom of God, with the finite and utterly inadequate power and wisdom of this world. The way of salvation is not made known through a process of human reasoning or philosophy, but through a revelation from God: a revelation made in the power of the Spirit of God.

Thus, in God's Word, it is written:

So he said to me, "This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: 'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the Lord Almighty." (Zechariah 4:6 NIV)

Contrary to the opinions and ideas of the world, the truths that God reveals are infallible, inerrant and eternal. Those truths arrived at by a process of human reasoning are not infallible, they are not inerrant, and they are certainly not eternal. Thus, the greatest mind in the world cannot hope to understand the ways of God, nor can it ever hope to discover God's plan of salvation.

For all his worldly wisdom, therefore, mankind remains in a lost and helpless condition—apart, that is, from a revelation of saving truth from God. This revelation comes through the Word of God, and it centres on the preaching of the cross.

Thus, in verses 1 and 2 of 1st Corinthians chapter 2, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 2:1-2

In verse 1, Paul alludes to his previous visit to Corinth. On that occasion, the apostle had spent over a year-and-a-half preaching the Word of God, and establishing the Corinthian church. (Acts 18:1-11) For the most part, the Jews in Corinth rejected Paul's message and sought to persecute the apostle. However, God assured Paul that he still had many people in that city, and encouraged him to continue preaching the Word.

With their Greek backgrounds, many of the Corinthians depended very much on hearing arguments proved by human logic, reasoning and debate—accompanied by powerful oratory. Paul, however, did not preach Christ in that manner. The apostle did not employ worldly methods to proclaim the glory of the Gospel. He depended entirely on the power of God's Holy Spirit to convince men and women of the truth, and to lead them to Christ. (1 Cor. 1:17)

Paul revealed God's truth to sinful mankind by preaching his Word in the power of the Spirit. He proclaimed the crucified Christ: i.e., the way of salvation through repentance toward God and faith in God's Son—crucified, resurrected, and highly exalted. (Acts 20:21)

Although an apostle, Paul did not come to the Corinthians wielding authority over them, or trying to persuade them by force of argument. On the contrary, Paul felt himself to be totally inadequate to the task for which the Lord had commissioned him.

Thus, in verses 3 to 5, the apostle records:

1 Corinthians 2:3-5

Paul trembled with fear in the presence of the Corinthians. The apostle could have trembled because—as he said elsewhere—his life was constantly in danger from those who opposed the Gospel. However, in the present context, it is more likely that Paul experienced this sense of weakness, fear and trembling because he realised that he was a bearer of a message from Almighty God. God required the apostle to proclaim Christ to the Gentiles that they might be brought to repentance and faith in his Son. However—as the apostle also says elsewhere—woe to him if he does not preach the Gospel. God will certainly call him to account, for the apostle was responsible for their lifeblood—at least until he had faithfully fulfilled his commission. (1 Cor. 9:16; cf. Isa. 6:5; Ezek. 3:17-19)

Therefore, seeing the magnitude of his responsibility before God, Paul came to Corinth in weakness, fear and trembling, resolving to know nothing among them except Jesus Christ and him crucified. In making Christ known, therefore, the apostle placed no reliance on human wisdom or human ability. On the contrary, he proclaimed Christ in the power of the Spirit. He relied solely upon the Spirit of God to convict of sin, to convince of the truth, and to convert to Christ. (John 16:8; cf. Acts 16:14b)

Although he used them (Rom. 15:18-19), the apostle did not rely on miraculous signs and wonders to authenticate his mission. The power and the glory of his message lay in the life-transforming operations of God's Spirit acting through the preaching of God's Word. Thus, the Corinthian's faith was founded on Christ, and on the wisdom and power of God—not on man, nor on the reasons or arguments presented by men. (1 Thess. 1:4-6)

God has shown the wisdom of this world for what it is—utter foolishness, when used without reference to him. However, God's Word does not condemn wisdom as such, nor does it condemn all forms of wisdom. The wisdom of the world is an expression of man's intellect, originating from the sum of his acquired knowledge. Although originally the creation and gift of God, man's intellect has been corrupted and perverted by his fallen sinful nature. This is one of the reasons why man cannot understand or discover God merely by the exercise of human wisdom, or by his reasoning powers, faculties or abilities. Fallen man's mind is *spiritually blind* (i.e., unable to 'see' or comprehend spiritual truths), and his soul is *spiritually dead* (i.e., unable to respond in any way to spiritual truths).

Furthermore, man's finite mind is incapable of comprehending the ways of God's infinite mind.

Wisdom from God

1 Corinthians 2:5-10a

There is, however, another form of wisdom—but this form of wisdom is never found in any unregenerate man or woman. This is the wisdom of which Paul speaks and which James speaks. It is that wisdom, understanding, or insight, which comes down from God above, and which he imparts only to those who are indwelt by his Holy Spirit. (James 1:5; 3:17) This is true spiritual wisdom—and it is highly commended in the Word of God. It is by this wisdom alone that a person can learn to understand the things of God. (Cf. Prov. 8:1ff)

To this end, therefore, the apostle Paul declares in verse 6:

1 Corinthians 2:6

Paul did indeed proclaim a message of wisdom—the wisdom of God. However, the apostle did not speak of this wisdom to those who could not understand because of their spiritual blindness (namely, the 'worldly-wise'). (2 Cor. 4:4) He spoke of this wisdom only to

those whose minds the Spirit of God had enlightened, such as the Corinthian saints. These alone are—or ought to be—the ‘mature’ [KJV, *perfect*]. These alone are capable of understanding the wisdom of God, and of believing his Word.

Thus, in verse 7, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 2:7

The wisdom of which Paul spoke was a wisdom that this world could not comprehend. It was God’s secret wisdom. No one can understand the secret things of God unless and until God chooses to reveal them. (Matt. 11:25-27) Thus, we see that God’s ways cannot be found out, except by divine revelation. (Rom. 16:25-26)

To whom, however, does God reveal his previously hidden truths? Only to those whom he has destined for his glory from before the beginning of time.

By what means does God reveal his truths to his own? Only by his Holy Spirit, operating through his Word of truth. (Eph. 3:4-9; Col. 1:26-28) Without the Spirit of God, no one can comprehend the truths of God. This is why they are foolishness unto unregenerate mankind. Natural man is void of the Spirit of life, of illumination, and of hope. He remains, therefore, in a hopeless condition—unless, in his grace and by his Holy Spirit, God enlightens that person’s mind to the truth.

Apart from those who are in Christ Jesus, this spiritual blindness affects the entire human race. This includes those responsible for Christ’s death (although their blindness does not excuse or mitigate their immense guilt). With few exceptions, both the civic leaders and the religious leaders of Jesus’ day were blind to God’s truth.

Thus, in verse 8, the apostle declares:

1 Corinthians 2:8

Politicians met together. Civic leaders met together. Religious leaders met together. All of them took counsel against the Lord and against his Anointed. (Cf. Ps. 2:2)

For all their wisdom and learning, none of them could understand Christ’s mission on earth. They sought only to bring about his downfall and death. With very few exceptions, all the rulers and leaders were living in a state of spiritual and moral blindness. (John 7:48-52) Therefore, being unable to see the glory of God in Christ Jesus, they crucified him—the one who is the light of life, the light of men, and the Lord of glory. (Acts 13:27-29; 2 Cor. 3:14-15)

The expression, ‘*Lord of glory*’ refers to the divine nature of the Lord Jesus and to his presence with his Father from eternity. Thus, in John chapter 17 verse 5, the Lord Jesus prayed:

“And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.” (John 17:5 NIV)

Again, the expression ‘*Lord of glory*’ parallels that in Psalm 24, which declares:

(5) ...He will receive blessing from the LORD and vindication from God his Saviour...

(7) Lift up your heads, O you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. (8) Who is this King of glory? The LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle. (9) Lift up your heads, O you gates; lift them up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.

(10) Who is he, this King of glory? The LORD Almighty—he is the King of glory. Selah (Psalm 24:5, 7-10 NIV; cf. Acts 7:2)

He who is Lord of lords is also Lord of glory, and he who is King of kings is also the King of glory.

How great, therefore, must be the sin and guilt of those who crucified the Lord of glory, and of those too who continue to despise the eternal Son of God—the Lord of all glory! Ignorance due to spiritual blindness may mitigate their guilt to some degree, but it does not wholly excuse them or deliver them from judgment, for they refused wilfully to hear or heed God's testimony concerning his Son. (Cf. Acts 3:17-19)

Alluding to a passage in Isaiah 64:4, the apostle continues:

1 Corinthians 2:9-10a

{See Isaiah 64:4; Ps. 31:19}

Assuming that the apostle is alluding to Isaiah 64 verse 4, he is referring to God's sovereign and almighty power to act on behalf of his people ('...*who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.*' Isa. 64:4b NIV)

However, Paul may be alluding also to Psalm 31 verse 19, which reads:

(19) How great is your goodness, which you have stored up for those who fear you, which you bestow in the sight of men on those who take refuge in you. (Psalm 31:19 NIV)

Both of the above quotations speak of God's temporal help and blessings. However, it is not to be imagined for one moment that they do not also comprehend the eternal blessings that God has prepared for all his people; for God's plans and purposes respecting his redeemed people are not for this life only, but for the eternal ages as well.

To return to 1 Corinthians chapter 2 and verses 9-10a: No one can see, hear, or even begin to comprehend what glorious blessings God has prepared for those who love him. They are beyond human understanding or measure. Yet, although we cannot begin to understand all that God has prepared for us, he shows us many of his blessings from day to day in our present lives (temporal blessings). Every provision that God makes for us demonstrates his love and care for us, and is evidence that he will fulfil his eternal purposes in our lives. (Ps. 31:19-20)

We search the Scriptures—for they are God's Word to our soul. They are God's truth, and God's promises to his people. As we search and meditate upon that holy Word, the Spirit of truth reveals the things of God to our hearts and minds. Thus, we are assured that God's love for us is everlasting; and, by his Word, we catch many precious glimpses of the glorious inheritance that he has prepared for all his redeemed and holy people. (Col. 3:24; Heb. 9:15; 1 Pet. 1:4)

The Holy Spirit Reveals God's Truths

1 Corinthians 2:10b-16

Here, then, declares the apostle Paul, is God's wisdom revealed—in his Word, and by his Spirit. The natural man, however, cannot understand the things of the Spirit of God.

Thus, the apostle continues:

1 Corinthians 2:10b-11

No one but the man himself knows what thoughts are in his own mind. Similarly, no one but the Spirit of God knows what thoughts, plans and counsels are in God's mind. In a manner incomprehensible to the human mind, the Spirit searches out the deep things of God (i.e., the inexhaustible wealth of eternal spiritual truths), and reveals them to us—insofar as God wills his purposes to become known.

The word translated 'searches' (all things) in verse 10b is a word that means to scrutinise (cf. NAB); or to search out with the greatest care and diligence, so as to accurately ascertain every element of the truth. Of course, the Holy Spirit has no need of learning these truths, since he possesses the same attributes as the Father and the Son. However, Paul is using a human analogy to demonstrate that God alone knows these eternal spiritual truths (including those relating to his planned blessings for the saints). And since God alone knows the scope of his eternal purposes for the saints, then God's Holy Spirit alone can reveal them to us. Hence, the impossibility and futility of the natural mind to comprehend the things of God, the things of the Spirit, or spiritual matters generally.

In saying that God has revealed these things 'to us' (or 'unto us') the reference firstly is to the apostles, to whom these mysteries were first revealed by the Holy Spirit. Through their teaching and through the Word of God, however, the Spirit reveals these same precious truths to all believers in Christ. Thus, when we look at the Scriptures—the Word of God, the Holy Spirit draws out of that vast treasure store each of the truths that God wants us to learn. (John 14:26; 16:13-15; 1 John 2:27)

To those, however, who do not possess the Spirit of God, these precious truths remain hidden—like an unfathomable mystery. To those without the Spirit, the Bible is just a book—although, perhaps a book of great literary or moral worth. Its vast wealth of spiritual truths, however, eludes them—unless and until, by grace, God chooses to reveal his truths to them by his Spirit.

It is most important to observe what this passage predicates of the Holy Spirit: These verses illustrate very clearly the deity and personality of the Holy Spirit, for only one who is equal with God can know the full counsels of God; and therefore must be omniscient; and, if omniscient, then divine. Again, only a person can be said to search out the deep things of God and reveal them to others. Thus we see that the Holy Spirit is a person, and a full and equal member of the Godhead.

Looking now at verse 12, Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 2:12

The spirit of this world includes the wisdom of this age. However, far from enabling men and women to find God and to draw close to him, the spirit of the world (human reason, or the wisdom of this age) keeps men and women at enmity with God. The spirit of this world is a spirit of independence from God. It is a spirit of self-sufficiency. It is a spirit of rebellion against God. It is a spirit that declares,

I will accept God if I can understand him and if he suits my purposes. But if I cannot comprehend his ways—or if it suits my purposes—I will deny that God exists. (GL)

This is the spirit of the world. This is the wisdom of this age. (Rom. 8:5-9)

We apostles, however—continues Paul—have not received that spirit. On the contrary, we have received as a gift from God the Spirit who comes from God above. This is the living

Holy Spirit. He is a divine person; and, by him, we understand all the things that God has freely given us in Christ Jesus. The very things that are foolishness to the world are our glory and rejoicing.

This was why the apostles were able to proclaim with divinely inspired power and authority such profound spiritual truths. Not only did the Holy Spirit empower them in a special way, but also the same Holy Spirit revealed to them these previously hidden mysteries concerning God's purposes for his church. This was the teaching that Paul and the other apostles passed on to all the churches for their spiritual benefit and for the glory of God.

In a measure, all of God's children may understand something of the profound and eternal truths that the Spirit revealed to the apostles. By the grace and providence of God, we are in possession of God's Word, the Bible, through which—by his Spirit—he reveals his plan and purposes to us. However, it is our responsibility as believers to search that Word diligently, prayerfully, and regularly—as did the Bereans. (Acts 17:11)

In verse 13, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 2:13

Paul explains to the Corinthians that the message he brings to them is not brought to them in the power of human reasoning, nor does he attempt to persuade them by powerful oratory or rhetoric. Rather, the words that he brings to them are words that the Holy Spirit himself has inspired within him. They are the very words of God.

*...not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit...
(NIV)*

Here, Paul is asserting that the words that he uttered were the very words taught him by the Spirit of God. Thus, God did not inspire the apostles merely in a general manner, but very specifically, so that the exact words that they chose to convey divine truth were the words given to them by the Holy Spirit.

Contrary to some claims, this does not mean that God used the apostles (and prophets) like mere automatons. Rather, the inspired apostles and prophets used the faculties with which the Lord had endowed them, and they spoke and wrote employing their own personal styles. However, the Holy Spirit ensured that they spoke and wrote only the very words of God, and that they did not err in their teaching of God's Word, or include in the inspired messages their own ideas or opinions.

By the Spirit, therefore, the apostle Paul expressed spiritual truths—or taught spiritual doctrines—in spiritual terms. These were terms, however, that any spiritually mature child of God could understand.

In verse 14, the apostle continues:

1 Corinthians 2:14

The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. (NIV)

The Holy Spirit is the key to understanding the truths of the Bible. Mankind cannot understand God or his ways if they do not possess the necessary key or interpreter. Unregenerate mankind lacks the power or ability necessary to arrive at a right knowledge of these profound spiritual truths. Therefore, since his mind cannot grasp or comprehend these great truths, they appear to him as folly or foolishness.

Sadly, however, it is fallen mankind who is foolish; for by his own sinful attitudes and wilful rebellion against God's revelation of his existence, power and glory in the natural creation, he has stultified his own mind to the truth and left himself wholly inexcusable before God and wholly accountable to him for his sin. (Ps. 14:1; 53:1; Rom. 1:18-20)

This is why natural man does not and cannot accept spiritual truths. They are foolishness to him because he has hardened his heart (or mind) against God's truth, so that it has become utterly insensitive to God's truth. Furthermore, his soul is spiritually dead, and it will remain so unless regenerated by the Holy Spirit. (Matt. 13:11-16; John 8:43)

In verses 15 and 16, Paul continues:

1 Corinthians 2:15-16

{See Isaiah 40:13; cf. Jer. 23:18}

Those who are spiritual are the only ones capable of judging (or discerning) spiritual things. The spiritual man—not the natural man—is truly wise in God's sight. (Heb. 5:14)

The believer, however, does not depend on his own insight or accumulated knowledge for wisdom, but on the Spirit of God. He uses all the faculties that God has given him, but these faculties have been renewed in Christ Jesus and are being sanctified daily by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the believer's mind becomes ever more conformed to the mind of Christ. As he grows in the faith and in the knowledge of God's living Word, he becomes ever more qualified to discern and appreciate spiritual truths, and to reject error, the mistaken opinions of unregenerate man, and false teaching. (1 John 4:1)

The believer, however, is not subject to the judgment or opinion of any unregenerate man or woman. By grace, the child of God knows and understands God's truths. Without this grace, however, the unbeliever does not and cannot comprehend spiritual truths. The unbeliever, therefore, is utterly incompetent to comment on spiritual truths, or to pass judgment on the believer's understanding of these truths. To do so, would be to reveal his own complete lack of spiritual comprehension, and to call into question the spiritual wisdom that God has imparted to the believer.

However, as Paul succinctly remarks in verse 16:

(16) "For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?" {Isaiah 40:13}

But we have the mind of Christ.

Let us conclude our study of this chapter with these words of Paul from Romans chapter 11:

³³ *Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and ³ knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!*

³⁴ *"Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?" {Isaiah 40:13}*

³⁵ *"Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?" {Job 41:11}*

³⁶ *For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory for*

³ Or *riches and the wisdom and the...* [NIV footnote to Rom. 11:33]

Expository Notes

ever! Amen.

(Romans 11:33-36 NIV)

1 Corinthians Chapter 3

Disputes and Divisions

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

1 Corinthians 3:1

Note that Paul addresses the Corinthians as *'brothers'* (comprehending both brothers and sisters in the Lord).

The apostle is not inferring that the Corinthian believers do not possess the Holy Spirit. Indeed, at the end of the verse, he specifically says that they are 'in Christ'—albeit, *infants* or *babes* in Christ. Paul addresses them as believers, but he cannot address them as spiritually mature believers. They are still spiritual infants. Since their conversion, they have made very little progress; and a spirit of worldliness is still dominating their lives. This explains why so many faults and abuses were evident in the Corinthian church. (Cf. 1 Cor. 14:20)

The very fact that these believers were quarrelling and fighting among themselves was evidence of their worldly attitudes and behaviour. The fact that they were aligning themselves with particular church teachers or leaders was proof of their spiritual immaturity. (Cf. Jas. 4:1-7)

By this time, these Christians should have advanced beyond the elementary doctrines of salvation to the meat of God's Word. However, they had failed to commit themselves to the apostles' doctrine—the oral and written teaching of God's Word—or to apply that teaching to their lives. They had failed to search the Scriptures. If they had, they would have learned what the Spirit says about their behaviour. They also would have learned how the Spirit works in sovereignly administering or apportioning his gifts. (Heb. 6:1-3; 1 Cor. 12:7,11)

Because, in certain matters however, they had failed to make any substantial growth in their spiritual lives and experiences, Paul finds himself compelled to say to the Corinthians in verses 2 and 3:

1 Corinthians 3:2-3

Even yet, Paul cannot feed these believers with anything other than the elementary teachings of God's Word—the milk, or basics of salvation. Although they are Christians, they are worldly or carnal Christians; i.e., because they have failed to make any real spiritual progress, they remain very immature in the things of God. Consequently, the world's standards of behaviour still condition their attitudes and actions. This is why they resorted to disagreements, partisan factions and threatened lawsuits. (Cf. Heb. 5:11-14; 1 Cor. 6:1-2)

The Corinthians claimed to have received a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit's gifts. Clearly, however, these believers lacked a sufficient measure of the Spirit's work of grace and sanctification in their hearts and lives. And, no matter what gifts we possess, God cannot use an unsanctified heart or life in his service. The *fruit* of the Spirit must take precedence over the *gifts* of the Spirit.

In verse 4, Paul continues:

1 Corinthians 3:4

To take sides, or to join with one party or another behind one particular servant of God, is to act in a worldly or spiritually immature manner. In the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, no-one should ever become a follower of any human being—no matter what his position, or his gifts, or his qualifications. To adopt such an attitude is to act according to the wisdom of this world, and this is utterly contrary to our calling in Christ Jesus.

In verse 5, the apostle continues:

1 Corinthians 3:5

Men of this world might have considered Apollos a great orator and powerful debater. Not so with God. Apollos was a servant of the Lord—and this was how the Lord's people were expected to regard him. (Acts 18:27-28)

Men of this world might have considered Paul a very learned religious teacher and preacher; especially with his earlier theological background as a Pharisee, and as one who had studied at the feet of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). Not so with God. By the grace of God, Paul was what he was—and he was the Lord's servant. (Acts 26:24-25)

The task of the Lord's servants is to deliver the Lord's word, to feed the church of God, and to prepare his people for works of service. In all things, however, they remain the *servants of the Lord*. They are not the servants of any man, and man must certainly not become the servants of—or followers of—these apostles, preachers and teachers. (1 Pet. 4:10-11)

In verse 6, Paul continues to outline the nature of his task:

1 Corinthians 3:6-7

When Paul came to Corinth, he came to the city bearing and scattering the seed; i.e., the Word of God as encapsulated in the Gospel. The apostle spent 18 months or more sowing or planting the seed of God's Word among the Corinthian citizens. (Acts 18:11)

Sometime after Paul's arrival in Corinth, Apollos appeared in the city. He had been sent by God to water the seed that Paul had sown. Ultimately, however, neither Paul nor Apollos was responsible for the fact that some of that seed sprang to life. This was the work of the Lord—through the regenerating power of his Holy Spirit. Without this work of divine and sovereign grace, nothing could have been achieved. Neither Paul's great learning nor Apollos' undoubted eloquence could have led one soul to Christ.

Therefore, the Corinthians ought to have realised that men such as these were merely God's servants. In and of themselves, they were completely powerless to benefit them spiritually in any way. Therefore, they ought not to have followed men, but the Lord.

In verse 8, Paul continues:

1 Corinthians 3:8

Each servant of God has one purpose—to honour and glorify God by fulfilling the specific task that God has given him. One person serves as a pastor who preaches and teaches; another serves as a Bible Class or Sunday School teacher; another as an evangelist; another as an administrator; another as a missionary; another as a deacon or elder; another as a helper in the church—or in one of many other equally valuable capacities or offices.

Each person performs the particular task that God has given him or her, in order to edify the church and to proclaim Christ to the world.

The Lord will reward each of these servants according to his own labours; i.e., insofar as he remains faithful to the task that God has given him, and for which the Holy Spirit has equipped him. However, God will not base a person's reward on his *numerical success*—or the lack of it—but on his *faithfulness to him* in performing his appointed task. (John 4:36-38)

In verse 9, Paul continues:

1 Corinthians 3:9

Paul and Apollos were workers together, or co-labourers, in the service of the Gospel. God had commissioned them to sow the seed of his Word among the citizens of Corinth (and elsewhere), and to water that precious seed.

Paul now refers to the Corinthians as being God's field—the ground upon which God's seed was sown. From that field, God had raised up many tender plants—many new-born believers in Christ.

However, a field needs to be prepared for the seed. And, once sown, the growing crop needs to be protected, fed and nourished. In like manner, the servants of God must prepare the ground for the sowing of the Gospel seed—by earnest prayer in the Spirit, and by practical visitation. Then, when new believers begin to appear and grow, God's servants must protect them from spiritual harm, feeding and nourishing them on the eternal Word of God.

Now, changing the metaphor, Paul refers to the Corinthians believers as God's building. Each one of them was a living spiritual stone built into the holy temple of the Lord. (Cf. vv.16-17; Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Pet. 2:5)

However, since the temple of the Lord is holy, it must not be contaminated with the things of this world. Moreover, since the temple of the Lord is one, factions and divisions must not split it apart. Yet, again, since each believer is represented by the individual stones of the building, we see that every one of these stones is necessary to complete the structure, of which Christ is head. Each believer—as a living stone—ought to fill the place in the building (the church) that God has prepared for him and has assigned to him. Thereby, the building is united as a holy, functioning and complete temple of the Lord.

Heed How You Build!

1 Corinthians 3:10-23

Considering again the illustration that Paul used of the building, the apostle continues in verse 10:

1 Corinthians 3:10

The task of preaching Christ was a grace or gift that God had given to Paul, and it was the apostle's responsibility to discharge this commission faithfully.

As an *expert builder* (NIV), or *wise master builder* (KJV), or architect, Paul laid a foundation: i.e., he set in place the elementary truths of the Gospel concerning faith in the crucified, risen and glorified Lord Jesus Christ. It was upon this sure and solid foundation—of which Christ himself was the Head and Chief Cornerstone—that the Lord was building his church.

Expository Notes

The apostle refers to himself as a 'wise' master builder... The apostle is not here claiming superior wisdom over other servants of God. Probably, he is using this term in allusion to his earlier remarks that contrasted the wisdom of God with the wisdom of the world (or the wisdom of this age). The foundation that Paul was laying was an expression of God's incomprehensible, infinite and previously secret wisdom; for it was through the preaching of the cross alone that men and women would be brought to Christ and reconciled to God. (1 Cor. 2:1-16)

The Chief Architect who designed this building (the church) was God himself. Paul was putting into effect the plans laid down by the Chief Architect, and was laying in place the foundation of the building strictly according to the divine plan. (Cf. Rom. 15:20)

But in what did this foundation consist?

The writer to the Hebrews gives us some insight into this:

(1) Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, (2) instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. (Heb. 6:1-2 NIV)

So we see that the laying of the foundation consists of the preaching of the Gospel, resulting in the heartfelt acknowledgement of sin, repentance toward God, and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Also included in the foundation truths are instructions regarding baptism, the laying on of hands (e.g., as in church appointments in recognition of calling to divine service), the resurrection of the dead (both that of Christ, and of all mankind), and the final and eternal judgment.

No doubt other important matters might be included, but these listed above were among the first essentials of the faith.

Returning now to verse 10 of 1 Corinthians chapter 3, the apostle Paul adds concerning the foundation that he had laid:

(10b) ...and someone else is building on it.

In this case, Apollos was the builder. Paul had laid the foundation. He had set down the first principles of the Christian faith. Now, Apollos was building on that foundation.

To change the metaphor, Apollos was watering the seed that Paul had sown by providing additional teaching about Christ, and about the truths of the Gospel. Apollos was providing further instructions in the foundational truths, with the aim of advancing to more mature teaching. However, as we have seen—and as Paul declared (vv.1-2)—many of the Corinthian believers were not yet ready to accept more mature teaching; i.e., the meat of God's Word.

Apollos had been faithful in adding with great care to Paul's foundation. However, Paul cautions anyone against adding inexpertly or carelessly to this foundation. To this end, the apostle says,

(10c) ...But each one should be careful how he builds.

There is one building plan—the Word of God. No one must teach anything other than God's Word.

Within that overall plan, there is a single blueprint for salvation—the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. No one is at liberty to make any alterations or amendments to the plan of salvation that God has drawn up. It is the one and only way of salvation for men and

women of all nations in all parts of the world. There is no other way, plan, or means of redemption except through repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, as proclaimed in the Gospel. (Acts 4:12; 1 Pet. 4:10-11; 2 Pet. 1:19 - 2:3)

To this end, the apostle declares in verse 11:

1 Corinthians 3:11

For no-one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. (NIV)

In Acts chapter 4, verse 12, the apostle Peter had declared:

Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved. (NIV)

God's Word is unambiguous and uncompromising: Salvation is to be found in no one else except Jesus Christ alone. Regardless of a person's cultural or religious background, and regardless of his personal beliefs and opinions, and regardless of his location or position, there is for him—as for everyone else—only one way of salvation. This way is through repentance toward God, and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is the foundation to which Paul refers. This is the foundation that has already been laid—and it has been laid by the Almighty God himself. For, in his Word, it is written:

So this is what the Sovereign LORD says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who trusts will never be dismayed. (Isaiah 28:16 NIV)

And, in combining this passage with Isaiah 8:14, the apostle Paul writes in Romans chapter 9:

As it is written: "See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame." (Romans 9:33 NIV; cf. Isaiah 8:14; 28:16; see also Acts 4:11; Eph. 2:20)

Revealed with Fire

Now, infers Paul to the Corinthian believers in verses 12 and 13, exercise extreme care and diligence in selecting the right quality of materials for laying on God's foundation:

1 Corinthians 3:12-13

It is no light matter to preach or teach the Word of God, or to witness from that Word. All who proclaim or expound that Word will be held accountable to God for how they have handled his Word of Truth.

Those who hold firmly to—and preach—the truths of God's Word in love, and without fear or favour, are building up God's church with imperishable materials—represented by gold, silver and costly stones. Those, however, who adulterate or compromise God's truth—or who modify God's Word to suit their hearers—are proving unfaithful to the Word of God and harmful to the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. They are using worthless and perishable materials—represented by wood, hay and straw.

Perhaps the gold, silver and costly stones may represent those who preach or teach God's Word faithfully, and in the power of the Spirit, without reliance on human ability. On

the other hand, the wood, hay and straw may represent those whose preaching or teaching is poorly prepared or presented; or who mix true teaching with error or false teaching.

On the Day of Judgment, each man's work will be shown for what it really is. That Day will try our works—and our teaching—by fire. The fire will utterly consume everything that is perishable and worthless—the wood, hay and straw. All *false* teaching and all *faulty* teaching will be tried by that fire—or the penetrating and purifying judgment of God—and the teachers will be judged accordingly.

Similarly, the penetrating and consuming fire of God's judgment will test all true and faithful teachers, but their works will survive intact. They had built upon the foundation with durable materials, such as gold, silver and precious stones. When subjected to the fire, such materials will not be consumed but will be purged of all impurities and rendered pure in the eyes of the Lord. Those who build on the foundation with such materials—i.e., with consistently sound preaching and teaching or other form of service—will earn a glorious reward for their faithful service.

Thus, in verses 14 and 15, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 3:14-15

Those who have built faithfully on God's sure foundation—which is Jesus Christ—will receive a reward commensurate with the quality (*not quantity*) of his work (v.13b). The Lord will commend such a person for diligently edifying his church and preserving it from error.

If, however, a person has proved careless, reckless, or indifferent concerning the quality of his teaching or preaching, he will suffer loss. Similarly, if, in some other way, he has neglected to feed, nurture and preserve the flock of God, he will suffer loss of reward for his unfaithfulness to God and to his Word. Assuming that person to have been regenerated, he himself will be saved—but only as by fire: i.e., 'by the skin of his teeth.'

In the Scriptures, the emblem of fire is often used to portray God's searching, penetrating and all-consuming judgments. So it is in this case. When the believer stands before the judgment seat of Christ, he will give an account of everything that he has done while on earth—including his preaching, teaching or witnessing. Christ will weigh every word that he has uttered—for good or bad. Like a searching, penetrating, all-consuming fire, his holy and righteous eyes will scan that person's entire life's work. The searching eyes of the Lord will destroy every spot of dross or inferior material. Only that which is truly of him—and that glorifies his name—will remain to earn reward.

God's Temple is Holy

In verse 9, Paul said to the Corinthians that they were God's building. Now, developing this theme further, the apostle writes in verse 16:

1 Corinthians 3:16

Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? (NIV)

The building, of which Paul spoke in verse 9, was in fact the temple of the Lord. Both as individuals and as a church, the believers at Corinth—together with believers everywhere—constitute God's temple. (Cf. 1 Cor. 6:18-20)

God's temple is holy. It is the dwelling place of God himself, in the person of his Holy Spirit. It is the Lord's specially consecrated sanctuary, where the people may enter to worship him. It is, therefore, the place of prayer, worship and praise—the place for the

offering up of spiritual sacrifices unto God. In addition, those who offer such holy sacrifices are the saints of the Lord, for he has made them a kingdom of priests to serve him from a pure and holy heart. (1 Pet. 2:5; Rev. 1:6)

It is of paramount importance—implies Paul to the Corinthians—to ensure that you do not contaminate or defile God's holy temple.

In the present context, such contamination could arise in any of the following ways:

- through the disputes in the church;
- through failing to teach, learn and apply God's Word adequately;
- by introducing philosophy or worldly wisdom into the message of the cross;
- by teaching, or permitting to be taught, that which did not accord with sound doctrine or godly conduct;
- by teaching or tolerating error;
- by relying on human skill, oratory or effort instead of the Spirit of God and the Word of God.

To a greater or lesser degree, all these faults are indicative of a spirit of worldliness or a spirit of compromise. To a greater or lesser degree, all such faults defile the temple of the Lord—for they can prove harmful or even destructive to the spiritual lives of God's people. And God's people constitute his holy temple.

Thus, in verse 17, the apostle declares:

1 Corinthians 3:17

If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple. (NIV)

The word *destroy* means 'to bring to ruin,' 'to lay waste,' or, 'to render useless.' It does not mean 'to annihilate.'

If any person is responsible for damaging or ruining the spiritual lives of God's children, God will certainly destroy him. If, for example, someone were to bring destructive heresies or pernicious errors into the church—thereby leading many of God's people into sin—God may bring about the downfall of that individual. Perhaps, however, much damage would be caused to the local church first.

Concerning such plausible—but false and evil—peddlers of God's Word, the apostle Peter says in 2 Peter 2:1-2:

(1) But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves. (2) Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. (2 Peter 2:1-2 NIV)

In addition, Jude writes:

For certain men whose condemnation was written about ⁴ long ago have se-

⁴ Or men who were marked out for condemnation [NIV footnote to Jude 1:4]

cretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a licence for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord. (Jude 1:4 NIV)

Under no circumstances, therefore, must we permit God's holy temple to be desecrated by careless or inadequately prepared teaching, by erroneous or false teaching, or by a subtle mixture of truth and error.

Paul had said that the Corinthian believers were still worldly. Even although they ought to have made spiritual progress, they were still infants in Christ. Again, by disagreeing among themselves and by forming groups in support of one church teacher or another, they were acting according to the standards of this world (or age), and according to worldly wisdom.

But what does God say of such wisdom? In verse 18, Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 3:18

Apparently, some of the Corinthians were asserting themselves and applying their worldly wisdom to the situation in their local church. However, the application of worldly wisdom to difficult moral and spiritual situations simply exacerbates matters—for such wisdom is void of the Spirit, and of the love and grace of God.

Therefore, Paul declares,

(18a) Do not deceive yourselves...

Do not labour under any false pretensions or delusions. If you consider yourself wise by this world's standards, then clearly you are not wise in God's eyes. Therefore, you ought to renounce your worldly wisdom and seek the true spiritual wisdom that comes from God above.

In your own eyes, and in the eyes of the world, you may become a fool. However, what does this matter when this world's wisdom—the application of this world's greatest learning, insight or methodology—is foolishness with God?

To this end, the apostle says in verses 19 and 20:

1 Corinthians 3:19-20

{Cf. Job 5:13; Psalm 94:11}

Our entire intellectual faculties and abilities, whether natural or acquired, are gifts of God's providence or grace. God expects us to use to the full all the abilities that he has given us. However, if we choose to use our intellect or our abilities without reference to God, or without regard to God's Word, then we are demonstrating utter foolishness. (Rom. 1:21-22)

In the eyes of the world, a person may be very learned and highly qualified. That person may attempt to address, or express an opinion on, the moral, spiritual and ethical questions contained in the Bible. However, if he or she does so without seeking and knowing the revealed will of God and without the aid of the Holy Spirit, then—according to God's Word—that individual is demonstrating the utmost folly. How can man—with his finite wisdom—speak of the ways of God, who is supremely and infinitely wise?

Man's opinions about God, and his judgments on his Creator, show the very perversity and futility of the human mind and of human wisdom. God treats such opinions and judgments with utter derision. (Cf. Ps. 2:1ff; Isa. 44:25)

Therefore, infers Paul, if you are relying on human wisdom to explain God's ways, to proclaim the Gospel, or to instruct and guide the church, you are foolish indeed.

This, however, is precisely what some of the Corinthian believers had been doing. In their wisdom, they had sat on judgment upon God's appointed servants—Paul, Apollos and Peter. In their wisdom, they had discriminated between these servants of God, and had chosen to follow one or other of these men.

However, what does the Scripture say?

See to it that no-one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ. (Col. 2:8 NIV)

The Corinthian believers should not have been led astray by those who were persuading them to side with one teacher or another. They should not have become the captives of men.

In verses 21 and 22, therefore, the apostle exhorts them to stop glorying in men:

1 Corinthians 3:21-23

Paul had demonstrated that the Corinthian believers had been acting from a worldly, unspiritual and sinful attitude or frame of mind. Now, he commands them to cease boasting or glorying in the flesh—i.e., in the achievements or abilities of men. (Jer. 9:23-24)

These men are merely the servants of God, and appointed by the Lord to fulfil a particular task. They must be acknowledged as God's ambassadors; but they must never be considered as superior. They are the dispensers of God's Word, and obedience to God and to his Word is what matters. (Eph. 4:11-15)

Paul continues,

(21b) ...All things are yours...

It is the Father's purpose to grant all things to the believer. We must remember that—one day—the saints will reign with Christ. Therefore, whatever happens in this present world happens only insofar as it furthers God's plan for his Church, and for his kingdom. (Rom. 8:32)

The entire universe—including this world and all its leaders—is under God's sovereign and absolute control. God is directing the affairs of the nations toward the one great end of accomplishing his plan for the Church. (Eph. 1:9-10) Therefore, there can be no room for distinctions among the people of God. We are all one in Christ Jesus. We are all fellow heirs with Christ of the coming glorious inheritance. Even now, all these things are ours. For God has promised to give them to us—and God cannot prove unfaithful to his word.

In verse 23, the apostle writes:

(23) ...and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.

You are of Christ, says Paul to the Corinthians. You are not of any man. You are members of Christ's body, the Church. Christ himself—and no other—is the Head of that body (1 Cor. 7:22-23).

Similarly, Christ is of God. He is not of any other being. He is of God—equal with God in power, glory and eternity. Concerning his offices and concerning his voluntary humiliation on earth, he subjected himself to the will of his Father and became obedient unto death—

Expository Notes

even death on a cross. (Phil. 2:8) Concerning his person, however, the Son is eternal God. He is one with the Father; equal in all his attributes, and is filled with all the fullness of the Godhead. He is the express image of the Father, and he sits at the right hand of his Father in the place of highest exaltation, honour, power and glory.

To him be the glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Eph. 2:9-11; Col. 1:19; 2:9; Heb. 1:3)

1 Corinthians Chapter 4

Apostles Despised by the Corinthians

1 Corinthians 4:1-13

Paul had told the Corinthian church not to glory in man or boast about man's achievements, nor to prefer one of God's servants above another. The apostle, however, had heard—possibly, from Chloe's household—that some of these Corinthian believers had been sitting in judgment upon him, and had been questioning the validity of his apostolic commission.

Paul hoped to make another visit to Corinth at some future date. In the meantime, however, he had sent Timothy, his faithful co-worker, to instruct the church more fully in the ways of the Lord.

Concerning the fact that he himself was merely the Lord's servant, the apostle says in verses 1 and 2 of chapter 4:

1 Corinthians 4:1-2

Firstly, Paul declares that he and the other apostles and teachers were—and ought to be regarded as—the servants of Christ. They were those in whom Christ had placed a stewardship or trust. It was their duty and responsibility to discharge that trust faithfully.

This trust involved making known the secret things (or 'mysteries') of God. The secret things or mysteries of God are those things that previously were hidden in the counsels of God, but which now he has made known to the church. In particular, this included the Gospel of eternal salvation to both Jews and Gentiles, through repentance and faith in Christ. It also included God's subsequent purposes for the universal body of believers—the church worldwide. (Rom. 16:25-27; Eph. 1:9-10; 3:3-9; Col. 1:25-27)

The apostles—and other servants of God—were required to make known to the world these previously undisclosed secrets of God's eternal counsels. However, no church or individual possessed the power or the authority to alter or amend God's truths in any way—nor did they have the right, power or authority to reject the Lord's divinely commissioned apostolic messengers.

Some of the Corinthians had been challenging Paul's right to speak authoritatively in the name of the Lord, or to exercise apostolic authority over the churches. Perhaps, in their judgment, since Paul was not one of the original twelve apostles he ought not to be claiming apostolic authority.

This, of course, was merely a reflection of some of the Corinthian believers' proud, arrogant and worldly spirit—as we have seen before and will see again shortly. Paul claimed nothing for himself except what the Lord Jesus had given him. He was indeed an apostle—called, appointed and commissioned by the risen and glorified Lord Jesus himself. Furthermore, Paul's apostleship extended particularly over all the Gentile churches, including the church at Corinth: a church, which—by the grace of God and in discharge of his divine commission—Paul himself had been instrumental in establishing. (Acts 9:1-20; 18:1-11; Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:1)

In verses 3 and 4, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 4:3-4

Paul made it plain to the Corinthian believers that he was not concerned with their opinions about him, or about their personal judgments upon him or his work. Indeed, even if a civil court of law—or a religious court—were to pronounce judgment against him, this pronouncement would not concern the apostle in the least. He was the Lord's servant—not the servant of any man. He was acting by the Lord's express command, and with the Lord's authority. (Cf. 1 Cor. 2:15)

The Lord Jesus Christ himself had commissioned Paul as an apostle to the Gentiles. Since he had been divinely ordained, no human court or religious assembly had the right, power, or authority to overturn that commission, or to call into question his apostolic appointment. (Gal. 1:1,15-16)

In this regard, Paul had been acting with a clear conscience. He had not departed from the terms of his original commission, but was doing everything that the Lord had commanded him to do. This by itself, however, did not make him innocent, or free of all possible faults. Even so, it was not for the Corinthians to sit in judgment upon the apostle. The Lord himself would judge Paul and his ministry, in due course.

This, of course, does not mean that the leadership of local churches may not sit in judgment upon their erring church members. The church is authorised and commanded to deal with open and obvious sin among members of its own fellowship. (1 Cor. 5:4-5,12-13; cf. Matt. 18:15-17) The church is not authorised or commanded, however, to pass judgment upon the motives of men's hearts, or on any other matter that it is not competent or qualified to assess. This, however, is exactly what some of the Corinthians were doing in relation to Paul.

Paul cautions against pre-judging any such situation. In the first part of verse 5, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 4:5a

No one must attempt to judge the motives or the secrets of another person's heart. The Lord has set a day for such judgment, but this is not the appointed time. Again, in its present state, the church is not in any position to judge matters relating to motive or conscience. We must wait until the coming of the Lord. Then, we will all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. Then, all of us will answer to the Lord for the deeds done in the body, and for the thoughts and intents of our hearts. (Rom. 14:10-13; 2 Cor. 5:10)

In the next part of verse 5, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 4:5b

There is one, and only one, who is competent and qualified to assess and judge the motives of men's hearts—the Lord Jesus Christ himself. On the Day of Judgment, everything now concealed in the dark recesses of men's minds will be revealed. Every thought, inclination, intention, and motive will be exposed, and we will be judged accordingly.

In the last part of verse 5, Paul declares:

1 Corinthians 4:5c

Then God, who knows our hearts, will reward us for what we have done—whether good or bad. For those who have remained true and faithful to the calling and commission with which he entrusted them, he will declare his approbation.

Many people on this earth receive their praise *from men*—but they have already received their reward. (Matt. 6:2) Many, however, on the earth whom men despise, reject or ignore, will receive great reward *from God* for remaining faithful to him and to his Word. (2 Cor. 10:18)

God alone is qualified to judge the heart and conscience. Therefore, we must seek to keep our hearts and consciences right in the sight of God, regardless of what men may think or say about us.

Paul had warned the Corinthian believers to stop behaving in a worldly manner, and to put an end to the disputes and party divisions in their midst. It must be recognised, of course, that when the Corinthians had aligned themselves with men such as Paul, Apollos or Peter, they did so without sanction from any of these men. Had these servants of God known of this situation, they would have dealt with it immediately (as did Paul). As it was, Paul himself may only have heard of it through the report brought to him from Chloe's household.

In verse 6, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 4:6

Paul had told the Corinthians not to pass judgment on himself or on any other apostle or servant of Christ—for it was not their place to judge such matters. Matters of conscience, and the validity of Paul's apostleship, were not matters for local church assessment or judgment.

The church leadership, of course, was authorised to assess and judge those who claimed falsely to be apostles of the Lord Jesus—and this indeed was what some of the Corinthians had been attempting to do in relation to Paul. Yet, even as they sat in judgment on a genuine apostle—who was then in Ephesus—they continued to tolerate or approve of false apostles who were then present in their very midst!

Paul applied the principles of not judging genuine apostles, or a person's conscience or motives, not only to himself personally, but also to Apollos and to other servants of the Lord. However, he did so in such a way as to benefit the Corinthian believers.

The apostle says,

(6b)...“Do not go beyond what is written.”

Paul was directing these believers to their Old Testament Scriptures. He was reminding them what these Scriptures taught about the servants of the Lord. He was reminding them how God expressly and repeatedly forbade his people from idolising anything or anyone. This included the divinely appointed prophets and other servants of God, whom the LORD sent to the people to speak in his name.

Therefore, says Paul,

“Do not go beyond what is written” [i.e., in the Scriptures].

Had the Corinthian church observed this rule, they would not have been able to boast about the supposed superiority of one man over another. Nor would they have been able to set up one man in preference to another. For they would have realised that—to have done so—would have been to idolise that particular teacher or leader by exalting a man and forming a gathering or 'worship group' around him.

The fact, however, that they *had* done so, demonstrated once again the proud, arrogant, independent and rebellious spirit of some of these Corinthian believers. Yet, in spite of all

their obvious and very serious faults and their distinct lack of spiritual insight and maturity, Paul still loved them dearly, as did the Lord Jesus himself. (Cf. v.14)

Then, in verse 7, the apostle asks:

1 Corinthians 4:7

Paul asks his Corinthian critics to examine their own hearts. He asks them to demonstrate in what way they were superior to other Christians—including the apostles. Surely, they had to admit that every spiritual gift in their possession had come to them from the Lord. And if they had received their gifts of grace and salvation from the Lord, then how did they differ from other believers?

Yet, although they did not differ in any way from other believers in relation to the grace that God had bestowed upon them in Christ Jesus, some of the Corinthian believers still presumed to sit in judgment upon the apostles. By implication, they claimed to have received superior gifts, abilities or degrees of wisdom that enabled them to determine the validity, qualities and qualifications of the apostles and other divinely appointed servants of God. Some of them even had the audacity to question or reject Paul's apostolic authority!

Furthermore, by their actions, they claimed the ability to discern whether they should follow one servant of the Lord or another. There was indeed a gift of discernment; but this was a gift of discerning between true and false spirits, or true and false teachers. God never intended it to be used to make a distinction between one true servant of the Lord and another. (1 John 4:1-6)

The fact was that, by electing to follow any man, the Corinthians were indicating that their 'wisdom' had not come from God. Rather, it was worldly; it was unspiritual; it was of the flesh. Even worse, their pride, arrogance and carnal behaviour sprung from their old sinful nature, and was of the devil.

In spite of all their claims to a super-abundance of gifts or abilities, these Corinthian believers possessed nothing *but what the Lord had given them*—and even these they had abused. But, since the Lord had given them all that they had, what right had they to boast as though these gifts had not been freely bestowed upon them? Had they forgotten that the Lord who graciously imparts his gifts *to* men, can withdraw these gifts *from* men? (1 Cor. 12:4-7)

In verse 8, the apostle continues:

1 Corinthians 4:8

Here, Paul uses irony and sarcasm to show to the Corinthians the folly of their proud, arrogant, worldly and self-sufficient attitude.

Some of the Corinthian believers had been implying or suggesting that they had no further need for apostolic teachers. They already had all they wanted or required. They had become a spiritually enriched church. They had made their own decision to become disciples of certain men within the church who claimed to represent the teachings and viewpoint of Paul, or the teachings and viewpoint of Apollos, or the teachings and viewpoint of Peter. They failed to acknowledge, of course, that these three servants of God all held to the same spiritual teachings and viewpoint.

The Corinthians, however, thought that—like kings over their kingdoms—they were responsible and mature enough to exercise independent rule over their own church affairs, without apostolic intervention or guidance. But, their bickering and partisan behaviour proved only their spiritual immaturity. They desired to be the followers of men, with the independence to rule their own fellowship. Yet, God had appointed the apostles to exer-

cise spiritual rule over the churches, and to instruct the churches infallibly in the Word and ways of the Lord—at least until they were in possession of the written (New Testament) Scriptures. (Acts 20:30)

Clearly, then, the Corinthian believers were not only refusing to acknowledge the apostolic office; they were despising that office. They wanted to attach themselves to Paul or Peter as individuals or as respected teachers—but not necessarily as divinely appointed apostles. Apollos, of course, did not hold apostolic office; but, even so, some of the Corinthians preferred this renowned Christian debater and orator as their teacher.

Thus, in verse 9, Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 4:9

If the worldly reasoning of the Corinthians was to be followed to its logical conclusion, then it would appear that the apostles were of little or no account—and barely worthy of recognition among the churches of Christ. Indeed, Paul likens the situation to that of a parade or public exhibition of criminals—men condemned to die in the arena. Yet, even in this parade of malefactors, the apostles are placed at the very end of the line. They are imagined to be the least and lowest of mankind. Indeed, they have become a spectacle—a laughingstock—to the whole universe of men and angels. This, at least, is what some of these Corinthians were implying.

In verse 10, Paul continues:

1 Corinthians 4:10

If what the Corinthians was saying was true, then the apostle's office and work was of little worth. The Corinthians were asserting their superior wisdom—albeit, *worldly* wisdom. They were asserting their strength—albeit, *human* strength, *human* power, and *human* ability.

But if these things were true of these spiritually immature believers at Corinth, then the opposite must be true of those who really were spiritually mature! The mature must be fools for Christ! They must be weak! They must be dishonoured! Carnal reasoning indeed!

In verse 11, the apostle continues:

1 Corinthians 4:11

These remarks reveal to us just how much hardship and suffering the Lord's servants were called upon to endure for the sake of the gospel.

Paul was fully entitled to receive financial and material support from those churches to which he ministered. As one whom the Lord had called and appointed to his service, the apostle was entitled to receive food and clothing from the churches—without having to request it. These things were his by right. They were the wages that were due to him for the work that he performed faithfully and diligently as the Lord's servant. (Luke 10:7; 1 Cor. 9:3-15; Gal. 6:6; 1 Tim. 5:17-18)

However, because many of the local churches to which Paul ministered were comprised of relatively poor members, the apostle did not claim his entitlements. On the contrary, he ministered to these churches free of charge. Consequently, however, he often lacked adequate food and clothing. (2 Cor. 11:27)

Not only did the apostle suffer want. He was persecuted, abused and shamefully treated by those who opposed the message of the cross. This is demonstrated very clearly by Paul's account of such sufferings in his second (recorded) letter to this church. Because

of its connection with, and relevance to the immediate subject, the passage has been quoted at length below:

2 Corinthians 11:16-33 NIV

¹⁶ I repeat: Let no-one take me for a fool. But if you do, then receive me just as you would a fool, so that I may do a little boasting. ¹⁷ In this self-confident boasting I am not talking as the Lord would, but as a fool. ¹⁸ Since many are boasting in the way the world does, I too will boast. ¹⁹ You gladly put up with fools since you are so wise! ²⁰ In fact, you even put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or pushes himself forward or slaps you in the face. ²¹ To my shame I admit that we were too weak for that! What anyone else dares to boast about—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast about.

²² Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I. ²³ Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. ²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ²⁶ I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. ²⁷ I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. ²⁸ Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?

³⁰ If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. ³¹ The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised for ever, knows that I am not lying. ³² In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. ³³ But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands.

On top of all this, the apostle was never certain of a place to stay. He depended on the hospitality of those among whom he was working.

At times, Paul supported himself by working at his trade as a tent-maker. Thus, in verses 12 and 13, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 4:12-13

Rather than prove a burden to the churches, Paul had worked at his trade to support himself. The word used for 'worked' or 'toiled' here is a word meaning 'worked strenuously' or 'toiled to the point of exhaustion'. (Acts 20:34-35; 1 Thess. 2:9; see esp. 2 Cor. 12:13-15)

Clearly, however, this means of support did not meet all his needs. Yet, he would rather die than claim his entitlement from those churches that either could not afford to support him, or which would have criticised him unjustly for accepting support from them.

When a hostile world scorned and abused him, reviling the message of the cross, the apostle did not retaliate. Instead, he committed himself to God, and he invoked the Lord's blessing upon those who persecuted him and hounded him mercilessly from town to town. Even although the world treated Paul and his co-workers as the scum of the earth, or the refuse of the world, these servants of the Lord Jesus endured the persecution and remained true and faithful to their Master and to the message of the cross. (Cf. Lam. 3:45)

Paul's Appeal and Warning

1 Corinthians 4:14-21

Yet, for all his plain speaking, Paul was not saying these things to distress or offend the Corinthian believers unnecessarily or unkindly. The word translated 'shame' means literally to 'turn back' or 'turn about'. In speaking plainly, the apostle did not intend to embarrass the believers to the point of discouraging them or turning them back from their profession. The apostle loved these believers dearly, and he yearned for them to grow to true and full spiritual maturity.

Therefore, in verse 14, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 4:14

Paul is not writing these things to humiliate the Corinthian believers, but to admonish them as those he loves dearly. The apostle wants to turn away their hearts and minds from worldly wisdom and worldly behaviour to true godly wisdom and to the things of the Spirit. True godly wisdom, however, is exemplified by pursuing the things of God—not the things of men. (Acts 20:30-31; Col. 1:28; 1 Cor. 6:11-13; 2 Cor. 7:3)

Paul looks upon these believers as his dear children. Many of these Corinthian believers had been brought to faith in Christ while Paul had laboured among them during his prolonged stay there. Therefore, the apostle could indeed consider them as his spiritual children.

In verse 15, he develops this theme further by saying:

1 Corinthians 4:15

Paul does not deny that the Corinthians had a number of (unnamed) individuals in their fellowship who could instruct them in the things of Christ. It seems, however, that the Corinthian believers were not being advanced spiritually by these instructors; probably because they were the same individuals as were forming cliques around Paul, Apollos or Peter. (Cf. 2 Tim.4:3-4)

Paul concedes that this church may have had any number of such guardians or instructors in Christ. However, the children's *guardian* is not the children's *parents*.

Paul could claim legitimately to be the Corinthian believers' spiritual father, because—through his preaching of the Gospel and teaching of the Word—many of them had been brought to repentance and faith in Christ. The other instructors or teachers were guardians. Paul, however, was their spiritual father. The Corinthians believers ought, therefore, to have acknowledged his prior claim over their spiritual lives and welfare.

Paul, however, was not only their spiritual *father*; he was also their spiritual *example*. Thus, in verse 16, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 4:16

By implication, Paul is exhorting the Corinthians to return to their original position and to observe and apply the teaching that he had given them during his stay with them. He encourages them to follow the manner of life that they had seen in him on that occasion. He counsels them to reflect on his conduct or behaviour while he had remained in their midst.

With a sense of real urgency, Paul appeals to the Corinthian believers to imitate (lit. *mimic*) his example; but only insofar as the example of his life reflected that of Christ. The last thing that the apostle wanted was for anyone to follow him as a person. This was the very thing that he was trying to discourage. (1 Cor. 11:1; Heb. 13:7)

Paul desired earnestly that his dearly beloved spiritual children would imitate the example of his life, and especially of his teaching. Therefore, in verse 17, he writes:

1 Corinthians 4:17

Timothy was one of Paul's trusted and faithful co-workers, and one who was well qualified to represent the apostle and to proclaim Christ in all his fullness. (Cf. Phil 2:19-22)

Out of his deep concern for his erring spiritual children at Corinth, Paul had sent Timothy to instruct and admonish the believers, and to remind the church of the apostolic teachings that Paul had given them during his ministry there. This was the same teaching that the apostle provided for every church—not just for the fellowship at Corinth.

Timothy's visit would also afford the Corinthians the opportunity of resolving their differences before Paul came to them in person. (1 Cor. 16:10-11)

It seems likely, however, that not everyone in the Corinthian fellowship would welcome Timothy's visit, especially since he was coming on behalf of Paul. These people asserted that—should Paul ever appear again in person—they would oppose him to his face. Therefore, in verses 18 and 19, the apostle addresses such proud and arrogant individuals directly:

1 Corinthians 4:18-19

Some of these people within the Corinthian fellowship refused to acknowledge Paul's apostolic authority over the churches. They believed that they could rule their own affairs without the intervention of the apostles, and consequently without the apostles' teaching or doctrine. (Acts 2:42)

However, this was a wilful refusal to recognise that—in the early church—God had appointed these apostles to teach, guide and guard his church. As yet, the church did not possess the full written canon of NT Scriptures. Therefore, it was essential that the people of God continued to receive their teaching from those who had heard from the Lord Jesus at first hand. Most frequently, this would happen through the preaching and teaching of the apostles and other divinely called and appointed servants of the Lord.

Paul had written this letter (1 Corinthians) and had sent Timothy as his representative in order to try to resolve the difficult problems within the Corinthian church. However, in verse 19, the apostle makes it abundantly plain that he intends to visit this church again in person—whenever God permits. Then, when he comes, he will deal with these arrogant troublemakers, and he will determine what power, right or authority they think they have for resisting one whom the Lord has expressly appointed to the apostolic ministry.

We must remember, of course, that—in common with the other apostles—Paul had been invested with authority over the local churches. The apostles were empowered to recognise officially those whom God's Holy Spirit had called to positions of church leadership. The apostles were also empowered to apply discipline to any church fellowship, if that church had failed to heed their advice, counsel or instructions earlier. (Cf. 1 Cor. 5:3-5; 2 Cor. 10:8)

The apostles, however, could not exercise their authority independently of the sovereign will and purposes of God. Although they were apostles, they were still God's servants.

In verse 20, the apostle continues:

1 Corinthians 4:20

The kingdom of God represents the rule of God over his redeemed and holy people; both in relation to external events concerning them, and within their hearts and lives. However,

his people had been redeemed by God's grace, not by any ability or merit of their own—and certainly not through the exercise of worldly wisdom.

Since, therefore, God's people had been redeemed by grace, this ought to be reflected in lives that were characterised by love, compassion, kindness and humility. (1 Cor. 2:4-5) The Corinthians talked much, but—in their lives—they failed to show much of the grace of God, or of the fruit of the Spirit. The kingdom of God, however, was not a matter of empty talk, but of power: the power of the Holy Spirit to transform lives, and to make them ever increasingly like Christ. (Rom. 1:16-17; 14:17)

The Corinthians talked much about the Spirit, but they had little real experience of the Holy Spirit's power. For all their talk, their faith—though genuine in most cases—was superficial. Yet, it need not remain so. By responding to the sound teaching of God's Word through the apostles, they could grow in grace and in the things of the Spirit.

In verse 21, therefore, Paul presents them with a stark choice:

1 Corinthians 4:21

Paul loved the Corinthian church dearly. He had risked his very life to see these people brought to repentance and faith in Christ. However, as a faithful spiritual father—and because of his intense love for them—the apostle was not prepared to leave them undisciplined. Paul could see the grave spiritual dangers that threatened to engulf this fellowship; and, if possible, he was determined to arrest their downward slide before they made shipwreck of their faith.

However, if they would not correct matters themselves, the apostle Paul would need to intervene personally, in fulfilment of his divine commission and authority over the churches. This would prove much more painful—not only to the Corinthians, but also to the apostle. (2 Cor. 13:2-10)

Even yet, however, Paul hoped that they might meet again under circumstances that were more auspicious. Whatever faults he may find with them, they were still his children. As such, he desired to express his love to them, not his displeasure.

Sadly, however, some of these Corinthian believers did not respond to Paul's appeals initially, as we can see from the apostle's remarks in his second letter to them. (2 Cor. 10ff.)

God does not desire to deal with his erring children severely—although, if necessary, he will do so. However, because of his great love for us in Christ Jesus, he is willing to forgive his wayward children upon their repentance and confession of their sin.

1 Corinthians Chapter 5

Sexual Immorality

1 Corinthians 5:1-8

In chapter 5, Paul addresses a second major problem within the Corinthian church—their failure to discipline a man who was guilty of gross sexual immorality. In a previous letter (not extant), Paul had told the Corinthians not to associate with any brother or sister who practised sexual immorality (vv.9-11). Instead of heeding this injunction, however, the Corinthian church was tolerating and condoning this very sin.

Therefore, in verse 1 of chapter 5, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 5:1

It had become a notorious fact that the church at Corinth was permitting sexual immorality among its members—even such a form of immorality as unbelievers or pagans would not tolerate. A member of the church had married his father's wife. He was, therefore, guilty of incest.

The woman in question was probably the man's stepmother. However, even the pagans considered incest sinful, appalling and detestable, and the practise was forbidden by Roman law. Furthermore, God's Holy Word, the Bible, expressly forbade sexual relations of this kind. (Lev. 18:8; 20:11; cf. 2 Cor. 12:21)

We should bear in mind that, in Paul's day, the city of Corinth was notorious for every kind of sexual immorality and perversion. However, the church of God should have stood as a bright shining light to expose such sin by the practice of righteous behaviour and attitudes. It should also have acted like the salt of the earth to preserve others—and especially its own members—from moral and spiritual corruption and degradation.

It was not the place of the church to judge outsiders. Before their conversion to Christ, some of these Corinthians would have been involved in similar sins themselves. However, the church should certainly have judged its own member for his blatant and gross immorality (vv.12-13). However, instead of reprimanding and disciplining the offender, the church virtually sanctioned this man's sin!

Thus, in verse 2, Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 5:2

The word here translated 'proud' or 'puffed up', is a word meaning 'inflated with pride', 'conceited', or 'carnally egotistical'.

What reason did the Corinthian church have for being proud, contemptuous and dismissive of other people's opinions and of Paul's express instructions? Perhaps, in their arrogance, they were proud that they were broad-minded enough to overlook this person's sin. Perhaps they were proud of their non-judgmental spirit toward this man.

Whatever, the real reason for their pride and arrogance, it represented an absolute distortion of God's grace toward them, a wilful rebellion against the express teaching of God's Word and against God himself, and a classic example of the exercise of their worldly wisdom—wisdom that was of the flesh, sinful and devilish.

Far from being proud of their so-called liberty and charity toward this man, his actions should have filled them with horror and grief that they—the church—had tolerated such a heinous crime. As a church, and as individual believers, the Corinthians formed the temple of the Lord—and the temple of the Lord is holy. However, they had permitted, and even condoned or encouraged, the desecration of God’s holy temple. They had allowed the sanctuary of the Holy Spirit to be defiled.

What, therefore, ought they to have done?

The leadership of the church ought to have dealt with this man immediately they had become aware of the situation. They ought to have warned the man of the consequences of his sin.

If, however—after sufficient entreaties and warnings—the man refused to repent, the church ought to have expelled him from their fellowship. Only in this way, could they preserve the sanctity of the Lord’s temple and bring home to this man’s heart and conscience the utter abhorrence of his sin in God’s eyes, and in the eyes of the unconverted world.

Since, however, the Corinthian believers had shown themselves unwilling to act against this man, Paul uses his apostolic authority to instruct them directly.

Thus, in verse 3, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 5:3

Although not personally present in the church, Paul is with them in spirit. Acting as though he was personally present among them, the apostle declares that he is about to pronounce judgment against this man. Paul expects the church at Corinth to concur with this judgment, and to implement it against the offender.

We must remember, of course, that Paul was not exercising any form of private judgment here. In keeping with Jesus’ words to the other apostles, Paul could only bind on earth what God had bound in heaven, and loose on earth what God had loosed in heaven. In other words, the apostle was strictly limited by the teaching of God’s Word. What that Word taught, enjoined or forbade, Paul could teach, enjoin or forbid. What the Word of God did not teach, enjoin or forbid, the apostle could not teach, enjoin or forbid. (Matt. 18:18; cf. Matt. 16:19; 2 Cor. 13:3)

Similarly, when God spoke directly through his prophets and apostles, the Holy Spirit inspired these holy men of God. When thus inspired, what they spoke was the very words of God. They could not add to God’s Word, nor could they subtract from it, or alter it in any way. Although in their styles of preaching, teaching and writing, they retained their individual characteristics and modes of expression, yet—concerning the actual words used—the apostles and prophets were simply the mouthpieces for the Almighty Sovereign God speaking through them from heaven. (1 Thess. 2:13; 2 Pet. 1:20-21)

In the case before us, the apostle Paul is basing his judgment on the revealed will of God as contained in the Old Testament Scriptures; especially, in such places as Leviticus chapter 18 verses 7 and 8. That passage expressly forbids incestuous relationships, or sexual relationships between near relatives.

Thus, it is written:

(7) "Do not dishonour your father by having sexual relations with your mother. She is your mother; do not have relations with her. (8) "Do not have sexual relations with your father's wife; that would dishonour your father. (Lev. 18:7-8 NIV)

It did not matter in the least that the man's father might no longer have been alive. The memory of his name would still be dishonoured by any unscriptural and incestuous relationship with his former wife. Nor did it matter that the man concerned was not a blood-relative of the woman. Although she may have been his stepmother, the relationship between her and her stepson was considered the same morally as that between a mother and her son. Therefore, to engage in sexual relations constituted the sin of incest.

In verses 4 and 5, the apostle continues:

1 Corinthians 5:4-5

The apostle expected the Corinthian church to act against this man without further delay. Whenever they received Paul's letter, and because this sin had been committed publicly, the whole church—not just the leadership—was to meet together.

Paul reminded them that, when they did so, they would be meeting in the name of the Lord Jesus: That is, they would be assembling together in recognition of Christ as the Head of the church, and as acting in his name and by everything that his name represents. They were to realise also that the Lord Jesus himself would be present in their midst in power: i.e., by his Spirit, and as the one who ruled over them, and who exercised his sovereign authority over all the churches. (Matt. 28:18-20)

Meeting together in this manner, the Corinthian believers—as a church—were to hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of his sinful nature, but for the ultimate salvation of his soul (spirit). (Cf. Matt. 18:16-18,20)

To 'hand a person over to Satan,' is to place that person in Satan's domain. It is to expel him from the fellowship and security of the church, and from the proximate influences of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God. It is to expose him to the world and its carnal insecurity, and to the influences of the world's unbridled corruption, and to the power of the evil one himself—the 'prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now works in the children of disobedience.' (Eph. 2:2; cf. 1 John 5:19)

For someone who had genuinely experienced God's grace in his life, such a course of action amounted to a very severe form of punishment. (1 Tim. 1:20; 1 John 5:19)

It is possible that a person 'handed over to Satan' was also subjected to some form of physical or mental affliction. (Cf. Job 2:6-7) Those who refused to repent of their evil deeds, or whom the church failed to discipline, sometimes suffered sickness, disease, or even death. If they were genuine—but backsliding—believers, God would preserve their souls from eternal condemnation. However, they forfeited their lives in this world; their usefulness in the service of God; and therefore much, if not all, of their reward in heaven. (1 Cor. 11:29-32)

On the other hand, those who repented of their sin and publicly acknowledged their wrongdoing, were forgiven by God and received back into the fellowship of the Lord's people.

In verse 6, the apostle warns them of the consequences of tolerating or condoning flagrant sin among its members:

1 Corinthians 5:6

In the Bible, leaven frequently represents the gradual spread and permeation of evil, from something initially indiscernible (at least, to others), to something widespread and notorious. Ultimately, the process results in moral putrefaction and spiritual insensitivity.

Yeast (leaven) ferments. A small amount placed in a batch of dough soon spreads throughout the entire batch. A single sin in a believer's life leads ultimately to more and

more sins, and to ever-increasing moral corruption or putrefaction in that person's life. Similarly, a church that tolerates one flagrant sin in one of its members will end up tolerating many flagrant sins in many of its members. (1 Cor. 15:33)

In verse 7, the apostle continues:

1 Corinthians 5:7

Paul now alludes to the Exodus, and to the preparation for the Passover. Then, the people were instructed to bake bread—bread without yeast—before their hasty flight from their bondage in Egypt. Before all subsequent celebrations of the Passover, the Jews were required to ensure that absolutely no yeast (leaven) was to be found anywhere in their homes. (Exodus 12:15; 13:6-8)

As we noted above, in the Scriptures, yeast—or leaven—usually signifies evil. It demonstrates how a small amount of evil permeates and contaminates the entire body. Therefore, says Paul, get rid of the old yeast. Purge out—or cleanse out most thoroughly—all that is evil from within you.

Then, says Paul, recognise yourselves for what you really are in Christ Jesus—a new batch, a new creation. Your old life has been hid with Christ in God. Put on, therefore, the new life—created in true righteousness and holiness after the image of God. (Eph. 4:22-24)

Paul says,

(7b) ...For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. (NIV)

The Lamb has been slain. The blood has been sprinkled. And that sprinkled blood has made us holy. We have been purged from evil and cleansed from sin. Now, we have been set apart and consecrated as holy to the Lord.

Therefore, we ought to live lives that are holy and free from worldly contamination. We must pursue holiness—not only in our own personal lives—but also in our church. (1 Pet. 1:18-21)

To this end, the apostle writes in verse 8:

1 Corinthians 5:8

Paul encourages the Corinthian believers to celebrate the Festival; i.e., to live continually in the light and power of Christ's sacrificial and vicarious death, his triumphant and glorious resurrection, and the certainty of his coming again. However, they were to do so from lives sanctified by the Holy Spirit—not lives lived after the dictates and desires of their old sinful nature. (1 Cor. 6:9-11; 1 Pet. 4:1-2)

Sincerity and truth were to exemplify their lives. There must be no sham; no hypocrisy; no cover-up for evil, and no countenancing of evil in their midst. All was to be pure and above board. Then, perhaps, the church, which had received notoriety for permitting sexual immorality among its members, might instead receive notoriety as a church that shunned evil and pursued righteousness, holy living, love, joy and peace in the Holy Spirit.

Then, sinners—including the sexually immoral—would know that God receives and restores even the vilest offender who, by his grace, truly repents and seeks his mercy. Then, they would experience true forgiveness, cleansing and deliverance from the God of all grace, through the power of Jesus Christ our Lord, and by the merits of his atoning blood. All praise and glory be unto Jesus!

Expel Sinning Believers!

1 Corinthians 5:9-13

Paul now refers to a related matter about which he had written in an earlier letter, but which the Corinthians had misunderstood. In his previous letter, the apostle had told the Corinthians that they must not associate with any sexually immoral person.

Paul, of course, was well aware of the unsavoury reputation Corinth had as a city. The city was renowned for its gross immorality and perversity. Among other things, Corinth was the centre of worship for *Aphrodite*—the Greek goddess of love. One thousand priestesses—all of whom were sacred prostitutes—served in the temple of Aphrodite. In the evenings, they would leave the temple and ply their immoral trade on the streets of the city.

Also in the city of Corinth stood the temple of *Apollo*—the god of music, song and poetry. The ancient Greeks looked upon the statue of Apollo as the ideal figure of male beauty and sexual virility. These sex-obsessed Corinthians worshipped everything that Apollo represented in terms of physical appearance and sexual prowess—in its most distorted and depraved form. In fact, many of Apollo's worshippers were practising homosexuals.

Aware of the gross sin and depravity that abounded in Corinth, the apostle Paul intended to ensure that none of this degraded and perverted form of sexual immorality and vice would enter the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Some of the Corinthian believers, however, had misunderstood what Paul had said to them in his earlier letter. They thought he had told them to avoid all social contact with immoral people everywhere.

Thus, in verses 9 and 10, the apostle writes to correct this misapprehension:

1 Corinthians 5:9-10

In his earlier letter, Paul had not been referring to the immoral men and women of the world. Nor was the apostle requiring the church to disassociate itself with anyone in the world who was covetous, dishonest or an idolater. If the Corinthian believers were to avoid social contact with all such people in the world, they would need to live on another planet!

In verse 11, therefore, Paul clarifies his intended meaning:

1 Corinthians 5:11

Light and darkness cannot dwell together in unity. Those who practise sin cannot share fellowship with those who pursue righteousness. The two attitudes and lifestyles are not only incompatible, but they are also diametrically opposed to one another.

Paul asserts that—if *anyone claiming to be a brother or sister in Christ*—is guilty of practising any such sin as he has just mentioned, then the Lord's people must not have fellowship with that person. They must not worship with him. They must not eat with him—especially if this involves the 'love feast' practised in the early church.

Such a person is contaminating the body of Christ. He is defiling the sacred things of God. He is despising the grace of God, and treating lightly the blood of the covenant by which God redeemed and sanctified him.

In verse 11 (above), Paul begins by mentioning the fornicator or sexually immoral brother or sister—but he does not stop there. Immorality assumes many different guises, and the apostle lists just a few more of them:

Greed: Greed or covetousness is another form of lust: for lust is excessive, uncontrolled or unbridled desire for something that we crave. Furthermore, greed is often linked to other sins, such as selfish ambition, arrogance and pride, that manifest

themselves in the lives of those who lust after other (unnecessary) things, instead of accepting humbly and gratefully that which God, in his bounty, is pleased to provide. Greed or covetousness results in idolatry.

Idolatry: Idolatry is not just the setting up of false gods or the worshipping of graven images. A person becomes guilty of idolatry when he worships ambition; or success; or wealth or possessions, or if he idolises another person. Paul treats this as a very serious sin, for those who practise it rob God of his glory (at least in their hearts). In addition, they dethrone Christ by refusing to recognise that he—and he alone—must rule supreme in their hearts and lives.

Slander: To slander is to speak evil of another person. The one who speaks evil of his neighbour, however, speaks evil of God in whose image and likeness God created his neighbour. Therefore, slander or evil speaking against another person is a very serious sin. Libel is the same sin expressed in writing.

Drunkenness: The believer who becomes filled and incapacitated by drink or drugs cannot be filled and controlled by the Spirit of holiness. The Holy Spirit may indwell him, but he is not being allowed to fill that person's life and sanctify his heart. A person who despises the Spirit of grace and of holiness in such a manner is rebelling against God. Furthermore, he is defiling the temple of the Lord. By his drunken or drug-induced behaviour, he has desecrated that which is holy—the dwelling place of God in the Spirit. This, too, is a most serious sin.

Swindling [rather, violence]: The word 'swindler' (NIV) or 'extortioner' (KJV) may not accurately reflect the sense of the original. In the original, the word has the connotation of violence—including such things as robbery with violence or 'mugging'. However, such a word should never be true of a professing believer. If it were, this would constitute yet another heinous sin.

The above list is not exhaustive. The apostle Paul is merely enumerating these few examples to show to the Corinthian church the kinds of professing believers whom they are to avoid. Effectively, the apostle is saying, 'If a believer's life is characterised by any sin similar to those I have just mentioned, do not even eat with such a brother or sister.'

Emphasising again that he is referring only to immoral practises *among professing believers*, the apostle says in verses 12 and 13:

1 Corinthians 5:12-13

{Cf. Deut. 17:7; 19:19; 21:21; 22:21,24; 24:7}

Paul's apostolic authority did not extend to those outside the church. It is not for the church to judge the world for its sin. In due course, God will judge everyone according to his or her deeds.

However, while the church is not authorised to judge outsiders, it is certainly authorised to judge those within its own fellowship. Indeed—as in the case at Corinth—a church that fails to exercise discipline is failing in its duty and responsibility to its members and to God. It is failing to show heartfelt love and concern for the offending brother or sister, or for other members of the church.

Returning, then, to the matter in hand, Paul uses the OT Scriptures to remind the Corinthians of their responsibility:

"Expel the wicked man from among you." (Deut. 17:7 NIV)

Paul now commands the church at Corinth to obey his instructions, and to expel the offender from their church. The church leadership was to hand this immoral man over to Satan (i.e., they were to excommunicate him from church fellowship and privileges, and

relegate him to the ungodly world in which Satan actively operates) Thus, they would arrest the contaminating influence of this man's sin among other members of the church. Thus, too, they would show to the whole church that God would not tolerate evil in the midst of his redeemed and holy people. They will have removed the leaven, poison or cancer from their midst.

Perhaps now, by God's grace—and if they obeyed the apostle's instructions—the church at Corinth would begin to experience spiritual healing among the members of Christ's body. Perhaps, too, they would begin to make real progress in the things of the Spirit, once they had resolved some of their other problems.

God loves his people, but he will not tolerate wilful sin in their midst. Where a professing believer blatantly practises some sin, the church must deal with that person firmly, but in love. Those who are spiritual ought to try to restore him gently. (Gal. 6:1) However, if after several exhortations, cautions, and warnings, the offender absolutely refuses to forsake his sin and repent, then the church is under a solemn obligation to act against that person for his own good, and for the good of the fellowship. The church must expel him from their midst, in accordance with the teaching of God's Word. (Matt. 18:17) Of course, if such a person returns to the church truly repentant, and having utterly renounced his sin, then the church must forgive and receive him back into the fellowship of God's people.

This is the principle laid down in the Word of God, and to this principle, we must adhere. It is not for us to condemn one whom God has forgiven, and who clearly shows—not just remorse—but genuine godly sorrow resulting in true and heartfelt repentance toward God and toward others. (2 Cor. 2:6-11; 7:10)

Let us remember the prodigal son. This young man wasted his life and his inheritance in wild living—including associating with prostitutes. Upon his repentance and return to his father, however, his father embraced him with open arms and celebrated his son's safe return from his rebellious and depraved way of life. The father did not say one word to the younger son about any of his former vile deeds. Rather, he declared to his boy:

For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. (Luke 15:24 NIV)

Let us, then, welcome back with open arms those who seek the mercy of the Lord. For those who show mercy to others, will themselves find mercy in their time of need.

1 Corinthians Chapter 6

Lawsuits between Believers

1 Corinthians 6:1-8

Paul now deals with another serious problem that had arisen in the Corinthian church—lawsuits between believers. Apparently, some of the Corinthian believers were prepared to sue one another in the civil courts over matters such as property rights, and other civil matters. Paul writes to correct this evil practice among the saints of God.

There were occasions when resort to a civil court was both necessary and justified. For instance, in the Old Testament, God appointed judges to resolve matters between one party and another, and to implement the sentence of the law. God's people could bring their cases before these judges for arbitration. However, the judges were appointed from among the people of God themselves, and therefore understood the law of God and the ways of God.

In the New Testament, Paul laid claim to his legal rights as a Roman citizen—and therefore entitled to the protection of the Roman law and of the Roman law courts. Again, when he felt it necessary to do so, and acting under Roman law, the apostle Paul appealed to the highest court in the empire: that of the Roman Emperor, or Caesar. These were justified and acceptable uses of the law and of the law-courts—an institution that God himself had ordained. However, for one believer to go to court with another believer was very strongly discouraged, if not virtually condemned and forbidden.

Therefore, in the first verse of chapter 6, the apostle Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 6:1

Paul could not conceive of believers going to court with other believers. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the case, matters between Christians should not be aired in public—let alone before non-Christian magistrates or judges.

Clearly, the matter to which Paul alluded was of a civil nature, as the following context demonstrates. However, if of a civil nature, and between believers, then there was absolutely no need to take these matters to the civil law courts. (Criminal matters, of course, had to be dealt with by the criminal courts.)

How could a believer expect a non-Christian magistrate to judge matters that were essentially of a Christian nature—or of a civil nature between Christians? Instead of bringing such matters before the courts, the Corinthian believers ought to have sought arbitration from one of their own people—an independent and suitably qualified fellow believer. Only believers—the saints—are qualified to judge matters between fellow believers.

Thus, in verse 2, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 6:2

On several occasions, Paul uses the phrase, *Do you not know...?* When he does so, he is using a solemn injunction, in the form of a rhetorical question, to remind his hearers or readers of something that he has told them on a previous occasion or something that should be unmistakably plain to them.

On this occasion, both were true. Paul had already taught the Corinthians about the Lord's second coming, and about events attending and following the Lord's coming—including the fact that the saints would judge and rule with Christ in his glorious kingdom. (Cf. Matt. 19:28)

The fact that the Corinthians already knew these things is amply demonstrated in chapter 15 of this epistle. There, the apostle finds it necessary to correct some of their views on the nature and scope of the Lord's Second Coming and of the resurrection. The context of that chapter shows that—although they were already aware of these truths—some false teachers had shaken their faith in the teachings that Paul had already delivered to them. Chapter 15, therefore, was written to refute the doctrine of the false teachers.

To return, however, to the matter of the saints judging the world: Since the people of God will share responsibility for exercising judgment—or government—over the world, how could they not exercise judgment over their own church members? How could they be competent to judge or rule the world, if they were not competent to try minor cases among themselves?

Christians view things from God's perspective. How, then, could these believers not arbitrate between the rights and claims of one Christian, and the rights and claims of another? (Rev. 2:26-28; 3:21)

Perhaps, of course—and because of their lack of stable church leadership and lack of internal discipline—the Corinthian church felt unable or unwilling to involve itself in such sensitive issues. If so, however, this was to fail in their responsibility toward God and toward their church membership. God had appointed pastors, elders and deacons in the church to not only feed and guard his flock, but to rule, govern and guide them. These overseers, however, were not to shepherd God's flock harshly, but lovingly, firmly and according to sound Scriptural principles.

In verse 3, Paul continues by explaining that the saints will have even greater judicial and governmental responsibilities in the coming age:

1 Corinthians 6:3

Presumably, this refers to the fallen angels. Many of these angels are being held in 'chains of darkness', awaiting the judgment of the last day. Then, these evil spirits will appear before the Lord of all creation. Then, the saints will share in judging these unholy and evil beings before their ultimate and everlasting consignment to the lake of fire. (2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 1:6)

This is the nature of the awesome responsibility that, one day, the Lord will lay upon the shoulders of his people. How much more, then—in the present—should the Lord's people be able to assume responsibility for judging the things of this earth. In addition, in view of their future responsibilities, how much more should they be able to resolve matters between the people of God? It is unthinkable that they who will judge the case of angels, cannot judge the case of fellow believers.

However, should these Corinthian believers have allowed matters to reach this stage? Should they not have sought to resolve these issues much sooner—prayerfully, and with that wisdom which comes from God above?

In verse 4, the apostle continues:

1 Corinthians 6:4

Perhaps, here, Paul is demonstrating the futility of taking such matters before non-Christian judges. However competent they may be in matters of law, pagan judges are not qualified to resolve differences of faith or practice between believers. Indeed, infers Paul,

you are more likely to receive a satisfactory resolution to your disputes from the least esteemed believer in your church, than from an unbelieving judge!

Paul here is speaking ironically. Essentially, what he seems to be saying is this: Even the 'least esteemed' person in your church is better qualified to judge such matters than an unbelieving judge. Surely, then, you must have someone within your fellowship who is more than capable of judging these matters competently, fairly and impartially.

In verse 5, the apostle continues:

1 Corinthians 6:5

Paul is attempting deliberately to shame these Corinthian believers out of their indifference or apathy in these matters. As has just been said above (on v.4), there must have been at least one person among them who was qualified to arbitrate in such matters. Why, then, did the Corinthian believers fail to recognise this individual's natural or acquired abilities, and his spiritual gifts—gifts of which they made so much? Why did they not appoint this person to resolve the disputes between the parties concerned?

Clearly, however, the church had not attempted to resolve matters internally. Therefore, in verse 6, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 6:6

It was shameful that the church had failed to deal with this matter internally. It was disgraceful that one believer should feel compelled to take another believer to court. It was abominable that this dispute between Christians was exposed to public view and debate. Those who were supposed to honour the name of Christ were bringing shame, reproach and dishonour upon his holy name.

As the saints of God—his sanctified ones—we must always be careful that our *public actions* do not contradict our *public profession* of faith in Christ. It is better to suffer wrong patiently, and without thought of compensation or redress, than to bring the name of Christ our Redeemer into disrepute in the eyes of the world. (Cf. Gen. 13:7-9)

Thus, in verse 7, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 6:7

The fact that some of the Corinthian believers were prepared to take other believers to court to resolve their differences demonstrates once more the worldly attitude and behaviour of many within this church. For all their claims to the blessings of the Spirit, they were not a spiritually mature church. By taking each other to court, and by discrediting their witness for Christ, they had been defeated—by the evil one himself. Satan had gained a victory over them by bringing these disputes among Christians to the notice of the unconverted world.

Rather than allow this to happen, declared Paul, why did you not simply suffer the wrong done to you? Why did you not allow yourself to be defrauded of your claim? You may have lost out in the short term, but you would have shown genuine love and concern for the body of Christ. In the longer term, God would have judged your case justly, and vindicated your cause. (Prov. 2:8; 20:22; Matt. 5:39-42; Luke 6:29-30)

Sadly, however, these believers were not content to commit their cause to the Judge of all the earth.

Thus, in verse 8, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 6:8

Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong—and you do this to your own brothers and sisters in Christ.

These believers were just as guilty as the party who had originally wronged or defrauded them. By seeking compensation or redress through the civil law courts, they were demonstrating their own unspiritual and ungodly attitudes and behaviour. Even if it meant that they themselves had to engage in underhand tactics, they would resort to such evil methods if this proved necessary. They would do this even although it involved sinning against God, and against a brother or sister in Christ. To them, it seems that the end justified the means. (Rom. 12:17; 1 Thess. 5:15)

Excluded from God's Kingdom

1 Corinthians 6:9-11

However, at this point, the apostle Paul reminds these believers that their behaviour makes them no better than the world of unconverted and ungodly men and women. Concerning those who are still in their sins, however, the apostle asks:

1 Corinthians 6:9-10

(9) Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders. (10) nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. (NIV)

None of the categories of people mentioned in verses 9 and 10 will ever enter the kingdom of God while they continue to practice their sin. Make no mistake, Paul says, if you behave like these people, then question whether you are still one of them. For no born again child of God ought to behave as though he still lived according to the standards of this evil age.

Paul lists some of the sins that exclude a person from entry into God's eternal kingdom. They are:

the wicked: The wicked or unrighteous refers to any lawbreaker or violator of justice and righteousness; it includes all forms of law breaking from deceit to the most serious offences; it also includes all forms of sin and moral depravity, from those who have committed minor sins to those who have committed the most violent, vile, or perverse forms of sin and iniquity.

the sexually immoral: The word used here (*pornos*) means originally, a man who hires out his body for sex (a male prostitute); then, one who indulges in promiscuous sexual relations. It covers all forms of illicit sexual relations: i.e., any kind of sexual relations outside of marriage.

idolaters: Those who worship false gods or idols; (for a Christian) participation in feasts or other events held in honour of idols or false gods; sharing communion with those who profess to worship the true God while holding to a form of idol worship; also, the covetous desire for wealth or material goods, etc.

adulterers: Those who prove unfaithful to their lawful marriage partner, and who violate the sacred vow and covenant that they have made before God; those who

prove unfaithful to God, and who violate their commitment to him to set their hearts on other time-consuming interests or pleasures, or who follow false teaching.

male prostitutes: The word used here (*malakos*) means, those who are effeminate. It also covers the keeping of boys and young men for sexual relations with other men. Again, it involves the hire of a man's body for sex (with male or female partners); and the man who submits his body to unnatural and lewd practices.

homosexual offenders: Those who live together sharing unnatural sexual relations with one another—either male with male, or female with female; any two males or two females who share unnatural sexual relations with one another (although not necessarily living together on a regular basis); anyone who lies with a member of the same sex as though he/she were a member of the opposite sex; sodomy.

thieves: The word used here (*kleptes*) has the primary meaning, to embezzle or to pilfer; it covers any kind of non-violent theft, including fraud, shoplifting, and house-breaking or burglary. In the Bible, the same word is used to refer to false teachers, including those who serve only for unjust gain.

the greedy: This word means covetous; it is used of the person who is never satisfied with what he has, but is always seeking more; it also applies to those who envy what others possess, and earnestly desire to possess these things for themselves.

drunkards: Those who enslave their bodies and their minds to the effects of alcoholic or intoxicating drink; also, those who submit their bodies and minds to the toxic effects of any other mind or mood changing substance, such as non-prescribed drugs, etc., whether natural or synthetic.

slanderers: A mischief maker, a railer or a reviler; one who speaks evil or maliciously of God (blasphemy), or of another person (slander), or who puts into writing unfounded and malicious accusations against another person (libel).

swindlers: Those who cheat or defraud; a robber; one who makes deceitful claims to obtain goods, services, money or benefits to which he is not entitled.

These examples illustrate graphically the standards of this evil age. However, asserts Paul categorically, none of the people who practice any of these sins will inherit the kingdom of God.

In a day when this truth is being disregarded or declared irrelevant to the present day and age, we must affirm with the utmost vigour that God's Word cannot change. It certainly cannot be altered to suit the whims and fancies of evil men. The moral and spiritual teaching of God's Word is eternal and unalterable. Anyone who disregards or despises these truths disregards and despises not man, but God.

No one who claims to belong to Christ must practise any of these sins. In Christ, that person is a new creation. He or she, therefore, must put to death the desires of the old sinful nature.

Christ holds out hope and assurance of forgiveness to the repentant sinner who truly renounces his evil ways. However, he never offers assurance of forgiveness to the unrepentant sinner who continues to indulge his sinful practices. Nor has any church on earth, or any church leader, the power or authority to alter this truth.

Paul, however, is not saying for one minute that such people cannot be brought to genuine saving faith in Christ. Indeed, the apostle says the very opposite.

Thus, in verse 11, Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 6:11

And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (NIV)

(11a) And that is what some of you were...

A number of the believers, now worshipping in the Corinthian fellowship, had actually practised some of these very sins. Formerly—when they were still enslaved to their sinful passions by the spirit of this age—some of them had indulged in all kinds of detestable and loathsome practices.

Alternatively, if they had not indulged in sexually immoral practices, they had pursued the gods of materialism, worldly wealth, and outright greed and idolatry. This however was yet another form of immorality. In God's eyes, these sins were just as detestable as the ones they themselves might have condemned in others.

(11a) And that is what some of you were...

However...God had delivered these Corinthians from their bondage to sin. God had changed their way of thinking and acting. Through their faith in Christ Jesus, God had transformed their life from the pursuit and practice of unrighteous behaviour and ungodly living, to the pursuit and practice of righteous behaviour and holy living. (Rom. 6:11-23)

Paul expresses this truth by the use of three very significant terms. The apostle says:

(11b) ...But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified...

...**you were washed**: The Corinthians believers had been washed by the purifying work of the Holy Spirit, and by the application of the Word of God to their hearts and minds. God had cleansed them of all their uncleanness. He had cleansed them by the blood of the atonement shed on Calvary's cross for the remission of their sins. God had washed them from all defilement of body and soul, and he had made them every whit clean. Therefore, they must not pollute by their attitudes, thoughts, words or deeds, what the sacred blood had cleansed.

...**you were sanctified**: By the Spirit of holiness and of grace, God had sanctified them or set them apart from the world and all its impurity, and set them apart for himself and for his service. By the Holy Spirit, they had been dedicated and consecrated to God to serve him with all their heart and soul. They were the chosen people of God—a holy priesthood—to minister praise and thanksgiving to their Creator and Redeemer.

...**you were justified**: Though they had been guilty, yet—by God's grace, and through their faith in the merits of Christ's atoning and vicarious work on their behalf—they had been justified. God had declared them 'not guilty' of all their sins and misdeeds because another Person had assumed their sin and guilt, and had borne the penalty due to them. God, therefore, had acquitted them of all charges on the grounds of Christ's perfect and everlasting righteousness, and on the grounds of his substitutionary work on their behalf. They had been set free from the condemnation of the law—and that by the grace of God.

In the last part of verse 11, the apostle writes:

(11c) ...in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

God had washed them, sanctified them and justified them in the name—or by the power, glory and authority—of the Lord Jesus Christ. God had washed them, sanctified them and justified them by the Spirit of all holiness—and by his Holy Spirit, he had sealed them as belonging to him for all eternity.

(11a) And that is what some of you were—

Before their conversion, some of these Corinthian Christians had practiced the kind of deeds mentioned by Paul and condemned by God in his Word. Now, however, in Christ Jesus, God had forgiven them, cleansed them and made them his own. Therefore, they must live now in the light of the fact that God had called them from the practice of unrighteousness, to a life of holiness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. By his free and sovereign grace, God had called them to a life of service for him, and to a life lived to the praise of his glory—through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The apostle Paul had told the Corinthians plainly that God would not tolerate the practice of sin among his redeemed and holy people. Nevertheless, the apostle still apparently feels that some of the believers at Corinth will continue to attempt to justify their sinful behaviour—especially, in the realm of sex.

Before their conversion to Christ, many of these Corinthians believers had been accustomed to indulging freely in sexual relations, and they had been influenced by their former pagan attitudes to sex. Consequently, they had considered sexual relations a matter of complete indifference, instead of a privilege and responsibility that God had said must be reserved for the marriage relationship alone.

“Everything is Permissible”

1 Corinthians 6:12-14

In view of their erroneous attitude toward sexual morality, Paul finds it necessary to respond to, and rebut, some of their own arguments. Therefore, in verse 12, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 6:12

The Corinthians made much of their freedom in Christ. Christ, (they asserted), had set them free from the restraints of the law. The Lord Jesus, (they claimed), had released them from all the requirements of the law, and from the condemnation of the law. Therefore, asserted the Corinthians, we are free to live in accordance with our own conscience, without regard to the Old Testament law of God, which—suggested the Corinthians—Christ has totally abolished.

While, at first sight, appearing plausible, this argument represents a gross distortion of the truth. Under no circumstances does God’s Word permit us to live without regard to his holy, righteous and just law. It is true that Christ fulfilled the law on our behalf. It is also true that he abrogated many of the Old Testament demands (especially concerning the *ceremonial* law). However, the Lord Jesus did not in any sense set aside or annul the *moral* law—that law of God which is encapsulated in the Ten Commandments. (Matt. 5:17-19)

Christ has set us free from sin and from the penalty of the law. However, this does not mean that we are free to disobey God's Word and to continue in sin. We are free—but we are not free to live as we please.

The Corinthians claimed to enjoy freedom in Christ; but, in fact, their own sinful passions and desires enslaved them. Their worldly attitudes and sinful behaviour clearly demonstrated this.

"Everything is permissible to me," they said—claiming freedom to make their own choices. Nevertheless, says Paul, not everything is beneficial. Not everything is for your good. Nor is it wholesome or edifying to your spiritual lives. Not everything is harmless to the mind, body or soul (cf. also 1 Cor. 6:10:23-24).

However, the Corinthians persisted, *"Everything is permissible to me..."* "Christ has set us free. It is not for anyone else to tell us what we may or may not do. We have the freedom to determine these matters for ourselves. In any event, we do not consider certain matters—such as eating, drinking, and (illicit) sexual relations—to be wrong. Indeed, they are all natural. Therefore, it must be right to fulfil our natural desires whenever we feel the need, and whenever we have the opportunity.'

This, it seems, was the line of reasoning pursued by some of these Corinthian believers. It is the same sinful line of reasoning put forward by many in the church today.

In reply, however, to the Corinthian's assertion,

(12a,c) *"Everything is permissible to me,"*

the apostle Paul declares,

(12d) *...But I will not be mastered by anything.*

The Corinthians were saying that *all things* were allowed. However, Paul points out that their so-called freedom was in fact enslaving them to evil passions and desires. Even while they proclaimed freedom, they were living in bondage to the lusts of their bodies and their minds. They were enslaved to greed—the unbridled passion for more, more, more. Far from being able to control the natural desires of their bodily appetite, they had given in to every excess in regard to food and drink (gluttony). Hence, the reason why some of them came to the Lord's Table intoxicated. (1 Cor. 11:21)

Far from being free, they were being overcome by the desires of their old sinful nature. That, therefore, which masters us, cannot be an exercise of our freedom: For freedom in Christ never provides us with a licence to sin. Rather, Christ releases us from sin's bondage, in order to live a life that is holy and pleasing to God.

Some of the Corinthians, however, refused to accept these demands for holy and righteous living. They still wanted to satisfy their sinful cravings. Therefore, in verse 13a, the apostle Paul continues to rebut their distorted and sinful arguments:

1 Corinthians 6:13a

Food—asserted the Corinthians—is a matter of indifference. In this case, it is not wrong to eat and enjoy the food we eat. The eating of food has no bearing on our spiritual lives; therefore, it cannot be wrong to indulge ourselves.

The Corinthians would use this same line of reasoning in their defence of sexual practices outside of marriage. It is important, therefore, to understand the implications of this kind of argument.

The above argument about food contains a fundamental and very serious error—and this error must be recognised before it is applied to other areas of life. God has indeed provided food for the body and the body for food—but not for *indulgence*. To indulge the body out of greed, gluttony, desire or lust is to abuse the body. To abuse the body, however, is to abuse the temple of the Lord—and the temple of the Lord is holy. In any event, both foods, and the present bodily functions, are temporary. Ultimately, God will destroy both.

If the argument concerning food and drink represents a distortion of the truth, the same argument applied to sexual relations represents an even greater distortion of the truth. To indulge the body with food and drink is sinful. It represents the sins of gluttony and drunkenness. To indulge the body with illicit sex is even more sinful. This is the sin of fornication or sexual immorality.

Realising, therefore, that some of the Corinthians were using their so-called freedom to indulge the body sexually, the apostle continues in verse 13b:

1 Corinthians 6:13b

(13b)...The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. (NIV)

Under no circumstances must we use our body for sexual immorality. This means that:

- Casual sex is wrong.
- One-night-stands are wrong.
- Living together while unmarried is wrong.
- Sex before marriage is wrong.
- Sex outside of marriage is wrong.
- Adultery is wrong.
- Homosexual and lesbian relationships are wrong.
- Unnatural sex in any shape or form is wrong.
- Reading or watching sexually immoral material is wrong.
- Listening to sexually immoral conversations is wrong.

The body is not meant for sexual immorality. Sexual relations between a husband and his wife are a gift and a blessing from God. However, sexual relations at any other time, or in any other form, constitute a perversion of God's gift, and are utterly condemned by God in his Word.

(13b) ...The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. (NIV)

The body is the dwelling place of the Lord himself, in the person of his Holy Spirit. However, if our body is the sanctuary of God's Spirit, how can we desecrate and defile that which is holy? (1 Thess. 4:3-8)

Again, the precious blood of Christ has redeemed our bodies. How can we despise that blood, and refuse to acknowledge that our bodies do not belong to ourselves, but to the Lord?

This was the lesson that some of these Corinthian believers had failed to learn—and perhaps the reason why the Lord judged some of them. This too, however, is the lesson that almost any believer can fail to learn. However, God will not hold us guiltless for abusing the gifts that he has given us.

The body has been redeemed for a specific purpose—its ultimate resurrection, transformation, and perfection in glory. To this end, the apostle writes in verse 14:

1 Corinthians 6:14

By the same power that raised Christ's body from the dead, our bodies too will be raised. This same body will be raised from death. (Rom. 6:4-5) For those still alive at the Lord's coming, their bodies will be changed to be like Christ's glorious body. (1 Cor. 15:51-52; Phil. 3:20-21; 1 Thess. 4:14-17)

This is the end for which God intended our redeemed bodies: resurrection, translation, and glorification in the likeness of Christ. Then, he will present us faultless and blameless before his Father. Then, we will live and reign with Christ in his glory. It is for this reason that the Holy Spirit who indwells and sanctifies us, has sealed us to God and guarantees that we will be kept eternally secure unto the day of final redemption—the redemption of our bodies. However, if our bodies are thus sanctified to God, and destined for a glorious eternity, how can we abuse and defile them now? (Rom. 8:11-13)

Our Bodies are Members of Christ Himself

1 Corinthians 6:15-17

In verse 15a, Paul continues:

1 Corinthians 6:15a

(15a) Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself?... (NIV)

Paul forcefully reminds the Corinthian believers—and us—that we have been united to Christ in body and soul. We are one with him in his death; one with him in his resurrection to new life; and one with him in his glorification.

In another sense, we are each members of Christ's body, the church—of which Christ himself is Head. However, any abuse of the individual members, is an abuse of Christ himself—the Head of the body. Therefore, it is no light matter to sin against the body of Christ. (1 Cor. 12:27)

In verse 15b, Paul continues by asking:

1 Corinthians 6:15b

(15b) ...Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! (NIV)

Paul attempts to shock these Corinthian believers into a realisation of the seriousness of their sin—a sin against Christ, against another person, and against their own bodies. How can they think of taking the members of Christ's body, and uniting them with a prostitute? Is this very thought not utterly reprehensible and detestable?

The word used here for 'prostitute' (Gk., πόρνη) includes not only the person who hires out their body for gain, but also any person who is willing to provide sexual favours for gain or lust. This is true whether that person is a practising prostitute or not. In other

words, the same principle applies to anyone who engages in sexual relations outside the sanctity and bonds of marriage.

Paul, of course, expects the Corinthians to express horror and revulsion at the very suggestion of uniting with a prostitute. However, in case they should entertain any lingering doubts, the apostle exclaims in one word, *Never!* Never under any circumstances should we contemplate abusing the body of Christ! Never should we contemplate union with a prostitute! However, in principle at least, this is exactly what we do when we engage in sexual relations with anyone other than our lawful husband or wife.

But what are some of the implications of sexual sin? In verse 16, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 6:16

Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, "The two will become one flesh." (NIV; cf. Gen. 2:24)

If we engage in sexual relations outside of marriage, we unite ourselves to another person. This, however, is not just a physical union. It is also a spiritual, emotional and psychological union. It involves the whole person and personality. This is why the Scripture says that a man and a woman are no longer two, but one. Physically, spiritually, emotionally and psychologically, they are no longer two (although the two partners retain their distinct individuality and personality). The sexual union has bonded them together as one. This bond cannot be severed when sexual intercourse ceases. It leaves a permanent imprint on the person and personalities of both partners to the union. This sense of union or 'oneness', of course, may be suppressed or virtually absent where the partners engage in sex purely for gain or lust.

In marriage, one of the purposes of this bonding into one, is to give to each partner the opportunity of expressing in a tangible and physical way their love, trust and respect for one another, and to satisfy each other's emotional and physical needs. Sexual union also gives them a sense of belonging inseparably to each other—and to no one else. When shared as part of a loving, caring relationship, it is intended to bind husband and wife together—spiritually, physically, emotionally and psychologically. This is one reason why God forbids pre-marital and extra-marital sex. This bonding of two people into one must be reserved for marriage alone. (Matt. 19:4-6; 1 Cor. 7:3-5)

Today, as in Paul's day, these sins are commonly defended and practised. God, however, never changes. Sex outside of marriage is still wrong. It is still as immoral now as it was then. Those Christians who commit such sins are guilty of abusing not only their own bodies, but also the body of Christ. Therefore, we can see how very serious such a sin is.

Yet, for everyone who acknowledges and renounces their sin—of whatever nature, and however vile or offensive to God—God has promised to show mercy. For those who return to him in godly sorrow and true repentance, he will forgive, cleanse, and restore them to himself and to his everlasting love and fellowship. (Matt. 21:31-32; Heb. 11:31)

We now turn our attention to verse 17. Paul had warned against engaging in physical union outside of marriage. Instead, declares the apostle, the believer was to unite himself spiritually with his Lord and Master.

Thus, in verse 17, Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 6:17

But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit. (NIV)

Physical union results in a bond that affects the whole person and personality not just physically, but also spiritually, emotionally and psychologically. Spiritual union, however, results in a bond on a far higher level than the physical.

Spiritual union with Christ implies becoming *one with* Christ. We become one with him in interest, will and purpose: That is, we unite with him in pursuing the interests of his church and kingdom. We unite with him in listening to his voice and obeying his will. We unite with him in learning from his Word and following his purposes for our lives. And we unite with him in purity of thought and holiness of life. (Cf. John 15:4-8; 17:21-23)

In thus living in union and communion with our Lord and Master, we exalt and glorify the name of his Father in heaven. The more closely we become united with him spiritually, the more we become like Christ—or Christ-like.

Sexual Immorality is a Sin Against Our Body

1 Corinthians 6:18

In verse 18, Paul returns to the dangers inherent in anything that tends toward sexual immorality, when he declares:

1 Corinthians 6:18a

(18a) Flee from sexual immorality... (NIV)

Elsewhere in the Word of God, we are told to resist [the temptations of] the devil and he will flee from us. (Jas. 4:7; 1 Pet. 5:8-9) In this case, however, God's Word expressly commands us to flee from this particular sin—the sin of sexual immorality. We are not to attempt to resist it merely, but to flee from its very presence. We are to avoid all places and people where we know we are likely to be exposed to this temptation. We are to do all in our power to keep clear of enticing or alluring situations. (Cf. 2 Tim. 2:22)

Clearly, it is practically impossible to avoid this temptation totally—and the Word of God is not suggesting otherwise. However, we must remember that temptation itself is not sin—unless we dwell on the temptation. However, when we are tempted to commit any kind of sexual immorality, then we must flee from it. We must take steps to leave that situation immediately. This is the only safe response to this particular temptation. (Gen. 39:12; Heb. 13:4)

In the next part of verse 18, the apostle continues by saying:

1 Corinthians 6:18b

(18b) ...All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. (NIV)

All other sins—whether in thought, word, or deed—are 'external' to the body. Granted, all sins originate in the heart or mind, and many of them may involve the use or abuse of the body. However, no other sins affect the body and mind in the same way that sexual immorality does.

- Sexual immorality involves two people in intimate relations or in intimate physical union.
- Outside of marriage, however, intimate relations are a gross violation of both partner's *chastity, dignity, and honour*.
- Sexual immorality also involves a violation of two people's *personalities*.

- Again, sexual immorality is a violation of God's *holy temple*—our bodies.
- Also, sexual immorality is a wilful refusal to acknowledge that God's Word says that—in sexual union—*"The two will become one."* (1 Thess. 4:4-7)

These are just a few of the ways in which we defile and degrade our bodies if we become guilty of sexual immorality. It is in this sense that we sin against our own bodies.

Essentially, sexual immorality is a sin against the soul, as well as against the body. In God's eyes, this is a most serious sin. *It is not however an unforgivable sin.*

Our Body is God's Temple

1 Corinthians 6:19-20

Then, in verse 19, the apostle asks:

1 Corinthians 6:19a

(19a) Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? (NIV)

The body of the believer is sacred to the Lord. It is the dwelling place of God in the person of the Holy Spirit. Like the holy of holies, it is a most holy place, which God's Spirit sanctifies and indwells (cf. 1 Cor. 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 6:16-17; Eph. 2:21-22).

God gave us his Holy Spirit to produce within us holiness of life: a life of purity, love, and honour: a life that is being ever more conformed to the image and likeness of Christ our Redeemer. (Rom. 6:19-22)

The Holy Spirit also seals us to God unto the day of final redemption and glorification. Therefore, says Paul, in the last part of verse 19 and verse 20:

1 Corinthians 6:19b-20

(19b) You are not your own; (20) you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body. (NIV)

From these remarks, it is evident that—when Paul speaks of the body here—he is speaking comprehensively of the body and soul. For when Christ redeemed us, he redeemed us body and soul. This lends support to the argument that sexual immorality is not only a sin against the body, but also a sin against the soul.

Paul makes it plain to the Corinthians—and to us—that the body is not ours to do with as we please. It has been redeemed. Our body is the purchased possession of the Lord. As such, it should be used only for his honour and glory—and never for any dishonourable or degrading purpose.

Christ paid for our body and soul with the ransom price of his own blood. And that blood has cleansed us from all iniquity. How, then—implies Paul to the Corinthians—can we despise the blood of Christ, and count as naught the sacrifice that he made to atone for our sins? (Heb. 9:12-14; 1 Pet. 1:18-19)

Let us, then, surrender our whole being—body and soul—to the one who loved us, and who died to make us his own. Let us yield ourselves wholly to him as a living sacrifice. Let us seek to honour him with our bodies, and let us glorify his holy name by the way in which we conduct ourselves in body, mind and soul. (Rom. 12:1-2; Phil. 1:20)

1 Corinthians Chapter 7

Marital Duties

1 Corinthians 7:1-7

The church at Corinth had written to Paul asking for his instructions and advice on several different matters. One of these was the question of marriage. Possibly, in view of certain local circumstances prevailing at the time, the Corinthian church sought the apostle's advice concerning the advisability of marriage.

In his reply, of course, the Holy Spirit of God guided Paul. As with all other Scriptures, what the apostle wrote here he wrote by inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

The apostle begins his reply to the Corinthian's letter by saying in chapter 7, verse 1:

1 Corinthians 7:1

The opening sentence indicates that Paul is responding directly to the matters raised by the Corinthian believers in their letter.

Several versions translate the latter part of verse 1 as, *It is good for a man not to touch a woman*, (or similar). The word translated 'touch' covers various meanings of that word; but the meaning intended here is that it is good for a man not to touch or make contact with a woman intimately, as in sexual relations within marriage.

In saying that it was good for a man not to marry, the apostle is not implying that the celibate or single state is to be preferred above marriage. Such teaching would contradict the Word of God, and would fly in the teeth of the way that God has constituted mankind as male and female. Such teaching would also expressly contradict Paul's own teaching elsewhere about the sanctity of marriage and of the marriage state.

However, these remarks do indicate clearly that—under certain circumstances, and for certain individuals—the single state is not only to be preferred, but is positively good or beneficial for that person. Such a person should learn to accept the single state as a gift (*charisma*) and a blessing from God—perhaps to allow that person to serve God with undivided attention. (Cf. vv.26, 32-35)

The celibate state to which Paul refers comes as a gift from God above, together with the gift of self-control. It bears no relationship with that form of celibacy enforced upon individuals by man, or by so-called church tradition. According to the apostle Paul, those who forbid others to marry are teaching a doctrine of demons. In other words, the prohibition to marry is not merely misguided; it is satanic, perverse, unnatural, and thoroughly evil. (1 Tim. 4:1-3)

There is a world of a difference between what *Paul* is teaching about celibacy, and what *others* elsewhere were teaching about celibacy. One is a gift from God. As such, it is *beneficial* to the individuals concerned. The other is the teaching of demons, and as such, it is *harmful* to the individuals concerned.

Again, we must remember that the instructions and advice that the apostle Paul was giving in chapter 7, was given in order to help the Corinthian believers through a particular crisis in their local church life or local geographical area (v.26).

Paul had said,

It is good for a man not to marry (v. 1b).

Then, in verse 2, the apostle adds:

1 Corinthians 7:2

In the city of Corinth, immorality was rife. As we have already seen, it had infiltrated the church and had defiled some of its members.

Paul is practical. He knows that men and women need companionship—for so God created them. The apostle knows too that men and women need an emotional and sexual relationship with one another—for God created this need within them. If, however, they cannot express and fulfil their physical needs within marriage, then they will be severely tempted to seek fulfilment outside of marriage. (Prov. 5:18-21)

This, of course, is what the Scriptures forbid. Therefore, Paul says, that—although, at present, singleness is the preferred option—yet, it must not continue to be the preferred option if that would lead to sin. Since the temptation to immorality is so intense, marriage must become the preferred option—even under the present adverse circumstances. Only those to whom God has given the gift of self-control, and who feel no compulsion to marry, should remain single.

We should not conclude from this verse that Paul is saying that marriage is merely a way of escaping from sexual immorality. Neither Paul in particular, nor the Scriptures in general, ever teach this view. On the contrary, God considers marriage to be an exalted state, and a blessed state of holy union between a husband and his wife. (Eph. 5:28-31,33) Unless there are some predisposing circumstances (e.g., serious illness or physical disability), loving sexual union is a vital and integral part of the marriage state. It is a state that God has promised to bless—so long as the marriage bed remains undefiled. (Heb. 13:4)

It should be noted from verse 2, that a husband was permitted to have only one woman (his own wife), and the wife was permitted to have only one man (her own husband). Within the Christian church, polygamous marriages were forbidden. No Christian husband was permitted to take concubines in addition to his wife. Again, no Christian husband or wife was permitted to share sexual relations with partners to whom they were not legally married. Marriage was to be strictly and exclusively between one man and one woman: a husband and his wife.

In Corinth, of course—as in many places today—it was commonplace to have multiple sexual partners. Over the centuries, it seems that little has changed.

Speaking now of conjugal relations in particular, the apostle says in verse 3:

1 Corinthians 7:3

In marriage, each partner assumes mutual duties and responsibilities in the sight of God. One of these is to provide for each other's physical and sexual needs on a regular basis. The fulfilment of sexual needs is not an option that either partner is entitled to provide or withhold at their pleasure, or under certain circumstances. A couple may abstain from sexual relations only if this be a mutually agreed and temporary arrangement.

It is each partner's duty before God to fulfil the other's needs. This means, of course, that it is not sufficient for one partner or the other to fulfil only their own needs. As far as possible and practical, both partners are to ensure that they satisfy one another's needs fully.

Extending this thought further, the apostle writes in verse 4:

1 Corinthians 7:4

This is the reason why neither partner is entitled to defraud or deny the other. God has granted the wife complete rights over her husband's body. She has therefore the right to expect her husband to fulfil his duty to her—lovingly, considerately, and until her needs have been fully met. In the same way, God has granted the husband complete rights over his wife's body. He has therefore the right to expect his wife to fulfil her duty to him—with the same love and consideration, and until his needs have been fully met.

These rights, of course, must not be abused. The fulfilment of a partner's sexual needs is a marital duty, responsibility, and privilege. Ideally, it ought also to be an expression of each partner's deep and intense love for one another; and a means of bonding them even closer to each other. As such, a husband and his wife should enjoy sexual relations to the full. They should receive sexual relations as a gift from God, and they should thank and praise him for creating man and woman to enjoy such intimate, soul-unifying, and satisfying love.

In verse 5, Paul says:

1 Corinthians 7:5

Having shown the Scriptural foundation for, and the importance of, natural relations, the apostle now declares to the Corinthian husbands and wives that they must not deprive each other. They must not refuse to meet one another's physical and sexual needs.

The word here translated *deprive* is a word meaning *to defraud* or *to rob*. To deny sex to our marriage partner is to defraud them or rob them of that which is theirs by right, and which we are duty bound to provide in marriage.

Paul makes one exception to this rule: Where, for example, the husband and wife have mutually agreed to spend time in prayer, then they may abstain temporarily from sexual relations. However, this exception must never become the rule. Thus, in the latter part of verse 5, Paul writes:

(5b) ...Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. (NIV)

Neither the believers at Corinth, or we ourselves, have any right to expose ourselves to unnecessary temptations. Thus, God's Word requires married couples to engage in regular sexual relations—abstaining only for short temporary periods of prayer and devotion. Afterward, they must resume normal marital relations, lest Satan take advantage and tempt them into sin.

In verse 6, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 7:6

Clearly, this remark does not apply to the immediately foregoing passage, since that passage expresses the teaching of God's Word for the marriage relationship. What Paul seems to be referring to in this verse, is his concession to permit marriage during the present crisis to those who felt unable to accept his advice to remain single (vv.1-2,26).

Paul is not commanding the Corinthian believers either to stay single or to marry. In the present unfavourable circumstances (the nature of which is not specified by the apostle), Paul is *recommending* or *advising* the believers to remain single. However, the apostle is conceding to the Corinthians the right to decide this matter for themselves. (Under more

favourable circumstances, they would do this anyway). For those, however, who choose to marry, everything that Paul has said about sexual relations in verses 2–5 apply to them.

In verse 7, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 7:7

In the present crisis, Paul wishes that everyone could remain single, as he was. Then they would not be concerned about their partner's welfare or about the welfare of their children. Whatever the nature and severity of the current crisis, it would be temporary. Then, men and women could safely seek marriage, without being overwhelmed with unnecessary anxieties, hardships, or extremely distressing circumstances.

Some commentators believe that Paul was anticipating the imminent return of the Lord when he told the Corinthians that it was better for them to remain single at this time. However, this view fails to account adequately for the current crisis at Corinth. Again, this view seems most unlikely, as Paul gives no such instructions or advice to any of the other churches to which he wrote. In addition, it would contradict the apostle's own teaching elsewhere, both in respect of the marriage relationship, and in respect of those events which must precede the Lord's second coming.

In the latter part of verse 7, the apostle writes:

(7b)...But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that. (NIV)

Paul recognises that a person cannot remain in an unmarried state unless he or she has received the gift (*charisma*) of self-control from God. To attempt to remain unmarried without this gift would be folly. It would create insuperable difficulties in that person's life, and leave him or her exposed to severe temptation to commit sexual immorality. (Cf. Matt. 19:10-12)

For those, then, who have not been given the gift of self-control over their sexual desires, Paul concedes that marriage is not only the preferred option, but it is—for them—the *only* option.

The Unmarried and Widows

1 Corinthians 7:8-9

Turning his attention now to those who were either unmarried or widowed, and who had no immediate intention of seeking marriage, the apostle says in verse 8:

1 Corinthians 7:8

In verse 1 of this chapter, Paul had been addressing individuals generally when he advised them to remain single—unless this was likely to prove unwise. Now, however, the apostle is addressing two distinct groups within the church: the unmarried and widows. Unlike the general group addressed earlier, the unmarried were those who had already chosen to remain single—at least, for the time being. The present crisis had not forced this choice upon them. Rather, their choice to remain single had pre-dated that crisis.

The unmarried, of course, may elect to seek marriage at some later stage. However, now that events had overtaken them, Paul considers that they would be better to remain unmarried for the foreseeable future. The apostle applies the same advice to widows (and to widowers). For the time being at least, they should not seek to remarry.

In verse 9, however, Paul qualifies what he has just said:

1 Corinthians 7:9

If it proved impossible for either the unmarried or the widows to exercise restraint, then they should seek a marriage partner. In this way, they could fulfil their natural desires within the bounds of a healthy, loving relationship—a relationship that would be sanctified and blessed by God himself. It would be better by far to enjoy sexual fulfilment within marriage, than to become inflamed with passion and consumed with unfulfilled desire. (1 Tim. 5:11,14)

Only those to whom God had given the gift of self-control over their natural sex drive, should ever attempt to remain single—and only for as long as they remained in possession of this gift. God, however, could decide later to withdraw this gift. In such an eventuality—and if the person involved began to feel the need for love and companionship, and for sexual relations—then he or she must seek a marriage partner as prescribed in God's Word.

Couples Already Married

Separation and Divorce

1 Corinthians 7:10-11

Paul now addresses those who were already married. In verse 10, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 7:10

What Paul had just said was not merely a command of the apostle himself—even although he was writing this letter by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. What he said was a command of the Lord Jesus Christ: A wife must not separate from her husband. In the sight of God, a husband and his wife had been united with each other. They were no longer two, but one. Therefore, what God had joined together, man must not put asunder. For this reason, God forbids a husband from divorcing his wife, or a wife from divorcing her husband. (Matt. 19:3-9)

Only two possible exceptions to this rule exist in God's Word: These are divorce due to marital unfaithfulness or adultery, and divorce due to wilful and final desertion. (Matt. 5:32; 1 Cor. 7:15) In the case of adultery, the exclusive marital relationship between the husband and his wife has been violated, and the bond of union severed. In the case of wilful and final desertion, the marital needs of the innocent party is being deliberately denied, and they are being defrauded of their due marital rights. This renders the marriage union ineffective, and severs the bond between a husband and his wife.

In the Word of God, these are the only two recognised grounds for permanent separation or divorce. Only if a person is divorced under one or other of these conditions, is he or she free to marry another partner. All other grounds of divorce or permanent separation are invalid in the sight of God.

Paul therefore reminds the Corinthians of the Lord's express teaching on this subject: A wife must not separate from her husband.

Then, in verse 11, the apostle adds:

1 Corinthians 7:11

Paul recognises that many of the people in the Corinthian church lived with unbelieving partners (although he deals with this situation more specifically below). One partner had

been converted—possibly, under the ministry of either Paul or Apollos—but the other partner remained an unbeliever.

Some of these unbelieving partners made life extremely difficult for their converted wife or husband. Possibly, they subjected them to constant verbal abuse, or even to prolonged mental or physical cruelty.

If matters reached such a desperate state of affairs that it was no longer advisable to live under the same roof, then Paul conceded that separation might prove the only option. If, however, a husband or wife found themselves forced to separate from their marriage partner, he or she was not thereby free to seek divorce and subsequent remarriage: For, although separated, they were still married to their original partners. Rather, the separated partner must seek reconciliation with his or her own partner whenever this proved possible.

In the latter part of verse 11, Paul says:

(11b) ...And a husband must not divorce his wife. (NIV)

Paul also makes it plain that a husband must not divorce his wife. Unless on the grounds already mentioned, no husband had the right to repudiate his wife. God had instituted marriage as a life-long partnership and union.

The only event that can legitimately dissolve the marriage partnership is the death of one or other of the parties involved. Only then does the surviving partner become free to seek remarriage—if he or she so desires (v.39).

Christians Married to Unbelieving Partners

1 Corinthians 7:12-16

Paul now addresses other married couples within the church at Corinth. In verses 12 and 13 the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 7:12-13

Paul begins this section with the remark:

(12a) To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord)...

What the apostle was writing, of course, he was writing by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. As such, the contents of his letter were, and are, the infallible, inerrant and authoritative Word of God. However, what Paul is about to say now, differed from what he had said previously (in verse 10). In verse 10, the apostle began his remarks by saying,

(10a) To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord)...

On that occasion, Paul had said *not I, but the Lord* because—while on earth—the Lord Jesus had given explicit instructions regarding the indissolubility of the marriage bond.

In the verse now under consideration, however, which deals with a different marriage situation, the Lord had not given any explicit instructions while on earth. These instructions, however, were now being given to the church through the apostle Paul, writing by inspiration of God's Holy Spirit.

Therefore, on this occasion, Paul says:

(12a) To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord)...

Paul now deals specifically with the situation where an unbelieving husband lives with a believing wife—or vice versa. This passage provides no grounds of support for the notion that a believer may marry an unbeliever. The Word of God expressly forbids such a union. (2 Cor. 6:14-18)

Paul is addressing those who were *already married* before one or other of the partners subsequently became a Christian. However, the fact that a former unbeliever is later converted to Christ provides the converted partner with no grounds or reason for separating from their unbelieving spouse. So long as the unbelieving partner is willing to live with his or her converted partner, then the believing partner must not seek a separation.

Indeed, there is a most important reason for remaining together, as Paul now explains in verse 14a:

1 Corinthians 7:14a

In the marriage relationship, the practical outworking of the believing partner's faith sanctifies the unbelieving partner. The unbelieving partner has not been sanctified in the sense that he or she has been made a partaker of the indwelling Spirit of God. However, they have been sanctified in the sense that the Spirit of God indwelling their partner's life has a powerful external influence on the unbeliever's life.

The presence of the Holy Spirit within their believing partner's life brings the unbelieving partner much closer to the influences of God's Word and God's Spirit. He or she is in that sense sanctified by the faith of his believing partner. We may consider these external operations of God's Word and God's Spirit as God's gracious influences on the unbelieving partner's soul.

Again, God considers the faith of one member of a household to sanctify—or set apart—the entire household. This does not mean that one person's faith results automatically in the justification of the entire household—although this may follow. It means only that they have been set apart as especially favoured in the eyes of the Lord, and especially amenable to the means of grace.

Clearly, then, an unbelieving partner of a believing husband or wife is in incomparably more favourable circumstances than would have been the case had both partners remained unconverted. It is for these reasons that Paul then adds:

1 Corinthians 7:14b

Here we learn that the parent's faith results in the sanctification of their children: That is, the practical outworking of their parent's faith produces a sanctifying influence on their children. The children are sanctified, or set apart from worldly influences and set apart to spiritual and godly influences, by their parent's holy and godly manner of life.

The children are sanctified through being taught the Word of God; through prayer, and through the worship services of the church. In all these ways and more, children of believing parents—or of at least one believing parent—are sanctified in the sight of God. (Cf. 1 Tim. 4:4-5)

Children of believing parents (or of one believing parent) are special in the eyes of the Lord. Although they must personally come to faith in Christ, yet—while they remain unconverted—they remain under God's special care and protection by virtue of their parent's faith. (This is one of the ministries specially assigned to God's angels—to take care of these little ones, and to watch over them by night and by day. (Matt. 18:10))

If it were not for the parent's faith, these children would be unclean and unholy. As it is, however, they are clean. They are holy. They are not yet *justified*—but they are *holy*. They are holy to the Lord. They are set apart to God as the object of his special love and pro-

tecting care. Thus, the children of believing parents—or of at least one believing parent—enjoy immeasurably greater privileges spiritually than those with unbelieving parents.

What a great responsibility believing parents have toward their children! How important to read the Word of God to them or with them, and to explain it to them! How important to pray with them and for them! How important to take them to the services of the church! And, above all, how important to show them by our personal example something of the love of God, and of a consistently caring and godly life.

In each of these ways and more, the children are being sanctified:

- by the sanctifying influences of the Holy Spirit in their parents' lives,
- by the sanctifying influences of the Word of God,
- by their parents' loving and godly example and lifestyle.

Thus, although regeneration and justification were still essential, yet there was a sense in which these children were being set apart as holy—holy to the Lord.

In verses 12 and 13, Paul says that a believing husband or wife should not separate from his or her unbelieving partner, so long as that partner was willing to continue living with the converted partner. The unbeliever was, in fact, sanctified by the believing partner's faith—and so were their children: That is, the unbelieving partner was being exposed to some extent to the sanctifying influences of the Holy Spirit in their believing partner's life; they were being exposed to the influence of God's Word, and they were being exposed to the example of their partner's godly lifestyle.

Paul anticipates, however, that some unbelieving partners would be completely unwilling to go on living with their converted spouse, and would actually desert the believing wife or husband.

Therefore, in verse 15, Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 7:15

Paul envisages a situation where an unbelieving partner absolutely refuses to continue living with his or her converted spouse. Although every reasonable attempt has been made to resolve the situation, the unbeliever categorically refuses to continue the marriage relationship, and indeed abandons his or her marriage partner.

Under such circumstances, the believing partner is no longer bound. He or she is no longer bound to endure the suffering and distress that living together as man and wife would entail. The believer should accept separation as the most appropriate course of action in this situation. After all, God has called us to live in peace.

Paul had said that, in such circumstances, the believing partner was no longer bound. Rather, he or she was to permit the unbelieving partner to leave—thus effectively severing the marriage bond. However, the apostle does not expressly say that the believer is now free to seek divorce and remarriage—although some commentators believe that this is clearly implied when Paul says that they are no longer bound.

At any rate, two grounds—and two grounds alone—are generally accepted among many conservative evangelicals as being a Scriptural basis for separation or divorce. These are:

- Separation or divorce on the grounds of adultery or marital unfaithfulness.
- Separation or divorce on the grounds of wilful and permanent desertion.

It is possible that the situation Paul is addressing here in verse 15 falls into the second category above as a valid ground for divorce—but this cannot be established with absolute certainty from this passage alone.

God, of course, never encourages divorce among his people. Indeed, he expressly states that he hates divorce. In God's eyes, marriage is for life—and the Lord certainly does not condone or recognise the manner in which so many people today seek and obtain divorce. (Mal. 2:15-16)

Paul, therefore, was not encouraging couples to divorce one another—even although some of these couples were living under most difficult circumstances. The apostle concedes the necessity of separation in some cases; but he would accede to divorce only as a last resort, and after all attempts at reconciliation had failed. This is in line with the Lord's own teaching on divorce, where he recognises no other grounds for divorce except adultery. Adultery violates the sacred one-flesh, one-spirit union between a husband and his wife. (Mal. 2:15)

However, Paul would much rather that a believing husband or wife continued to live with his or her unbelieving partner. Therefore, in verse 16, the apostle asks:

1 Corinthians 7:16

More important even than the personal relationship between a husband and his wife, is the relationship that each partner bears to God. In this case, the believing partner stands in right relationship to God—and this by God's grace and mercy toward him or her. The unbelieving partner, however, yet remains under the wrath and condemnation of God. He or she is bound for a lost eternity—unless, by God's grace and mercy, this partner too is brought to repentance and faith in Christ the Redeemer.

Earlier, Paul had said that the unbelieving partner was sanctified by the faith of the believing partner. But, if this be so—and if the believing partner truly loves his unbelieving spouse—should he or she not consider his or her partner's salvation and spiritual welfare to be of the utmost importance?

So long as the unbelieving partner was willing to live with the believing partner, then the believer should count it a joy, a privilege, and an immense responsibility to demonstrate to their beloved partner something of God's love, mercy and grace in Christ Jesus. (1 Pet. 3:1-6)

Remaining Where God Called

1 Corinthians 7:17-24

Under the present adverse circumstances, therefore, Paul advises that people should remain as they were at the moment—either single or married. However, at this point, the apostle widens the application of this principle to include many other categories and situations involving the Lord's people.

Thus, in verse 17, Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 7:17

Clearly, this wider application of the principle did not apply only to the crisis at Corinth. Paul gave this same advice to all the churches—even to those who were not presently facing a particularly severe crisis.

We each have a place in life. God has called us to that place, and has equipped us to function most effectively under specific circumstances. In his providence and grace, God gives us particular gifts, talents or abilities to use in that place, or under these circum-

stances. Therefore, we should use God's gifts to the utmost, and to his eternal glory (v.7; Rom. 12:3-8).

External circumstances are of relatively little importance. What matters is recognising God's hand of providence in our present circumstances, and seeking to fulfil God's will for us within the bounds of our present situation.

As a practical example, the apostle writes in verse 18:

1 Corinthians 7:18

There was no need for believers to change their present state or condition. As an example, circumcision belonged to the covenant that God had made with Abraham. It was required of all Jewish parents that they circumcise their male children whenever they reached eight days old. Circumcision was a sign that God's covenant with Abraham extended to his children. This sign, therefore, indicated the children's special covenant relationship with the Lord God in whom their parents trusted.

The covenant of circumcision, however, did not apply to the Christian believer. Now, the faith of believing parents sanctified their children to God—without the necessity for the former outward sign. (Paul does not deal with baptism in the present context.) God considers the children of believing parents (or of at least one believing parent) in the same way that he considered the children of faithful Abraham: i.e., as children of the (New) Covenant. This does not mean necessarily that all these children are saved. However, it means that—because of their parents' faith—these children are especially favoured by God; they are sanctified as holy in his sight.

In a unique sense, children of believing parents are set apart to God. They are brought within the influences of the means of grace. They are placed under God's protecting care, and under the protecting care of his holy angels.

Now, then—inferred Paul—since circumcision no longer applies, you need not concern yourselves with this rite. If you have been circumcised already, do not seek to disguise the marks of circumcision—for this is unnecessary. Again, if you have not been circumcised, then do not seek to be circumcised—for, as a sign of the covenant, this is no longer required of God's people.

Thus, Paul exhorts these believers simply to accept themselves as they were, and the way they were. The apostle encourages them to serve God in their existing state, condition or situation—without attempting to make changes that God did not require.

To explain and reinforce what he has just said, the apostle writes in verse 19:

1 Corinthians 7:19

As a former Pharisee, and a zealous adherent of the Mosaic Law, Paul would have known very well the importance of circumcision among the Jewish people. God had commanded Abraham to observe this rite, and he required all Jewish parents since Abraham's time to circumcise their male children on the eighth day after their birth.

Circumcision was the physical sign of the promise that God had made to Abraham while he and Sarah were yet childless. God had promised Abraham that he would bless him, and make of him a great nation—through which all nations on earth would be blessed. Abraham had believed God, and God had reckoned him righteous for his faith. As a sign that God would fulfil this promise—or covenant—with Abraham, God commanded the patriarch to circumcise every male in his household, and in the household of every Hebrew family. Those who were not circumcised were excluded from the covenant that God had made with Abraham. (Gen. 17:1-14)

Paul knew all this. He knew also that many Jewish converts to Christianity still believed that they should circumcise their children. Thus, in certain churches, conflict arose between those who advocated circumcision, and those who were convinced that it was no longer necessary.

Elsewhere, Paul deals with this problem in some detail. However, for the moment, the apostle is content to remind the Corinthian believers of the irrelevance of external rites and ceremonies, now that Christ had come. Therefore, the apostle declares:

(19) Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts. (NIV)

The rite of circumcision is no longer necessary or valid. (Gal. 5:1-6; 6:15; Col. 3:11)

Now, God commands faith—faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, God commands obedience—obedience to the teachings of his Son and his apostles. This teaching includes instruction about baptism, but it does not include instruction about continuing the rite of circumcision. On the contrary, that rite passed away with the old economy.

Therefore, let the Corinthian believers keep God's commands. Let them follow the Lord's teaching as it was now being given to them through the apostles by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Let them do what God says in his Word, and through his divinely appointed apostles. Then, they would not need to concern themselves with the externals of a former, but now dead, economy.

Therefore, in verse 20, Paul again says:

1 Corinthians 7:20

Here, the apostle exhorts these believers to honour God in their present state and capacity, and under their present circumstances. They should remember that God had called them *in* their present situation, not *from* their present situation. Unless their present situation was wholly incompatible with their position as a Christian, they should continue to serve the Lord where they now were (v.17; cf. Luke 3:10-14).

Paul was not giving a command, or laying down a principle here, that was designed to prevent these Corinthian believers from seeking improvement or advancement if the occasion arose. The apostle expressly says otherwise below, in relation to slaves. Paul is merely providing ground-rules for these believers, and advising them to remain at all times within the will and purposes of God for their lives. They should bear in mind that God often places his people in specific situations, positions or occupations in order to point other people to his Son.

Paul now deals with one practical example that was commonplace in his day. In verse 21, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 7:21

Paul does not enter into discussion or debate about the rights and wrongs of slavery. He deals with the situation as it then existed, and as it related to those slaves who had been converted to Christ. If a person was a bondservant when God called him, then that person must not think of himself at a disadvantage. He must not become unsettled in mind or troubled by his present condition. The Lord called him while in that condition that he might live for him, serve him, honour him, and suffer for him there. (1 Pet. 2:18-21)

Nevertheless, Paul is not suggesting for one moment that—if the opportunity presented itself—a person should not seek to improve upon such a condition. If, for example—by the providence of God—a slave should be able to secure his freedom, then he should certainly embrace that opportunity.

As a rule, this principle might be applied to many other occupations. Where we now are, we serve. However, if—*by the providence of God*—we are given the opportunity to serve him elsewhere, then we may avail ourselves of that opportunity. We must be extremely careful, however, to ensure that such a move from our present situation does not conflict in any way with God's express plans and purposes for our lives. Similarly, we must be sure that such a move does not take us away from a place to which God has previously, and specifically, appointed us—unless it be at his express direction.

Returning for a moment to the issue of slavery: Paul did not look upon slavery in the same negative way that many people do today. Of course, slavery was unjust and indefensible in the sight of God. However, Paul sees its positive aspects. He sees it as a place of opportunity to serve the Lord. The apostle also recognises—as does the Word of God generally—that the status of a slave is not in any way inferior to that of the master. In God's eyes, both master and slave stood on the same level. (Col. 3:11; 1 Tim. 6:1-2)

In addition, those slaves who had come to know Christ as their Lord and Master were no longer the slaves of men. They were the bondslaves of the Lord—and yet, at the same time, they were the Lord's freedmen.

Thus, in verse 22, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 7:22

Those who belong to Christ are his freedmen—and yet his slaves. Those who are in physical slavery have nevertheless been released from spiritual slavery. Again, even although a person is a slave physically, Christ looks upon him as his freedman. He is one over whom Christ—and not man—has the right to exercise complete power and authority.

Even those who come to know Christ as free men and women are yet Christ's slaves. The Lord has delivered them from spiritual bondage. He has released them from the chains of sin. He has set them free from a guilty and accusing conscience. (John 8:31-36)

The Lord has not set them free, however, to return to sin, or to live as they please. On the contrary, Christ has purchased their freedom from sin with his own blood, in order that they might become his 'free slaves.' They are his by redeeming blood—and they must serve, honour and glorify Christ their Lord, Master, and rightful Owner. (Rom. 6:18-23; Gal. 5:13; 1 Cor. 6:20)

Thus, in verse 23, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 7:23

At this point, Paul widens his allusion to slavery. Now he includes any form of unjustified or unbiblical control that men or women attempt to exert over other men or women. In God's eyes, every person—*considered as an individual*—stands on an equal footing before him. This is true regardless of the person's age, race, colour, sex, rank, status or position. No one has the right, therefore, to impose on other people his own ideas, opinions or particular form of teaching. The only form of teaching which we are bound to obey, is that set forth in the Word of God—the Bible.

God, of course, commands us to respect and obey those whom he has placed in positions of authority over us. However, when we obey them, we are obeying them as God's appointed servants. (Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:16-17)

Generally, however, Paul is saying that we must not submit ourselves to a yoke of slavery—particularly, of a moral or spiritual kind. Since we are Christ's freedmen, we must not yield—even for moment—to man's personal opinions, or to man-made traditions, rules or regulations. We must submit ourselves only to the teaching of God's Word as it is clearly set forth in the Bible. (Gal. 2:4-5; 5:1)

We are Christ's freedmen—and Christ's slaves. Under no circumstances, must we become slaves of men. We ought to heed godly counsel and godly advice very seriously indeed. Nevertheless, ultimately, we must act in accordance with God's will for our particular situation, and in line with God's written Word, the Bible.

One day, God will hold us to account for what we have done—or failed to do. Therefore, in verse 24, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 7:24

Once again, the apostle reminds the Corinthian believers that they were duty-bound to accept their present situation as God given and God appointed. They were to accept their responsibilities before God. They were to live as Christ's bondslaves, and not the bondslaves, or dominated and submissive servants, of any man.

Paul exhorts these believers to remain where they were when God called them. They were to serve the Lord in the place of his appointing—unless and until the Lord himself directed otherwise. (Col. 3:22-24)

Again, we must bear in mind that Paul was not giving these instructions merely to the crisis-torn church at Corinth. Concerning our station in life, this was the rule that Paul laid down—or ordained—in all the churches. This rule, therefore, was to be observed by the Lord's people everywhere. We should continue to serve where God has specifically placed us or called us, and serve elsewhere only when God directs us clearly to move. By thus trusting and obeying God, we can be assured that the Lord will provide, and that he will bless both our families and ourselves.

Distractions of Married Life**1 Corinthians 7:25-35**

Paul now deals with one other group within the Corinthian church—virgins.

In verse 25, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 7:25

Paul addresses those who were yet virgins. The Greek word for virgin (*παρθένος*, *parthenos*) can refer to either a male or a female who has never engaged in sexual intercourse. In this passage, however, Paul appears to be speaking principally of female virgins.

Since he has already addressed single or unmarried people, it is possible that the virgins Paul was speaking of here were those virgins who were betrothed or engaged to be married. Again, some of the single or unmarried people to whom he had already spoken, may have been married previously. Those virgins now thinking of marriage, however, would have been contemplating for the first time the commitments, duties and responsibilities of such a step.

In this verse, Paul says that he has no command from the Lord: i.e., the Lord Jesus did not lay down specific instructions for the kind of situation that Paul is now addressing. Paul, however, was an apostle. This meant that he had been authorised and sent by the Lord to represent his name. It also meant, that—when he was teaching or speaking in the name of the Lord—Paul, or any other apostle, was speaking by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. (1 Tim. 1:12-13; 1 Pet. 3:15-16; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 1:19-21)

Every word that an apostle of the Lord Jesus spoke or wrote to the churches, therefore, was to be received as the very word of God. The apostles' teaching was authoritative,

inerrant and infallible. It was God's Word spoken by the apostles under the direct guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

The holy prophets of the Old Testament exercised a similar office and ministry. What they spoke, were the very words of God. (1 Cor. 14:36-37; 2 Cor. 10:8-10; 1 Thess. 2:13; 4:8) However, neither a prophet nor an apostle was at liberty to teach something that God had not revealed to him, or commanded him to teach.

On this particular occasion, the apostle was not passing on a command or set of instructions that the Corinthians were bound to obey. On the contrary, Paul stated that he was giving them his judgment on the matter. Even so, the apostle considered that they ought to consider his advice and counsel very seriously, since his judgment was given by inspiration of the Holy Spirit (cf. v.40). As one, therefore, whom God considered trustworthy and faithful, the apostle was presenting the Corinthians with God-inspired, sound common sense advice, to help them deal with their present situation.

Thus, in verse 26, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 7:26

In view of the perilous times and circumstances, Paul considered that virgins should defer any proposed marriage arrangements, and remain single for the present. To have embarked upon marriage at this time, would only have added considerably to their present troubles, anxieties and concerns.

However, although this was Paul's *opinion* as a godly and concerned individual, the apostle made it plain that the believers at Corinth were not bound to accept this particular advice. They must exercise their own discretion in accordance with the situation then prevailing, and in line with the general teaching and principles of God's Word.

(We must bear in mind, of course, that much of the New Testament had not yet been committed to writing. The Corinthians depended to some extent on the teaching of the Old Testament Scriptures. In addition, they possibly had access to various extracts from the Gospels, together with a few individual epistles written to them or passed on to them from other local churches. Much—but not all—of the early New Testament teaching was oral. The apostles, pastors, elders and other teachers in the early church presented this teaching to the people.)

In verse 27, the apostle briefly summarises what he had said earlier:

1 Corinthians 7:27

While the current crisis prevailed, Paul thought it advisable for the believers to remain as they were. They should not seek to add to their present troubles by changing their existing situation or by taking on additional commitments and responsibilities.

Then, in verse 28a, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 7:28a

There is, of course, no sin attached to marriage. Marriage is an institution, a gift and a blessing from God. However, despite Paul's clear qualifications, some of these believers might have thought it a sin to disregard the apostle's advice; especially if they believed that Paul's advice was the advice or instructions of the Lord Jesus himself. However—and as Paul had tried to make clear—in spite of the apostle's sound common sense advice, the Corinthian believers remained free to exercise their own discretion in this matter. If they chose to marry, they could marry. If a betrothed or engaged virgin chose to marry, she was perfectly free to do so.

Paul had tried to offer godly counsel and sound advice to suit the prevailing circumstances. Nevertheless, if—in this particular matter—they believed that marriage was necessary, or that it was what God required of them, then they must marry. They would not be committing any sin by marrying, or by disregarding Paul's *apostolic advice* on this matter (vv.36-38). (Believers were not, however, at liberty to set aside any *apostolic commands* or *instructions*.)

In verse 28b, the apostle continues:

1 Corinthians 7:28b

In his own personal life, the apostle Paul had already endured much suffering, hardship and persecution for the sake of Christ. These were the 'normal' sufferings of believers at that time. However, if as an unmarried man, the apostle had to endure such intense suffering, how much greater would be the suffering if it involved a wife and family as well?

Moreover, if these were just the 'normal' sufferings of believers at that time, how much greater must have been the sufferings for Christians at Corinth? The crises within the church almost overwhelmed these believers. Apparently, also, they were facing another extremely difficult situation *outside* the church.

Thus, Paul explains that he is not trying to restrict the rights and privileges of these dear fellow believers, but to protect them from more worries and anxieties. He is attempting to shield them from the intense sufferings and persecutions that will be inflicted upon them for their faith, and which would be more keenly felt where there were families and children. (Cf. Jer. 16:1-4; cf. also Luke 21:20-24)

Living as we are, over 2000 years later, we can have little or no real conception of the intensity of the early Christian's sufferings. Therefore, we are sometimes puzzled as to why Paul would advise against marriage, which, after all, God himself had instituted for the good of mankind.

However, the apostle knew—from a personal and practical point of view—exactly what marriage in these circumstances would entail. It is certain that he would not have given such advice without spending much time with God in prayerful intercession about the matter. Such was his care for all the churches.

How fortunate we are today—and how thankful we ought to be to God—that we are free to enjoy the blessings of marriage, or the blessings of a single life, without persecution from outside. These, however, were the very persecutions, sorrows and sufferings to which many believers at that time and place found themselves exposed on a daily and hourly basis. Even so, this present world is not our real home. We ought not, therefore, to commit ourselves to the things of this world, as though we could hold on to them forever.

This is the thought that now engages Paul's attention in verses 29-31:

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

Paul is reminding the believers at Corinth that the world, and everything in it, is transient. It will not last forever. In relation to eternity, time is very short. It is but a fleeting shadow. (Job 14:1-2; Ps. 39:4-7; Jas. 4:14; cf. 1 John 2:18a)

Bearing in mind, therefore, the brevity of this present life, we ought not to set our hopes and aspirations on the things of this world—but on the things of the world to come. Everything that we have in this age will pass away. That which we inherit in the age to come will never pass away. (Cf. Rom. 13:11-12)

When Paul says that those who have wives should live as though they had none (v.29), he is not for one minute suggesting that a husband should in any sense neglect or deprive

his wife. This would be contrary to the apostle's teaching elsewhere where he says that a husband must love his wife as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for it. It would also be contrary to the teaching of God's Word as a whole. (Eph. 5:25,28)

Paul is simply saying that the husband/wife relationship—like everything else belonging to this world—is transient. When God instituted marriage for the good of mankind, he did so for this life alone. Although we will meet our loved ones in heaven, the marriage state itself will not exist there. All believers will be brothers and sisters in the Lord. (Luke 20:34-36)

While time remains, therefore, a husband must continue to live with his wife in love, purity, faithfulness, and honour. He must continue to fulfil all his marital duties toward her. However, he must not be so pre-occupied with his wife and family that he forgets that this world is not his final destination. He must live with his wife—but he must not become encumbered unduly with the cares of this life. He must provide for his family, but he must not become overburdened with material things or the ever-increasing desire for material possessions. Rather, he must prepare himself and his family for the age to come—for that age which will endure for eternity. (Cf. Luke 12:15-21)

What applies in verse 29, applies in principle and practice to verses 30 and 31. There is a time and a place for mourning and for happiness—and the Bible recognises the validity of both. However, both mourning and happiness in this world are transient. In heaven, there will be no more sorrow, crying, pain, tears or death—and therefore no more need of grief or mourning. In heaven, overwhelming and eternal joy will replace the transient happiness of this world. No happiness on earth can surpass or even begin to match that coming joy.

In the latter part of verse 30, Paul mentions those who buy things. We must bear in mind that—whatever we buy in this world—we will not be able to keep. Again, (in verse 31), those who make use of the things provided in or by this world, must remember that these things will pass away. Therefore, we ought not to become so engrossed in this world's pleasure and leisure activities—or any other interests—that we begin to neglect spiritual and eternal matters. Although, while we live in this world, we must keep both feet firmly on the ground, we must keep our mind firmly fixed on Christ in his heavenly glory.

It is often said that we can be too heavenly minded to be any earthly use. However, if our mind is not set on those things that are above, then we *will* be of no earthly use! How can we minister to the needs of people on earth, if we have not first had our own needs met from the glorious riches of heaven?

Paul therefore says that we ought to live in this world as those who were merely passing through to a better home on high. (Heb. 13:13-14) Thus, in the latter part of verse 31, the apostle writes:

(31b) ...For this world in its present form is passing away. (NIV)

Paul now returns to speaking more specifically about the commitments of married life—as opposed to single life. In verses 32 to 34a, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 7:32-34a

Paul does not want to increase the Corinthian believer's existing problems and difficulties by advising them to assume additional commitments and responsibilities. At any other time, and under any other circumstances, these commitments and responsibilities may be right and proper. However, this is not the time to take on added duties.

The apostle points out what should be evident to all: family commitments, duties, and responsibilities do not burden an unmarried man (like Paul). His freedom from these responsibilities permits him to give his undivided attention to serving the Lord. On the other hand (v.33), a married man must concern himself with the ongoing support and welfare of

his wife and family. He must endeavour to please his wife, and assist her in every possible way. He must help her attend to a whole host of family duties and responsibilities. A married man, therefore, cannot give so much of his time or energy to serving the Lord. Of necessity, his interests are divided. (1 Tim. 5:8)

What of course is true of a man is likewise true of a woman. Therefore, in the next part of verse 34, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 7:34b

A single woman is able to give herself wholeheartedly to prayer and to the work of the Lord. She is able to devote much more of her time and energies to serving the Lord without the distractions of family life. (Cf. Luke 2:36-37) On the other hand, a married woman must assume responsibility for her family. She endeavours to please her husband, and to take care of their children. Thus, although she may be just as dedicated to the Lord as her unmarried counterpart, a married woman cannot have the same degree of freedom or time to devote to the Lord's work. Of necessity, her interests must be divided.

In making this observation, the apostle Paul is not trying to discourage or disparage marriage. He is simply trying to be practical in an extremely difficult situation. Therefore, in verse 35, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 7:35

In a time of such intense persecution or distress, Paul was only saying these things for the Corinthian believer's own good. The apostle had no desire to hinder them from marrying, or to hinder them in any way. Indeed, in his other epistles, Paul speaks very highly of marriage and of the marriage relationship.

Under the circumstances then prevailing at Corinth, however, the apostle thought it advisable to remain single. This would enable the believers to concentrate their efforts on serving the Lord during a most difficult time, and it would avoid imposing unnecessary burdens on a marriage partner, or on their children.

Doing what is Right**1 Corinthians 7:36-38**

Having advised the believers at Corinth to remain single during the present crisis, however, the apostle Paul realises that this may not always be possible or in the best interests of the parties concerned. For some people, marriage may be even more advisable than remaining single. Thus, in verse 36, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 7:36

For some people, it may be more advisable to get married, than to remain unmarried. Marriage may prove necessary for such people, even during the present distress. If a man believes he is not acting properly toward the virgin to whom he is engaged (or betrothed), then they should marry.

This does not necessarily imply that the man is in danger of behaving in an unseemly manner toward his fiancée—although this could be the case. However, and perhaps with some justification, a man may feel that he is acting improperly toward his fiancée by deferring the wedding arrangements indefinitely. This would be especially true if—as the verse states—the woman was getting on in years. In either case, Paul says the man should do as he wants. Both he and his betrothed should do what is right for them. They should get married. They are not sinning in setting aside Paul's apostolic advice.

Paul had already made it plain that the believers were to determine for themselves whether—in their particular case—marriage would be right or wrong, appropriate or inappropriate. In addition, of course, the couples were not sinning in getting married. As long as they obeyed God's rule to marry only those who belonged to him, they were fulfilling God's institution, and they could expect to experience the Lord's blessings.

Paul, however, recognised that not everyone felt the need, or thought it appropriate, to enter into the commitments and responsibilities of married life at the present time. Therefore, in verse 37, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 7:37

If a man was under no compulsion to marry now, and if he had determined to remain in his present state, then he should stay single until the situation improved. This, of course, assumed that he was not doing any wrong to the virgin to whom he was engaged. It also assumed that both had agreed together to remain single until the present crisis had passed.

Those, therefore, who chose to remain unmarried, were doing the right thing under the circumstances.

In verse 38, Paul summarises what he has just said:

1 Corinthians 7:38

In this passage, Paul is speaking only to those who were engaged to be married (or betrothed in marriage). It is perfectly right and proper for a man and woman to get married—if the situation demands it. However, if marriage is not absolutely necessary at the moment, then—in view of the crisis prevailing at Corinth—it would be even better for the engaged couple if they could postpone their wedding arrangements until a more favourable time. This would avoid adding to the complexities of their existing anxieties, cares and distresses.

An alternative interpretation sees these remarks as a reference to a father and his daughter. According to this interpretation, the father should determine in his own mind whether it was wise or appropriate to discourage his virgin daughter from marrying at the present time, or whether it would be wiser and more appropriate to give her in marriage. This would be especially true if the daughter was coming on in years, and had not yet been given by her father in marriage. Thus, Paul would be saying that there would be no sin on the father's part if he decided—in spite of the apostle's temporary advice—to give his daughter to her betrothed in marriage.

Marriage is a Life-Long Union

1 Corinthians 7:39-40

For those who were married already, or who would be getting married soon, the apostle provides this reminder in verse 39:

1 Corinthians 7:39

A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord. (NIV)

The marriage covenant is a solemn undertaking made before God to observe the indissoluble bonds of holy matrimony. In the eyes of God Most High, once the marriage union has been established, it cannot be dissolved or annulled. It is, and remains, a lifelong

union between a husband and his wife. God hates divorce; and God's Word recognises permanent separation only on the grounds already mentioned (vv. 2-3,10-11).

If, however, a wife's husband were to die, then the widow would be free to remarry. She may freely accept anyone she chooses as her marriage partner, so long as her prospective husband belongs to the Lord. Here, we see that God's Word does not permit believers from marrying unbelievers (cf. Deut. 7:3-4; Mal. 2:11; 2 Cor. 6:14-16).

What applies to a widow, applies also to a widower. If a man's wife dies, he is free to marry anyone of his choice, so long as that person belongs to the Lord.

As he contemplates the possibility of widows (or widowers) remarrying, Paul considers that this may not be in their best interests at the present time. Therefore, in verse 40, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 7:40

During the present difficulties at Corinth, Paul considers that a widow would be happier if she remained unmarried. She is free to remarry if she wishes, but perhaps this is not an appropriate time to be thinking about assuming marital responsibilities again.

At the end of verse 40, the apostle says:

(40b) ...and I think that I too have the Spirit of God. (NIV)

The apostle was not expressing any doubt, either about what he had just said, or about having the Spirit of God. The advice that he had just given was and remains the inspired Word of God, and Paul gave that advice as the Spirit guided and directed him. However, in the church at Corinth, a number of people claimed to possess special gifts of the Spirit. These men even implied that they had greater spiritual authority than Paul did, and that their gifts equalled or surpassed the apostle's gifts. Elsewhere, Paul refers to these egotistical individuals as 'super-apostles' (so-called) (cf. 2 Cor. 12:11-12).

Unlike these men, Paul was a genuine apostle of the Lord—appointed by the Lord Jesus himself. As such, Paul was empowered to speak authoritatively to the churches in the Lord's name, as the Spirit enabled and directed him. Paul knew, however, that the so-called 'super-apostles' at Corinth would contest his apostolic and Spirit-inspired message—including the advice that he had just given this church in his letter. With this in mind, therefore, Paul declares:

(40b) ...and I think that I too have the Spirit of God. (NIV)

In other words, If your 'super-apostles' have the Spirit of God, then I think that *I too* have the Spirit of God!

Paul, it seems, was speaking ironically. His meaning appears to be: If 'super-apostles' (so-called) have God's Spirit, then I—who am a genuine apostle—*definitely* have God's Spirit. Moreover, since this is so, then what I have written to you in this letter, I have written by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It is the inspired Word of God (cf. 1 Thess. 4:8)

1 Corinthians Chapter 8

Concerns about Food Offered to Idols

1 Corinthians 8:1-8

Introduction

We now move on to another section of Paul's reply to the church at Corinth—that contained in chapters 8 through 11. In these chapters, the apostle deals with questions raised by the Corinthians, and about the exercise and restraint of Christian liberty. In chapter 8, Paul deals specifically with the eating of meats or other foods that had been offered to idols.

Some of the believers thought that they should never eat any food, or participate in any function, where some form of idolatrous practice was observed. Among the general population, there was a widespread practice of buying and using the prime meat remaining from the pagan priest's portion of idol sacrifices. However, this practice effectively barred believers from taking part in any social functions, in case their hosts had purchased prime meat that had been previously associated with idols.

Among the Christians who believed it was wrong to eat such meat were legalistic Jews converted to Christ. Many former Jews still found it difficult to eat anything that did not conform to the strict Jewish dietary laws. This group, however, represented only one small segment of the believers at Corinth.

In almost complete opposition to this group, was another group who maintained that their freedom in Christ granted them liberty to do as they pleased in this respect. Christ, they asserted, had set them free from the restraints of the Mosaic Law, including the laws relating to clean and unclean foods, and foods offered to idols. Therefore, they were at liberty to eat any kind of meat—whether or not that meat had been offered previously in sacrifice to an idol.

This, then, was the situation with which Paul had to deal: These two groups of Christians with widely divergent opinions on the matter—plus others who did not want to associate themselves with one side or the other.

How was Paul to resolve this matter while maintaining unity among the people of God? Only by the guidance of the Spirit of God could the apostle hope to achieve this. What, therefore, the Spirit-inspired apostle writes in the verses that follow reflect the wisdom of God applied to a concrete situation.

Let us then consider what God's Word says, as Paul begins to address this matter.

In chapter 8, verse 1, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 8:1

Some of the believers at Corinth had been asserting that their freedom in Christ entitled them to do what they themselves believed was right. If they believed there was nothing wrong with eating meat formerly offered to idols, then (they said) they were free to do so. Other believers, however, asserted—just as strongly—that it was wrong to eat meats previously devoted to idols. These believers also asserted with equal vigour that it was wrong to participate in any kind of function or social event that used meat from this source. (Cf. Acts 15:19-20,29; Rev. 2:14)

Expository Notes

Both groups professed *knowledge*. Both groups professed to know assuredly, what was right. As can be seen, however, knowledge by itself had led each group to adopt opposing sides in this debate.

Paul, therefore, has to point out to these believers that *knowledge* cannot be the sole criterion in resolving this matter. More important than knowledge is *wisdom*. Moreover, essential to the exercise of both wisdom and knowledge is *love*. Therefore, in the latter part of verse 1, the apostle says:

(1b) ...Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. (NIV)

Knowledge inflates the ego—the self. However, that which inflates the ego is not from God. This kind of knowledge is worldly knowledge—the bedfellow of worldly wisdom.

There is, however, a wisdom that comes from God above, and a knowledge of which God approves. These characteristics, however, are spiritual in nature—not carnal. They derive from God, and they are nurtured on and by the Word of God. When they are applied to a given situation, they are applied in truth and love. Therefore, Paul ends verse 1 by saying:

(1b) ...love builds up.

Carnal knowledge results in divisions. Love, however, not only maintains the unity of the church, but it also nourishes and strengthens the church, and helps it to grow in the things of God.

From the very outset, then, Paul is centring his reply to this difficult question on the foundation of love—love toward God, and love toward fellow believers. This does not mean that the apostle will sacrifice truth for the sake of preserving unity and harmony. Rather, he will set forth the truth in a spirit of love—and without taking sides.

In verses 2 and 3, the apostle contrasts the difference between knowledge and love:

1 Corinthians 8:2

Both sides in this dispute were laying claim to spiritual knowledge. Clearly, however, neither side was exercising true spiritual knowledge. Rather, they were depending on *worldly* knowledge. These believers were firmly asserting their personal convictions. They were vigorously defending their cherished beliefs. However, they were doing so without regard to other and higher Scriptural and spiritual principles.

If we claim to know virtually everything of significance about a particular matter, we are demonstrating worldly-mindedness and spiritual immaturity (cf. Prov. 26:12; Gal. 6:3; 1 Tim. 1:5-7). The truly wise and mature Christian freely acknowledges that his understanding and knowledge of God's truths is limited and that he has still very much to learn (cf. Prov. 30:2-4).

The mature or spiritual man or woman also acknowledges that—taken by itself—knowledge is of limited value. When, however, a person balances and governs his limited knowledge with true spiritual wisdom, insight and love, then that knowledge can be of great value to others and to himself. Therefore, in verse 3, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 8:3

Love—not knowledge—is of paramount importance.

Both sides in the Corinthian dispute were trying to apply their imperfect knowledge to the situation—and they were doing so without wisdom and without love. Thus, they could not

accept each other's point of view. However, *in matters of conscience*—which this matter is—we must have regard for other believer's godly opinions.

If a believer truly loves God, then he is known by God. The more he rests in God and spends time prayerfully in God's Word, the more clearly the truths of God's Word become known to him. (Cf. 1 Cor. 2:9-16) When, however, a person concentrates his mind on the issues on hand—without regard to God and his love—he loses sight of God's truth and God's requirements. In this instance, God required the exercise of wisdom and love, in addition to knowledge and understanding.

- *In matters of fundamental doctrinal importance*, there can be no dispute about what we must believe or practice.
- *In matters of conscience*, however—which Paul declares this matter to be—then it is for the individual believer to determine for himself, before God, whether something is right or wrong, permissible or not permissible.

In addition, however, it is the believer's solemn duty and responsibility to consider what effect his personal choice might have on the spiritual lives of other believers. The Corinthians, it seems, were anxious to exercise their freedom to choose for themselves in such matters. However, they were *not* so anxious to assume their duty and responsibility to consider what effect their action might have on the lives and consciences of their fellow believers.

This, then, is the situation that Paul must address. Therefore, in verse 4, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 8:4

Before dealing with the question of meats itself, the apostle desires to deal with the question of idols. Paul concedes that some of the Corinthian Christians knew that the beings represented by idols were non-entities or figments of people's imagination. People may make icons or statues to represent their (false) gods, but the gods themselves did not exist. Thus, these so-called gods were utterly powerless to aid their devotees or worshippers in any way. (Ps. 115:4-8; Jer. 10:14-15)

However, while it is true that idols are nothing in the world (or the universe), it is also true that the spiritual forces of evil use the concept of idols and false gods to draw worshippers after them. People, who believed that they were worshipping their local deity or divinity, found instead that they were involved with Satan and the demons, and with various evil, occult, and immoral practices.

Paul does not refer to the connection between idols and demons at this point in his letter, but he does so later. (1 Cor. 10:19-21)

Paul finishes verse 4 by declaring:

(4b) ... (We know) ... that there is no God but one. (NIV)

The only God in existence is the one true, living and Sovereign God who created the universe and who even now preserves his creation by his almighty power. There is no God but this God—regardless of what people may think, say or believe. (Deut. 4:39; 6:4; Isa. 37:16; 44:8-9)

Thus, in verses 5 and 6, the apostle adds:

1 Corinthians 8:5-6

Paul acknowledges that—throughout the world—people worshipped a vast variety of so-called gods. Some of these gods were gods of the earth, or gods of nature. Others were gods of the heavens, or planetary or spirit gods. Without exception, however, every one of these so-called gods lay within the realm of the created universe: That is, if they were not purely imaginary objects, they were *created objects* or *created beings*.

However, the people who adhered to these idols were totally ignoring the true Creator of the universe. The true and living God who made the heavens and the earth—and who dwells outside his creation—was a stranger to those who worshipped nature gods, astrological or planetary gods, or spirit gods. (cf. John 1:10; Gal. 4:8)

Yet, says Paul, for us Christians, the true and living God rules over the entire universe. This God is the only true God in all creation—yet he himself is *uncreated* and eternal. This God is our Father in heaven. He is the one through whom everything in creation came into existence. This includes the world of nature, the world of spirits, and the starry and planetary heavens. (Eph. 4:6) God, however, never created sun, moon, stars, the natural world, or the spirit world, to be the objects of worship. Indeed, in his Word, he expressly forbids worship being given to any created being or thing. (Cf. Ezek. 14:2-6)

God's creation testifies to his eternal power and glory. It is his witness to mankind that he exists, and that he is the Designer and Creator of everything in the universe. In their spiritual blindness and folly, however, unregenerate mankind cannot see the hand of Almighty God in the created universe. (Rom. 1:18-23)

The same God who created the natural world, the spirit world and the planetary and starry heavens, also created us. In him we live, move and have our being. It is because of him that we exist—and we exist in order to serve God, to enjoy fellowship with him forever, and to glorify his name. (Acts 17:28)

There are, therefore, many "gods" so-called. However, there is only one true, living and Sovereign God: the Creator of all, and the Father of all who believe. Similarly, there are many "lords" so-called. Nevertheless, there is only one Lord of all. He is Jesus Christ, the Son of God—equal with the Father in eternity, power, and glory. Through him, and for him, God created the universe and all it contains. Through him, and for him, God has granted to us life—biological and physical life, spiritual and eternal life, and abundant life.

The Christians at Corinth acknowledged, therefore, that there was only one true God, and that Jesus Christ his Son was, and forever remains, Lord of all. However, not all of these Christians had yet come to realise that idols had no real existence. They had not yet come to know that the so-called and idolatrous gods were either imaginary, or that they were created objects such as stars and planets, or trees and plants. Again, they did not yet realise that, in many cases, these so-called gods and idols were actually associated with the worship of spirits, or of Satan and the demons, or of involvement in and with the occult and all its evil practices.

Therefore, in verse 7, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 8:7

Not everyone knew that the beings or gods associated with idols were non-entities. Not everyone in the Corinthian church realised that to sacrifice to an idol was to sacrifice to a non-existent being (leaving aside for the moment any satanic connection). Moreover, because the idol itself was lifeless, and because the god represented by the idol did not exist, neither the supposed god nor its idol could contaminate any meat offered to it in sacrifice.

No doubt, many of the believers at Corinth could accept this part of Paul's argument—i.e., about the non-existence of false gods and supposed animate idols *per se*. However, some of these believers possibly realised that—although, in reality, idols represented non-existent beings—the demonic forces behind many of these idols were very real and very powerful. Perhaps, then, these believers saw the sacrificial meat as being offered to these demonic beings, if not to non-existent gods or their idols. If so, they may have considered the meat to have been utterly polluted by its possible association with demonic sacrifices.

However, *any created being* that requires such sacrifices is claiming rights, prerogatives and privileges to which it is not entitled. It is claiming divine rights and divine worship. Since God alone is entitled to such rights and privileges, no other living being must ever claim them, or require any kind of sacrifices.

No other living being has a right to claim the devotion or worship of mankind, for *mankind is God's creation*. God himself has expressly forbidden anyone from acknowledging any God beside himself—and this includes all created beings. Satan and the demons are created, and fallen, beings. Any sacrifices offered to them, therefore, are expressly forbidden and intrinsically invalid as an offering, since no other God exists but one. Therefore, the meat offered—even to such evil beings—remains unaffected and uncontaminated.

Perhaps, however, some of the believers at Corinth still did not understand these things. They may have found difficulty in accepting such truths since—in the past—they had become so accustomed to idolatrous worship and practice. Paul, therefore, acknowledges that such believers might still think of food offered to idols as contaminated food. Moreover, if they believed this to be so, *then eating such meat would defile their weak consciences*. (Cf. Rom. 14:14,23)

Paul, however, asserts that neither the weak nor the strong in conscience were to make an issue of this matter, or of any other similar matters of conscience. Therefore, in verse 8, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 8:8

Food does not bring us near to God. The blood of the atonement, cleansing our lives and consciences, brings us near to God. Food does not bring us near to God. Clean hands and a pure heart brings us near to God. (Heb. 9:13-14; Ps. 24:4; cf. Jas. 4:8)

It does not matter, one way or the other, whether or not we eat meat. We are no worse off for not eating meat and no better off if we do. (Rom. 14:17-20) Other considerations are much more important than the eating of meats formerly offered to idols.

Liberty is Not License

1 Corinthians 8:9-13

To these other matters, the apostle Paul now turns his attention. Thus, in verse 9, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 8:9

Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling-block to the weak. (NIV)

More important than anything else, was consideration for the consciences of other believers. More important than the exercise of Christian freedom was the exercise of Christian love.

This very important principle applied not only to the eating of meats sacrificed to idols, but to every conceivable situation, which involves *a matter of conscience*. In such situations, the exercise of our Christian freedom or Christian liberty must always give way to the exercise of love. Exercising love involves showing genuine love toward God, and genuine love and concern for our fellow believers; and, indeed, for our neighbour in general. (1 Cor. 10:24)

To exercise our freedom without due regard for the effect that this might have on the consciences of other believers, is sin. It is to place a stumbling block in their path. It creates an offence or an occasion for falling—falling, that is, into sin. Consequently, it may cause serious damage to a fellow believer's faith. (Matt. 18:6-7; Rom. 14:20-21)

To take a concrete example of this kind of situation in his own day, the apostle Paul writes in verse 10:

1 Corinthians 8:10

What happens, however, when a 'stronger' Christian is convinced that something is right, and decides to exercise his Christian freedom? Suppose, for example, this believer is convinced in his own mind that idolatrous gods have no real existence. Therefore, he also knows that any meat offered to them cannot become polluted. With a clear conscience, he may buy that prime quality meat at the meat market, and eat it privately at home.

Suppose, however, this 'stronger', or more knowledgeable, believer goes a step further. Rather than eating this meat privately at home, he accepts an invitation to participate in a social function being held at an idol's temple. At this function, he will be served meat from the idol's altar—meat that this believer personally is convinced has not become contaminated by its idolatrous associations. Even so, by accepting an invitation to take part in a meal dedicated to idols, *does he not appear to be sharing* in a sacrifice that has been offered to these idols? *Does he not appear to be participating* in idol worship?

Suppose, now, that a 'weaker', or less knowledgeable, brother or sister sees this other believer eating meat in the open courtyard of the idol's temple. Will the weaker brother or sister not consider that it must be permissible for him or her to follow similar practices—even although, previously, he or she had very grave doubts about these practices? Then, of course, the weaker believer would not be acting from faith. Moreover, whatever is not of faith is sin. (Rom. 14:23) Such action on their part, therefore, could bring about their spiritual ruin.

A person may be completely convinced in his own mind that a certain course of action is not in itself sinful. However, according to the teaching of God's Word, that person must consider the consciences of weaker—i.e., less spiritually knowledgeable or mature—believers. (Rom. 14:14-20)

Without due regard for the consciences of our weaker brothers and sisters in Christ, we can all too easily place a stumbling block before them which causes them to fall into sin. Thus, in the example just quoted one stronger believer's convictions results in a weaker believer being enticed into doing something that his conscience does not permit. This may cause considerable harm or damage to that believer's spiritual life and conscience.

To this end, the apostle writes in verse 11:

1 Corinthians 8:11

It is no light matter to exercise our Christian liberty, when by so doing we risk causing unnecessary offence to a brother or sister in the Lord. Christ died for our sins. He also died for their sins. Christ reconciled us to God. He also reconciled them to God.

We, however, by our actions, risk alienating them from God by enticing them to sin. That is, we do something of which their weak conscience does not approve. Consequently, we cause them to stumble in their faith. We may even cause them to backslide seriously from the Lord—perhaps for a very long time. In effect, this believer—for whom Christ died—is destroyed by the exercise of a stronger believer’s knowledge and Christian liberty or freedom.

Of course, the weaker or less knowledgeable believer cannot be destroyed in the sense that he loses his salvation—although he may lose his *assurance* of salvation. Again, because he sins against his own conscience by doing what his conscience forbids, a weaker believer may lose his close fellowship with God. He may lose his effectiveness in God’s service. Indeed, this weaker believer may continue on his downward slide from God and from the things of the Spirit until—by God’s grace—he is brought to acknowledge and repent of his sin. Only then, may he return to the Lord.

While, however, he remains in a backslidden state, his faith, testimony, and godly life is being effectively wasted, ruined or destroyed. If it were not for the fact that God preserves his elect so that they cannot ultimately fall away, then a believer in such a position might come very close to falling away from his faith. This, of course, cannot happen to any truly regenerated child of God. But it shows how serious a matter it is for anyone to cause a weaker brother or sister to sin by offending their conscience, or by placing a stumbling block in their path.

Thus, Paul infers, consider very carefully what you do. Consider the effect that your actions might have on the consciences of other believers. Do not—by the exercise of your freedom—lead a weaker believer into sin.

The apostle demonstrates the consequences of such an action in verse 12, where he says:

1 Corinthians 8:12

When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. (NIV)

Here we see just how serious such a sin is. We are all members of Christ’s body—including the weaker believers. The weaker believer is just as important to the functioning of the body as those who are stronger. Indeed, the parts we consider less esteemed, are indispensable—and, in God’s eyes, highly esteemed. (1 Cor. 12:12,20-25)

Again, the weaker believer was redeemed to God with the same precious and atoning blood as the stronger believer. To sin against them, therefore, is to sin against their Redeemer, and ours. To sin against them is to sin against Christ—of whose body they form an integral part. Yet, how can we sin against the Lord? How can we offend one who is precious to him, who is honoured in his sight, and for whom he laid down his life?

Thus, implies Paul to the believers at Corinth, Consider carefully what you do. Do not sin against your fellow believers, or you may find yourself sinning against Christ himself.

How, then, were stronger believers to resolve such matters of conscience? What was a believer to do when he was convinced in his own mind that something was not in itself sinful, but which could be construed as being sinful by a weaker believer?

In respect of meats offered to idols, the apostle gives his God-inspired answer in verse 13. What he says in this verse about meats offered to idols may be applied as a general principle to every other situation that involves matters of conscience or matters of indifference.

In verse 13, Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 8:13

At the outset, we said that the exercise of love must take precedence over the exercise of Christian freedom or liberty. Love, however, can prove to be very costly. It can involve sacrifice—self-sacrifice. Sacrifice for the sake of others.

Love must not consider our own interests and welfare, but the interests and welfare of others. If we really possess the love of God in our hearts, then we will not hesitate to do what we know is right for others. In matters of conscience, we will endeavour to do all in our power to avoid giving offence to a fellow believer. We will bear with them as those who love them and care for them. By so doing, we will strengthen them in their most holy faith.

By showing such love and consideration for them, we are in fact showing love and consideration to Christ. For whatever we do to one of the least of these, his brothers, we do to him. (Rom. 15:1-3) Let us, then, resolve never to do anything that might cause a weaker believer to sin, or stumble in his faith. Let us never engage in any activity or course of action that may cause a weaker brother or sister to fall, or to be brought into a backslidden and sinful condition. Let us never sin against those for whom Christ died, or against the Lord himself. (Rom. 14:20-23)

1 Corinthians Chapter 9

God's Servants Entitled to Support

1 Corinthians 9:1-18

In chapter 8, Paul had been speaking about the necessity of restraining the exercise of one's rights for the sake of the weaker brother or sister. Now, in chapter 9, the apostle speaks of the restraints he has imposed upon himself as an apostle. Although, as the Lord's servant, Paul was entitled to a number of basic rights, yet he had not claimed these rights from the Corinthians—nor did he intend to do so.

Before dealing with this matter, however, Paul begins by asserting his position as an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, in chapter 9, verse 1, Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 9:1

The Corinthians had been claiming their right to exercise their Christian liberty or freedom in relation to the eating of meat offered to idols. Now Paul reminds them that he too has certain rights in Christ Jesus. He has freedom or liberty in Christ not only in respect of meats, but also in respect of that which was due to him as an apostle and a servant of the Lord.

Certain people at Corinth had been questioning the genuineness of Paul's apostleship. However, Paul's credentials as an apostle were impeccable. He had seen the Lord personally—one of the essential requirements of apostleship. He had been called by God, appointed by the Lord Jesus, set apart and empowered by the Holy Spirit, and commissioned by the church to the work of the Lord. (1 Cor. 15:8; Acts 9:3-6, 15-17; 13:2)

The very fact that many of the believers at Corinth had been led to faith in Christ through Paul's ministry in that city was further evidence that Paul was a genuine apostle and servant of the Lord Jesus. Therefore, in verse 2, Paul declares:

1 Corinthians 9:2

Certain arrogant individuals in the Corinthian church were trying to discredit Paul, and to deny the validity of his apostolic ministry. These same individuals claimed apostolic office themselves—even although God had not appointed them to this office. However, they were apparently attempting to exclude Paul from the church at Corinth.

Perhaps some of these individuals were the same people who were causing factions and divisions in the church, with one party claiming to follow Peter; another, Apollos; another, Paul; and yet another, Christ. In any event, as Paul points out, some of these individuals and their respective groups might refuse to recognise his apostleship. Surely, however, those who had been led to Christ through his ministry must acknowledge that they were the fruit of his apostolic labours! (Cf. 2 Cor. 3:1-3; 12:12)

Again, it seems that those who opposed Paul were also trying to persuade the Corinthian church as a whole that Paul should not be recognised or supported by them. In response to these unkind, critical and arrogant individuals, the apostle says in verse 3:

1 Corinthians 9:3

Paul feels it necessary, not only to assert his apostolic authority in the churches, but also to remind the church at Corinth that—as God's servant—he has certain fundamental

rights. It was the duty, privilege and responsibility of all the churches among whom Paul laboured to recognise these rights, and to fulfil their obligations toward him and toward God. Thus, Paul begins his defence—or 'apology' or testimony—of his position against those who were presumptuously passing judgment upon the servant of the Lord (cf. Acts 22:1ff).

Firstly, then, Paul counters in verse 4 by asking:

1 Corinthians 9:4

As God's servants, don't we have the right to the necessities of life? Has not the Lord commanded that his servants should be supported by those to whom they minister? (Gal. 6:6)

God's servants are entitled by right to the provision of food, clothing, and other necessities of life. Moreover, the Lord has promised that his blessing will remain upon those who help meet his servant's needs. (Luke 10:3-12)

Continuing his defence in verse 5, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 9:5

Not only is an apostle himself entitled to this support, but so also is his believing wife.

Here we learn a number of things:

- An apostle—or any other servant of God—had the right to take a marriage partner. In order to serve the Lord, he need not be a single man, as was Paul.
- Again, it shows that the apostles—or most of them—were married men, and that their wives accompanied them in their work for the Lord.
- It also shows beyond question that the apostle Peter was a married man. (Cf. Matt. 8:14)
- Again, it implies very clearly that—by this time—the Lord's brothers were servants of Christ in their own right.

So, infers Paul, by right, we who are servants of Christ are entitled to be accompanied by a wife; and, by right, we are entitled to expect the support of the Lord's people among whom we minister.

Thus, in verse 6, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 9:6

Other servants of the Lord received their support from the churches. This left them free to dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to the work of the Lord. Why, then—counters Paul—should Barnabas and I be treated any differently? We too are the Lord's servants. We too are proclaiming Christ's gospel—the very work for which the Holy Spirit set us apart. (Acts 13:1-3; 15:2-4,12) Why, then, do you discriminate between the other apostles and us? If they are entitled to your support, so also are we. If they should not have to work for a living, nor should we.

Paul, of course, was not making an issue about being treated unfairly. However this may have been, this was not his main concern. Paul's primary concern was to insist on his apostleship as being from the Lord. Moreover, if appointed by the Lord—which he was—then he was entitled to the same treatment and consideration as the other apostles. This was especially true concerning the provision of practical and necessary support from the churches. (Cf. 1 Cor. 4:11-14; 1 Thess. 2:9-12)

In verse 7, the apostle develops his argument by asking:

1 Corinthians 9:7

(7a) Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? (NIV)

When soldiers are enlisted to full time service, all their military clothing and equipment is provided free of charge. In addition, they receive wages for the service they perform. This is their entitlement. This is their due return for the service they render to their government and for their country. No civilised government or country would expect their full time servicemen and women to serve their country without adequate support and equipment, or without remuneration. (Cf. 2 Tim. 2:4)

Then, in the next part of verse 7, the apostle asks:

(7b) ...Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its grapes? (NIV)

No vineyard keeper or vinedresser establishes, waters, and otherwise nurtures and sustains his vines without expecting to harvest some of the resulting grapes for his own use. This basic principle applies to all farming situations: The farmer rightfully keeps for himself and his family an adequate proportion of all his crops. This is his entitlement for the months of labour that he has bestowed upon his crops and herds. (Cf. Deut. 20:6; Prov. 27:18)

Thus, in the last part of verse 7, Paul asks:

(7c) ...Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk? (NIV)

The shepherd or farmer is fully entitled to his reward for the labour he performs. A share of the milk is his by right. (2 Tim. 2:6; cf. Prov. 27:23-27)

These illustrations demonstrate very clearly that the labourer is worthy of his hire, and that—by his providence—God ensures that the needs of his servants are fully met.

In verse 8, the apostle continues:

1 Corinthians 9:8

Someone may object that Paul is merely expressing his own personal opinion on this matter. They may further contend that other people may not be inclined to agree with this apostle's argument or point of view concerning the way in which the Lord's servants should receive their support. They may even suggest that all servants of the Lord should support themselves by their own labours (as Paul did voluntarily), instead of seeking support from the churches.

Paul, however, anticipates and counters such an objection. As the apostle is about to point out, he is not merely expressing his own personal opinion. Rather, he is applying to this situation a well-established principle, which God himself had laid down in his Word.

To this Law or principle, Paul now refers in verse 9a when he says:

1 Corinthians 9:9a

(9a) For it is written in the Law of Moses: "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain"... (NIV; cf. Deut. 25:4)

The ox, or other beast of burden, is labouring on behalf of its master. However, while it continues to work for its master, the ox's owner must not prevent the animal from eating

some of the grain. This is part of the ox's entitlement or reward for the service that it performs for its master. (1 Tim. 5:18)

Now, then, continues Paul in verses 9b and 10:

1 Corinthians 9:9b-10

The principle that God laid down for the support of working animals must be applied also to those servants who work for the Lord. This was the reason that the principle was divinely given in the first place: not merely for the welfare of animals—although an animal's welfare must not be neglected. However, if, according to God's ordinance, an animal's welfare must not be neglected, how much more should the church attend to the welfare of God's human servants?

This, essentially, was Paul's argument. He and others had been ploughing the ground faithfully, and sowing the seed of God's Word. One day, he and others would reap a *spiritual* harvest. Nevertheless, in the meantime, should not he and others expect some share in the *material* harvest of the churches? (2 Tim. 2:6)

Thus, in verse 11, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 9:11

Paul and other servants of the Lord had been sowing the seed of God's Word. However, for this service, they were entitled to a physical and material harvest: i.e., food, clothing, shelter and other essentials of life. (Matt. 10:10)

In verse 12a, Paul strengthens his argument by asking:

1 Corinthians 9:12a

Other people claimed, and received from the Corinthian church, the right of material support. However, these other people were not apostles of the Lord Jesus and servants of God. Rather, they were self-appointed individuals. Alternatively, they were individuals whom the Corinthian church themselves had appointed without due regard to the conditions and qualifications set down for the appointment of elders or deacons.

However, if these so-called apostles and servants of God were entitled to the Corinthian church's material support, how much more were Paul and his co-workers—who were genuine apostles and servants of God—entitled to such support? (vv.2-6; 2 Cor. 11:20-23)

In verse 12b, the apostle continues:

1 Corinthians 9:12b

Paul and his companions had not exercised their right to material support from certain churches (although they did accept assistance from some other churches). Rather than appear indebted—especially to the church at Corinth—the apostles did not claim or accept anything from them by way of support. Paul followed this practise in a number of other churches.

That he might not place any hindrance or stumbling block in the way of the Gospel, the apostle was fully prepared to forego his due rights and entitlements whenever the occasion required. This may possibly explain to a certain degree why the apostle often suffered great hardships including shortage of food, clothing and shelter.

However, as one whom the Lord had called and appointed to his service, Paul remained fully entitled to the support of those churches among whom he laboured, or on whose

behalf he proclaimed the Gospel of Christ to others: e.g., on his missionary journeys. (2 Cor. 11:7-9,27)

In verse 13, Paul alludes to another OT example:

1 Corinthians 9:13

Those who served the Lord in the capacity of priests or Levites within the temple were entitled to their support from a share in the temple offerings. (Lev. 7:6-10)

Thus, in verse 14, Paul says:

1 Corinthians 9:14

It was and remains the Lord's express command that those who preach the Gospel should be supported in that ministry. (Matt. 10:10; Luke 10:7)

But who is required to support God's servants if not those to whom they minister, or those local churches on whose behalf they are preaching Christ to others?

In other words, the Lord's people ought to support the Lord's servants. However, the support that the Lord's people provide *materially* should be a fair and adequate reflection of the work that the Lord's servant is performing *spiritually*. (Gal. 6:6; 1 Tim. 5:17)

In verse 15, the apostle continues:

1 Corinthians 9:15

Paul could have claimed support from the church at Corinth. However, rather than leave himself open to unjust criticism, the apostle made no claims on this church. As was his practise in many other places, Paul supported himself in his trade as a tentmaker while preaching the Gospel as time and circumstances permitted. (1 Cor. 4:12; 1 Thess. 2:9; 3:8-10)

The apostle points out that he is not saying these things in order to shame the Corinthian church into providing for his needs. On the contrary, he would much rather remain independent of that church—even to the point of death—than forfeit his ground for boasting (cf. 2 Cor. 12:13-15).

Yet, even although the apostle was asserting his independence from the Corinthian church, he was not independent of the Lord, or of the commission that the Lord Jesus had laid upon him. Thus, in verse 16, Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 9:16

Concerning his support, Paul could claim independence from the church at Corinth—for he supported himself by the labour of his own hands. It was on this ground that he boasted. However, when it came to the preaching of the Gospel, Paul had no grounds for boasting. The Lord had commanded him to preach. The Holy Spirit had set him apart to preach. Therefore, as he says in this verse, he was compelled to preach. "*Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!*" (v.16b; Acts 9:3-6,15; 13:1-4)

By grace, Paul had been saved and called to this apostolic ministry. However, since it was by God's sovereign grace and mercy that he was now making Christ known to others, then Paul had no grounds of boasting as an apostle and preacher of the Gospel. He was simply obeying the Lord's command. He was fulfilling God's eternal purpose for his life (cf. Rom. 15:17-20).

Thus, in verse 17, the apostle declares:

1 Corinthians 9:17

If Paul were preaching voluntarily, then he would have a reward—the reward of seeing God's name being glorified through souls being brought to repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. However, important as this may be, Paul had not assumed this work voluntarily. Rather, as one who had been in the process of persecuting and vilifying the church, the Lord had called Paul (then Saul of Tarsus) to the work of the Gospel. The Lord himself had set Paul apart, anointed him with the Holy Spirit, and appointed him as the apostle to the Gentiles.

Paul, therefore, was not merely a *voluntary* servant of Christ, but a *bondservant* of Christ. The apostle was under a solemn obligation to fulfil the task that the Lord had laid upon him, and to which God had commissioned him. (Gal. 2:7-8; Eph. 3:7-8; Col. 1:25)

Therefore, in verse 17b, the apostle says:

(17b) ...I am simply discharging the trust committed to me. (NIV)

The trust committed to Paul was the stewardship or solemn responsibility of preaching the Gospel in accordance with, and in fulfilment of, his divine commission.

In verse 18, Paul continues:

1 Corinthians 9:18

Paul's reward was to be able to offer the message of the Gospel to everyone free of charge. In this way, no one was made to feel that they should not be benefiting from the Gospel message because they were perhaps too poor to contribute toward the preacher's material needs. By working with his own hands, and providing for his own support, Paul removed this potential obstacle.

The apostle had ensured that everyone—rich or poor—would hear the Gospel without feeling under any obligation to support the messenger. So in this and other ways, Paul asserted, he had not made use of his unquestionable rights to support in preaching the Gospel of eternal salvation (cf. 2 Cor. 11:7-9).

Paul had been putting into practise the words of the Lord Jesus:

"It is more blessed to give than to receive." (Acts 20:34-35 NIV)

Paul Becomes All Things to All Men

1 Corinthians 9:19-23

As one whom God had called and appointed to his service, the apostle Paul had every right to claim support from the churches for the work that he was doing. However, the apostle chose to forego this right—and a number of other rights—so that he would not hinder the Gospel of Christ. Paul was prepared to do anything lawful to help advance the Gospel and build up the church—even if this involved him in great personal sacrifices or hardship. To this end, the apostle writes in verse 19:

1 Corinthians 9:19

Like any other believer, Paul was entitled to complete freedom in Christ Jesus, so long as he did not place an obstacle in another believer's path. In all matters of conscience or matters of indifference, the apostle was not under any obligation to conform to either Jewish or Gentile opinions or prejudices. (1 Cor. 10:32-33; 11:1)

Nevertheless, although free of Jewish religious practices and Gentile customs, the apostle submitted himself to certain practices and customs in order to win the confidence of his listeners or readers. This does not mean, however, that the apostle submitted himself to the Old Testament laws of ceremonies and ordinances, or to any idolatrous or questionable practice of the Gentiles. As we shall see from this passage, in everything that he did, Paul held steadfastly to the principles of Christ's law—the law of love. (cf. Rom. 13:8-10)

However, in matters of indifference or conscience, the apostle was prepared to conform to the commonly accepted customs or practices of the area. In all other matters, however, Paul held resolutely to the teaching and principles of God's Word, without yielding for a moment to those who opposed his stand. He was a servant of the Lord—not the servant of any man or of any body of men.

Thus, in verse 19, Paul had written:

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. (NIV)

Then, in verse 20, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 9:20

In an attempt to win Jews to Christ, Paul adapted himself willingly to their customs and practices. He did this, however, only insofar as it did not involve him in any compromise of the Word of God or of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

For instance, in order not to give offence, Paul had arranged with Timothy, one of his travelling companions, for the latter to be circumcised. On this occasion, circumcision for the believer was a matter of indifference or conscience. (Acts 16:1-3) However, on other occasions—when legalistic Judaizers or false brothers insisted that circumcision was essential to salvation—the apostle resolutely opposed them and refused to submit anyone to their demands for circumcision. (Acts 15:1-2,5-29; Gal. 2:3-5; 5:1-14)

So then, like a Jew, Paul became *as though* he were under the law—in order to win those under the law: i.e., the Jews. However, as he is most careful to point out, the apostle did not submit at any time to the law as a way, means, or supplement to salvation.

In verse 21, the Paul continues:

1 Corinthians 9:21

The phrase, *not having the law* (KJV, *without law*; Gk., ἄνομος, *anomos*) means those who live apart from, or without reference to, the moral code or law of God: i.e., the Gentiles.

However, the Greek word (ἄνομος, *anomos*) also refers to the character of such people: That is, they are transgressors or violators of God's law, lawless, or wicked. The phrase *not having the law*, therefore, speaks both of the Gentiles as people, and of their conduct or manner of life, both individually and collectively. Although not all Gentiles were guilty of the most lawless deeds, nevertheless all Gentiles lived outside the knowledge and restraints of God's holy law, both in regard to its moral capacity and in regard to its spiritual capacity. (The only exceptions were those Gentiles who had become proselytes to the Jewish religion, or those who had adopted some of the customs and practices of the Jewish faith.)

To those not having the law, then, Paul adapted himself. In all matters of conscience or indifference, the apostle conformed to the customs and practices of the Gentiles in order

to win them for Christ. However, as he had already expressly stated, he did not thereby compromise the law of God or the essential liberty of the Gospel.

Even after conversion to Christ, many former Jews found difficulty in associating with Gentiles or in accepting Gentiles customs such as eating 'impure' foods. Indeed, some of the Jewish Christians often could not understand the failure on the part of the Gentile Christians to observe the very strict Mosaic laws relating to cleanliness and hygiene. (Gal. 2:11-16)

Paul, however, had no such scruples about any of these strict OT ceremonial laws and ordinances. Perhaps, then, it was to such matters that he was referring when he spoke in this verse of becoming like the Gentiles. Paul would become all things to all men that he might by all means save some.

In verse 22, Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 9:22

To those whose consciences were weak, to those who were weak in the things of God—Paul became as one of them, although he personally was not weak in the faith. However, to avoid giving offence to those with a weak conscience, the apostle refrained from doing anything that might cause them to stumble in their faith. If, for example, some of them were likely to be offended by the eating of meat, then Paul would not eat meat as long as he lived—even although the eating of meat was a matter of complete indifference. (Rom. 14:1-23; 15:1-2; 1 Cor. 8:13)

As the apostle says in the second part of verse 22, he had become all things to all men so that by all possible means he might save some: That is, that he might be the means through which the Holy Spirit would draw them, challenge them, convict them, convince them, and lead them to Christ. Paul, therefore, was fully aware that he must preach the Gospel not only through his *message*, but also through his *life*.

The apostle had become all things to all men for the reason stated in the following verse (v.23):

1 Corinthians 9:23

Paul did all this for the sake of preaching Christ to the lost. It is his great joy and reward to see men and women brought by the Holy Spirit to repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The apostle desired only to prove faithful to the task that the Lord had laid upon him, and to preach Christ crucified wherever the name of Christ had not been heard.

Paul's reward was the fruit of the Gospel message: i.e., the lives of men and women, boys and girls, redeemed by the message of the cross. The apostle was blessed abundantly in seeing people of all ages and stations in life profess faith in Christ, and in seeing the evidence of God's ongoing grace in their daily lives and in their own personal witness for Christ.

Striving to Win the Prize

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

However, the task with which the Lord had entrusted the apostle was by no stretch of the imagination an easy task. The preaching of the Gospel, and the associated care of the churches, was fraught with much sorrow, grief, difficulty, danger, and hardship. (Mark 8:35-38; 2 Cor. 2:4-5; 11:23-28)

Alluding to the spiritual battle upon which he was then engaged, Paul writes in verse 24:

1 Corinthians 9:24

In an athletic competition, many runners enter the race. Many strive to win the victory wreath. As a rule, however, only one arrives first at the finishing line, achieves the crown and celebrates the victory.

In the Christian life, we must run the race with perseverance. We must strive against all the odds with the determination to reach the finishing line and win the crown of victory. We must fight the good fight of the faith and finish the course, leaving behind all hindrances and distractions, and all other competitors in the race. (Heb. 12:1-3) Only by pursuing the Christian race (or Christian life and service) in such a way, will we hope to achieve the garland of victory: i.e., the reward promised to all those who remain faithful to the Lord and to his service.

An athlete cannot compete successfully in the games unless he has strenuously prepared and equipped himself beforehand. Nor can the Lord's servant successfully and faithfully pursue a holy, godly, and spiritually useful life, if he does not prepare and equip himself daily and hourly from the Word of God and the fellowship of prayer.

Thus, in verse 25, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 9:25

An athlete, or any other competitor, must prepare himself in body and mind for participating in the games. In the case of the ancient Olympian or Isthmian Games, or the modern Olympic Games, the aspiring contender must prepare himself regularly for many months or even several years before the games actually take place. The aim of these contenders is to achieve the ultimate prize for physical prowess. In the ancient Isthmian Games, with which the Corinthians would be familiar, this was a laurel wreath or wreath composed of foliage or leaves from that shrub. In other words, a crown that would not last, but soon would wither and decay.

The Christian, however, prepares himself in body, mind and soul for running the race that the Lord Jesus has set before him. He too must constantly train or discipline himself. In the believer's case, he trains his body, mind and soul through the Word of God and by prayer, that he might be fit to run—and to keep on running—in order to win the victor's prize. In the believer's case, the prize is an award (or reward) that will never wither or decay, but will last forever.

Certain it is, however, that if a believer does not constantly press on in the race, he will not be awarded the prize of victory. His salvation will remain secure. Nevertheless, because he did not prove faithful to his Lord and to Master's service, this believer will forfeit in heaven some or all of his glorious reward for faithful service (cf. 1 Cor. 3:13-15).

Therefore, infers Paul:

- *train* vigorously *for* the race, and
- *run* vigorously *in* the race.

With this thought in mind, the apostle writes in verse 26:

1 Corinthians 9:26

Paul has a goal to achieve—the crown of life, and the reward for faithful service to his Lord. To this end, he runs the Christian race single-mindedly, fully determined to win the prize. To this same end, the apostle constantly disciplines himself in body, mind, and soul, so that he can pursue the race with the utmost vigour, and without distractions or hin-

drances. Such distractions or hindrances could arise in his life if he failed to prepare his mind, body or soul adequately for Christ's service and for Christ's honour and glory.

When Paul changes the metaphor in the second part of the verse, he means essentially the same thing: A boxer does not overcome his opponent and win the prize merely by thrashing at the air or by shadowboxing. Time after time, he must engage his opponent physically in the fight. However, to engage in a boxing match and to prove successful, involves intense prior training, strict personal discipline, and a determination to overcome the adversary against all the odds. Only then, can the contender hope to succeed against his opponent, and win the prize.

The Christian, too, cannot live an inactive, uncommitted, or indifferent life, and still hope to please his Lord and Master. If he intends to win the prize, he must engage daily in intense spiritual training, strict self-discipline, and a determination to fight and to succeed against every trial, difficulty, and hardship. To change the metaphor, he must strive constantly and courageously as a soldier of Christ against the adversary, with the determination to overcome his enemy and to achieve the victory—by the grace of God. (Eph. 6:12-13; Heb. 4:1-2)

Thus, in verse 27, Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 9:27

Paul assumes full control over his own body. Rather than submitting his body to evil passions and desires, or to inactivity or laziness in the things of God, the apostle exercises strict discipline over his body—and over the desires of his mind. Instead of yielding his body to sin as an instrument of unrighteousness, Paul yields it to God as an instrument of righteousness. The apostle yields himself—in body and soul—to God as a living sacrifice, surrendered in and to the service of God.

Paul makes his body a slave, not only to himself—although this is true—but also and primarily to Christ and to his service. The apostle puts every effort into surrendering himself to his Lord and Master, and using his body and mind to pursue his Master's will to the utmost of his ability—and by the grace and strength that God provides.

Paul gives his reason for adopting this course in the latter part of verse 27:

(27b) ...so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize. (NIV)

It was, of course, impossible for Paul or for any other truly regenerated child of God to forfeit the crown of life or the crown of righteousness: i.e., their eternal salvation. God had given them their salvation as a gift of his sovereign grace and mercy. Therefore, it could not become forfeit. In relation to eternal salvation, God's gifts and his call are irrevocable. (Rom. 11:29) However, although no truly regenerated believer can lose his salvation, he can certainly lose some or all of his reward in heaven. Unlike salvation, reward is based on faithfulness to the Lord and to his service.

In everything that he did, therefore, Paul was endeavouring with all his heart and soul not only to complete the race set before him, but also to win the prize: i.e., the reward for true and faithful service.

After having preached to others—both of the gift of salvation, and of the need to pursue a life of holy and faithful service—the apostle cannot conceive of himself as failing to attain his own *reward* through unfaithfulness. For, should such a thing ever happen, it would lead to his disqualification (for reward) just before the finishing line.

So it is with every one of us. God has granted every truly regenerated believer the gift of eternal life, and this gift can never be withdrawn. However, in order to attain the prize of

reward, each believer must prove faithful to his Lord and Master. He must run with perseverance the race that is marked out for him. Then, he will be certain of obtaining the glorious prize of heavenly reward for faithfulness to God and to his Son.

1 Corinthians Chapter 10

Warnings from the Past

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

In chapter 10, Paul turns his attention to those who began in the race, but who fell out along the way. Referring to the example of Israel after their deliverance from Egypt, the apostle writes in verse 1 of chapter 10:

1 Corinthians 10:1

The opening word '*For*' connects this paragraph directly with the preceding paragraphs where Paul had been speaking about the need for intense training, strict self-discipline, and continual perseverance in the Christian life. The phrase, *I do not want you to be ignorant...* is a phrase used by Paul to introduce some important truth. Again, although the apostle is writing to apathetic or wayward believers in the Corinthian church, he still expresses his love for them by referring to them as *brothers*.

Now, infers Paul, you Corinthian believers claim to have experienced the blessings of the Lord. Well, then, consider this: The people of Israel experienced God's blessings when he delivered them from their cruel bondage in Egypt. They experienced God's miraculous power and glory, when, by his servant Moses, he parted the Red Sea and led his people on dry ground safely to the other side. (Exodus 14:13-31; see esp. vv.19-20; see also Jos. 4:23-24)

These people were under the cloud: i.e., they were led on their journey by God's almighty presence—represented in and by the cloud. By day and by night, they experienced the unique presence of the LORD. Such was the closeness of their fellowship with God. (Exodus 13:21-22; 40:34-38)

These exemplified only a few of the great blessings experienced by our forefather, Israel.

Then, in verse 2, the apostle continues:

1 Corinthians 10:2

Throughout their journeys, the people of Israel remained under God's guidance and Moses' leadership. They were 'baptised' into Moses in the sense that they were united to him as his followers (just as baptised believers are united to Christ as his followers) (cf. 1 Cor. 1:13-15; John 9:28).

(In the case of Israel, the baptism was *typical* or *figurative*. It represented union with God and with his servant Moses. In the case of a believer today, however, baptism is *literal* and/or *spiritual* and *mystical*: It represents cleansing from sin; it represents death, burial and resurrection with Christ and union with Christ in the heavenly realms.)

Israel, then, was united with God in a covenant bond and with Moses as God's appointed leader and deliverer. Day by day, these people experienced God's blessing on their lives, as he led them by the cloud. At night, God was present with them in all the fullness of his Shekinah glory: i.e., in the fiery pillar within the camp. Israel experienced God's power at the Red Sea, and throughout all their journeys in the desert.

However, while they remained in the desert, how was the entire nation of Israel sustained?

The Lord God himself provided for all their needs. Once more, they experienced the providence and the blessing of the Lord at first hand.

Thus, in verses 3 and 4, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 10:3-4

Throughout their forty years of wandering in the desert, God provided these people with food and drink. (Exodus 16:35; Neh. 9:15) However, the physical food and drink spoke of a much greater provision—the provision of spiritual sustenance or spiritual food. (Deut. 8:3) To this end, verse 3 says that they all ate the same spiritual food: i.e., they received the word of God through Moses. However, as we will see shortly, they did not receive God's word with faith, or with thanksgiving in their hearts to God.

Again, verse 4 tells us that they drank the same spiritual drink from the spiritual rock that accompanied them: i.e., their souls were fed and nourished on the things of God and the things of the Spirit. (Neh. 9:19-21) Once more, however, they despised the Spirit of grace and of glory, and endeavoured to resist or reject the sanctifying influence of the Holy Spirit over their lives.

The last part of verse 4 tells us that the rock that accompanied them was Christ. In effect, then, the people of Israel were resisting the work of Christ in their lives, and were sinning wilfully against the holy Son of God.

Incidentally, this passage demonstrates unmistakably the pre-existence of the Son of God. As the eternal Logos, God's Son was present with the people of Israel in the desert—for he was the Rock that accompanied them on all their journeys. He was the one who provided their souls with spiritual manna, or the real bread from heaven. (John 6:31-35)

Remarkably, however, even after experiencing so much of God's blessings, power and glory, most of these same people ultimately turned aside from God, and from God's ways. Having begun in the race, they later fell by the wayside. However, they fell because of their own unfaithfulness, folly and sin. Thus, in verse 5, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 10:5

God was utterly displeased with these unfaithful people. Even although the Lord had blessed them abundantly by delivering them from Egypt, and by providing for their every need, yet they were not satisfied with what God provided. In their hearts, the people of Israel still yearned for their old way of life. They disbelieved the promises of God, including the promise of a land of great abundance, which lay ahead of them. They despised the grace and goodness of God toward them from day to day, and from hour to hour. In a word, they forgot God and all his benefits. (Num. 14:11)

However, those who despise the grace and goodness of God invite upon themselves the condemnation and judgment of God—and judgment begins with the family or people of God. (1 Pet. 4:17)

Even although these people had experienced God's almighty deliverance and God's abundant blessings, yet they also experienced God's righteous anger and his just judgment. With two exceptions (Joshua and Caleb), every single one of that adult generation died in the desert. Only their children survived to enter the Promised Land. (Num. 14:28-35)

This situation appears to have some parallels with the situation at Corinth, which Paul will later refer to in this letter. Because some of the Corinthian believers had despised the Lord's Table, God had judged them. These believers had been punished by death for their sin. In the case of the Corinthians, they had not lost their salvation, but they had forfeited

some or all of their reward in heaven. Although saved, they would not experience the same degree of eternal blessedness as those who had remained faithful to their Lord and Master, and who had honoured his name and his ordinances.

However, in the case of Israel, both the writer to the Hebrews, and Jude, seem to imply that those who died in the wilderness may have perished eternally—although this is not expressly stated in the OT record. In this case, and although the Israelites had experienced much of God’s grace and blessings on their lives, they could not have experienced the inward regenerating power of the Holy Spirit. However, their knowledge of, and closeness to God and to his mercy—together with their experience of God’s power in delivering them from Egypt—left them culpable for not seeking the salvation of the Lord. (Heb. 3:16-19; Jude 1:5)

Yet, why did God cause these distressing events to be recorded on the pages of sacred history?

Paul gives his answer to this in verse 6:

1 Corinthians 10:6

All these things were written down in the Word of God to warn us against the kind of behaviour and attitudes exhibited by the unfaithful Israelites. It is a warning against being sidetracked from wholehearted commitment to Christ and to the Christian way of life. It is a warning against longing in our hearts for those things that we know are sinful and evil. It is an exhortation to believe God’s Word wholeheartedly and to trust his promises always—regardless of the sometimes difficult or perplexing circumstances that enter into our lives.

God is in sovereign control of all events in the universe and in our individual lives. By his Word and by his Spirit, he guides us in the way that we should go. In order to prove faithful to him, we must humbly accept the teaching of his Word in full, and obey his will in every respect. Then, we will not be inclined to set our hearts on evil things—as did the Israelites. On the contrary, our heart’s desire will be to please the one who called us to himself by his grace and for his own glory.

However, what specifically did the Israelites do to incur God’s anger and bring his judgment upon them?

Paul provides us with some examples of the things we must avoid, beginning with verse 7:

1 Corinthians 10:7

{cf. Exodus 32:6}

Here were the professing people of God compromising their faith and allegiance to God by associating with vile and godless idols! However, we cannot walk the way of holiness and the way of sin as well.

Weary of waiting for Moses to descend from the holy mountain, the people pleaded with Aaron to make gods to go before them. So much for their faith in, and commitment to, the true God!

Aaron—who must have known better—heeded Israel’s persistent and sinful appeals. He collected all the gold from the people’s jewellery and had it melted and moulded into an idol, cast in the shape of a calf.

Then Aaron proclaimed:

...“*These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.*” (Exodus

32:4b NIV))

Aaron then built an altar in front of the golden calf and announced to all the people that they would hold a festival to the LORD there the following day. Thus, in Exodus 32:6, we are told:

So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry. (NIV)

This is what happens when the invisible, intangible God of all creation is replaced or represented by a visible, tangible, created object of worship. Pure spiritual worship degenerates into impure sensual indulgence. These faithless people had no desire to wait on God. They desired only to satisfy their own sinful appetites and fulfil their own ungodly lusts. Not all who are called to follow the Lord actually belong to the Lord. Many are called, but few are chosen.

Even in the church, there are those whom the Bible describes as blots and blemishes on our love feasts. These individuals seek to satisfy only their own sinful cravings, and desire to entice weak-willed believers into their own evil snare—the snare of the devil. God will deal with these people according to their vile and wicked deeds. (2 Pet. 2:13-14)

Essentially, Paul was warning the Corinthians against associating with any idolatrous pagan cults in that city—of which Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty, was the most notorious. The principle of worship in these cults was the same as that practised by devotees of Baal Peor, and exemplified in the worship of the golden calf. In the pagan temples at Corinth, the people participated in a feast dedicated to a particular idol or deity. Later, they took part in all kinds of sexually immoral behaviour.

Avoid these places like the plague, contends Paul. If you do not, it is certain that you will become involved in their vile and detestable sins. (1 Cor. 5:11)

What do we learn from this?

- We must worship God alone—in spirit and in truth.
- We must not compromise our faith or our witness by associating with any form of worship that differs from the Biblical model.
- We must never use any object to represent God's image or likeness.
- We must not place ourselves in any situation where we know that sin is practised, or where we know that we are likely to expose ourselves to temptation.

Once we begin to set our hearts on other things, then we have begun to engage in idolatry. The Israelites discovered this to their cost when they set up idols instead of God, and when subsequently they yielded their bodies and minds to sinful indulgence and to sexual immorality.

However, once *one* such sin has been committed, it becomes all the easier to repeat such sins. Thus, in verse 8, the apostle warns us:

1 Corinthians 10:8

God does not turn a blind eye to those who profess his name, yet cause his name to be blasphemed by their evil way of life. God is holy, righteous and just. He will not leave the guilty unpunished. If those who profess God's name continue to abuse the body that God has given them, and which he has redeemed at inestimable cost, then God will act in righteousness and justice. He will cleanse his church and purge such evils from its midst.

One of the gravest sins that any believer can commit is sexual immorality. It is a sin not only against his own body and the body of another person, but also against the indwelling Holy Spirit. For the believer's body is the temple of God's Spirit. (1 Cor. 6:15-20) God intended physical and sexual relations to be enjoyed within the sanctity of the marriage union—never outside of that union. To indulge in sex before or outside of marriage is to invite the judgment of God.

Forgiveness is, of course, possible—upon true repentance. However, none of us should presume upon the grace of God. If a sinner does not repent and forsake his sin in time, God may judge that man or women without warning. This is what happened to the Israelites when between 23,000 and 24,000 of them died in a single day. They had engaged in the worship of Baal Peor—which involved having sexual relations with the prostitute 'virgins' who worshipped this Moabite god. Therefore, God judged Israel for her unfaithfulness and for her gross impurity (cf. also Num. 25:1-5).

Then, in verse 9, Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 10:9

God had led his people throughout all their desert journeys. Now, he was about to bring them around the land of Edom, just opposite the Promised Land. However, by this time, the Israelites had become extremely impatient. They challenged God and spoke directly against him and against his servant, Moses. Instead of believing that God would bring them into the Promised Land, the people of Israel doubted his word. In this way, they were putting the Lord their God to the test.

Again, instead of accepting the provision that God had made for them throughout their journeys, they complained bitterly about having no food and no water. God had provided them with manna and quail, as well as water; but they detested the provision of the Lord. Once more, by their ingratitude and rebellion, they had been putting the Lord their God to the test. (Exodus 17:2,7; Ps. 78:14-22; 95:8-11 with Heb. 3:8-11)

Ultimately, however, God dealt with these people's rebellious and ungrateful attitude. He sent venomous snakes among them. These snakes bit the people, and many of the Israelites died as a result.

When the people realised that God was judging them because of their sin, they repented and pleaded with Moses for help. In response to Moses' intercessory prayer, God told him to make a bronze serpent and place it on a pole in the midst of the camp. All those Israelites whom the poisonous snakes had bitten, but who looked in faith to the bronze serpent on the pole, lived. (Num. 21:4-9)

Here, then, we learn not to doubt the providence or the wisdom of God. Nor ought we to call into question the ways of the Lord—for his ways are past finding out. Rather than put the Lord to the test and incur his displeasure, we should humbly submit to his sovereign will for our lives. Certain it is that God will never make a mistake concerning our lives, or the lives of those who are closest to us. In all things, God does indeed work for the good of those who love him, to those whom he has called according to his purpose. (Rom. 8:28)

Whether, then, in the daylight or in the darkness, let us trust the Lord with all our heart and soul. God is faithful. He cannot fail to fulfil his promises, until the day that he ceases to be.

In verse 10, the apostle continues:

1 Corinthians 10:10

Here, we are exhorted not to find fault with God for the way in which he does things, or for the people whom he chooses to carry out his will or to act in his service.

The people of Israel grumbled or complained against the Lord and against his servants on many occasions. One such occasion, recorded in Numbers chapter 16, involves Korah, Dathan and Abiram. These men insolently rebelled against God's appointed servant, Moses, despising his leadership and disdaining the fact that Moses alone was authorised to convey God's word and God's will to the people.

Korah, Dathan and Abiram contended that they—and others within the camp of Israel—had as much right to serve as priests before the Lord as did those whom God had expressly called and ordained to this office. God, however, punished these men for rebelling against him and for refusing to accept the servants whom he himself had appointed: i.e., Moses and Aaron. Korah, Dathan and Abiram were destroyed when the ground opened beneath their feet. (Num. 16:1-34)

Similarly, those individuals who thought they had as much right to serve God in the holy place as those whom God had expressly called and appointed were destroyed by the fiery judgment of God. Two-hundred-and-fifty rebellious Israelites died at the hands of the Lord. (Num. 16:35)

The people of Israel were then reminded that only those whom God calls and appoints—in this case, only the descendants of Aaron—were permitted to serve him as priests, and to burn incense before the Lord. The people, however, grumbled against Moses and Aaron—and effectively against the Lord. *"You have killed the LORD's people," they said.* (Num. 16:41)

This further sin and rebellion brought upon the people a plague from God in which 14,700 people perished. This was in addition to those who had already died because of Korah's rebellion. Were it not for Aaron's intervention, many more would have perished under the hands of an angry God. Standing, however, between the living and the dead, Aaron offered prayers and incense to the Lord, thus making atonement for the people's sins. (Num. 16:46-50)

The apostle Paul refers to this plague from God as an act carried out by God's destroying angel: That is, one of God's holy messengers sent on an errand of judgment, to execute God's punishment against sin (cf. Exodus. 12:23,29; 14:19; 2 Sam. 24:16).

From this sad incident, we learn not to oppose God, or those whom God has expressly called and appointed to his service. So long as they continue to obey God's commission, these individuals are not the servants of men but the servants of the Almighty and Sovereign God. Although they are men, they are acting as God's spokesmen to declare the Word of the Lord. Those who resist God's appointed ministers, resist God himself.

In like manner, those who enter upon some work, ministry, or office to which God has *not* called them, are acting presumptuously, and without the authority or blessing of God.

More generally, we learn from this incident just how serious a sin it is to grumble or complain against the Lord or against the choices that God makes. Let us humbly accept everything that God does as being perfectly consistent with his holy, just and upright character, and with his infinite love, mercy, compassion and wisdom.

Whatever our opinions of a particular matter, God cannot—and will not—do wrong; nor will he ever act unjustly or unfairly. But let not man presume to call unfair or unjust, that which God pronounces just, fair and righteous.

1 Corinthians 10:11

{cf. Rom. 15:4}

Many people believe that—as far as his character is concerned—the God of the New Testament is not the same as the God of the Old Testament. Essentially, they believe that the God of the OT was more a God of *righteousness, holiness, justice, and anger*—hence, the kind of judgments that he brought upon Israel when they disobeyed. However, the people who hold to this view of God’s character also hold to the idea that the God of the NT is predominately a God of *love, mercy, compassion, and grace*.

Both views of God’s character or nature are distorted or unbalanced. The eternal God cannot change. What he is from eternity past, he must ever continue to be for all eternity yet to come. As with the Lord Jesus himself, God is the same, yesterday, and today and forever. (Mal. 3:6; Heb. 13:8) If this were not so, then Paul’s argument would be without force and meaningless. However, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the apostle has expressly said that the incidents to which he had just referred were recorded *for our example*.

However, these incidents could not be an example to us of how God deals with the unbelieving and the rebellious, if he does not deal with such people in a similar manner today. The examples would then be pointless. This does not mean that every detail must be the same. It simply means that God continues to act in justice and righteousness against those who wilfully and presumptuously rebel against him, or who consistently disregard, disobey, or disbelieve his Word.

For instance, Ananias and Sapphira rebelled against God and lied to the Holy Spirit. Consequently, God judged them by death. (Acts 5:1-11) Again, as we noted earlier, God punished certain professing believers in the Corinthian church with sickness or death, because they despised and desecrated the Lord’s Table. (1 Cor. 11:27-32)

Thus, God has not changed—nor can he change. His nature is immutable: i.e., unchangeable. He is a God of love, mercy, compassion, and grace. He is also a God of righteousness, holiness, justice, and truth. *God is love. God is also light.*

At the end of verse 11, Paul refers to the present period as *the fulfilment of the ages*. Like the expression, ‘the day of grace,’ ‘the fulfilment of the ages’ is that period extending from the first to the Second Coming of Christ. Israel was set forth as an example to all believers living in the present ‘day of grace’.

We must not become overconfident, therefore, in our walk with God. It is true that God’s grace keeps us from falling away finally. However, this does not mean that we cannot fall into sin—sometimes, very serious sin.

With this in mind, the apostle writes in verse 12:

1 Corinthians 10:12

So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall! (NIV)

Paul has just outlined some very serious examples of the kinds of sins into which the people of Israel fell—even when they were experiencing the guidance and the blessings of God. The fault, of course, lay with the people. Instead of keeping their eyes fixed on the Lord, and their minds on the things of God, they started longing in their hearts for the things of the world and of the sinful nature. Thus, they fell into sin; and, for their unfaithfulness to him, God punished them.

We, too, must never consider ourselves safe from temptation just because we are experiencing God’s guidance and God’s blessings in our lives. The moment we take our eyes

off the Lord, or off the things of the Spirit, we open our minds to other external, worldly, and sinful influences. However, if we allow these influences to occupy our minds, we are much more likely to be presented with temptation, and then to fall into sin.

No matter how mature we consider ourselves to be, we remain safe only for as long as we walk by faith and keep in step with the Spirit. No matter how advanced we think we are in the Christian life, we can still fall into very serious sin if we do not follow the Lord wholeheartedly. The moment that we begin to open our hearts and minds to other things—things which lead us away from God, or which disturb our communion with God—then eventually we will fall. (Prov. 16:18; 28:14; Rom. 11:20-22; Rev. 3:17-22)

Thus, in verse 12, the apostle is addressing each one of us individually when he says:

So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! (NIV)

God, however, knows our human frame, frailties, and failings. He knows that we will be tempted to sin. He also knows there will be many times when these temptations seem about to overwhelm us. Thus, in the first part of verse 13, Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 10:13a

(13a) No temptation has seized you except what is common to man... (NIV)

In this sentence, the word *seized* means 'to lay hold of' (suddenly), or 'to ensnare vigorously and securely'.

To begin with, the Word of God assures us that all mankind faces the same temptations—the same in kind, and the same in intensity. This, of course, means that God's children are not excluded from these temptations. The opening sentence also tells us that these temptations can come upon us *suddenly*, almost without warning, and catching us unawares.

We know, of course, that the Lord Jesus himself endured this very *kind* and *intensity* of temptation. Therefore, from this, we learn that—in *and of itself*—temptation is not sin. Temptation leads to sin only when we harbour it in our minds: when we dwell on it—instead of rejecting it immediately; or, when we yield to it.

However, as has been intimated already, God knows all about us. He knows the exact nature of the temptations that we are called upon to endure. Thus, in the next part of verse 13, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 10:13b

(13b) ...And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear... (NIV)

God is utterly faithful to his Word and to his promises. In his Word, he has promised never to leave his people, or never to abandon them. (Deut. 31:6,8) Again, in his Word, the Lord has promised to deliver his people from the battles that are waged against their souls. This certainly includes the assurance of God's presence during temptations, and the assurance of his deliverance from temptation. (Ps. 50:14-15)

God, therefore, will not fail to fulfil his promises. When his people call upon him for help, strength, and grace in time of need, the Lord will deliver them. He will come to their aid. (1 Pet. 1:5-7; 5:8-10)

This assumes, of course, that we are not holding on to some unforsaken and unconfessed sin in our lives. Providing, however, that we have confessed all known and secret

sins to God—and forsaken them—God will certainly answer his people’s plea for help and deliverance from temptation. Indeed, as we have seen, his own Word assures us categorically that he will not permit us to be tempted beyond what we can bear (v.13b)

However, what happens when we reach the point when we cannot endure the temptation any longer?

Paul provides the answer to this in the last part of verse 13:

1 Corinthians 10:13c

(13c) ...But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it. (NIV)

As soon as we face temptation, God acts. No matter how suddenly or unexpectedly the temptation has come upon us, God provides an immediate remedy. The apostle says that God provides a way out so that we can stand up under the temptation—instead of being crushed beneath what seems to be an unbearable load. Clearly, then, escape does not come through reliance on human strength or human resources. Deliverance will come—but it will come only through trust in God, and through the grace that God provides. Our help is in God. He alone can provide grace sufficient.

Even so, God expects us to prepare ourselves for temptations. Such preparation lies in knowing the Word of God, and by applying the teaching and principles of that Word to each individual temptation in our lives. Let us remember that, when Jesus was tempted, he resisted temptation by quoting from the Word of God—which is the sword of the Spirit.

By heeding the teachings of God’s Word, we learn to avoid certain places or situations where we know that we might be tempted to sin. We learn to apply God’s truths to other situations. We learn to reject temptation as soon as it first presents itself to our minds. We learn to turn our minds instead to the things of the Spirit.

These illustrate just a few of the ways of escape that God provides from temptation. Since each temptation is different, and each person may react differently, God provides the exact way of escape that is appropriate to that individual.

If we yield, it is not because God has failed or God’s Word has failed. Rather, if we yield, it is because we choose to do so. God’s Word has assured us that God will not permit us to be tempted beyond our ability to endure. Thus, if we yield, it is because we have not taken advantage of the way of escape that God has provided. In this case, we are responsible for our sin and for the consequences of our sin.

Let us remember: Our God is able to deliver—but we must be willing!

The Lord’s Table, and the Table of Demons

1 Corinthians 10:14-22

The apostle Paul had just illustrated some of the sins into which Israel’s unbelief and unfaithfulness had led them. These sins began with unbelief and idolatry.

Paul had begun speaking about idolatry in chapter 8. In that chapter, the apostle discussed the rights and wrongs of eating foods that had been offered in sacrifice to idols. Paul had argued for the right to buy this meat in the market, and to eat or not to eat according to conscience. However, the apostle had stated quite clearly that we were not to do anything that might cause a weaker or less knowledgeable brother or sister to stumble in the faith.

Now, in the present section of chapter 10, the apostle warns against any participation with idols or with idol worship. Paul shows the incongruity of attempting to participate in the Lord's Table, and in the table of demons.

Thus, in verse 14, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 10:14

Paul continues to address these worldly-minded and spiritually immature believers as, *dear friends*. In spite of all their shortcomings, they were still his beloved brothers and sisters in the Lord. They were still those for whom he yearned and interceded daily in prayer. They were still those whom his heart longed to see making real progress in the faith.

However, they could not make real progress in the faith, as long as they lacked wholehearted commitment to the Lord. Moreover, they could not pursue wholehearted commitment to the Lord, while their hearts were divided between the Lord and idols—or between the Lord and any other unhealthy interests.

For this reason, then, Paul appealed to these dear saints: *flee from idolatry*. (v.14b) The expression, 'flee from' in this sentence is the same as that used in 1 Cor. 6:18 where Paul says, *flee from sexual immorality*. In God's Word, we are told to resist or stand resolutely against every temptation to sin—except these two. In these two cases, we are told to 'flee from' sexual immorality, and to 'flee from' idolatry. In both cases, the only safe course of action is total avoidance of the situation; or, to remove ourselves immediately from the source of temptation—without waiting to resist it.

Paul wanted the saints of the Lord to have no communication or fellowship with anything associated with idols. The Corinthian believers belonged to the Lord. In spiritual matters especially, their communication and fellowship must be with him and with him alone.

To this end, the apostle writes in verses 15 and 16:

1 Corinthians 10:15-16

Paul exhorts the Corinthian believers to think very seriously about what they were doing. They were to make a sensible judgment about the situation. Whatever religious feast they associated with, by so doing they participated willingly in that feast. In the case of a Christian, he or she participated willingly at the Lord's Table: i.e., the participant shared willingly and actively in remembering the precious shed blood and the body of Christ. Therefore, they identified themselves with Christ and his atoning sacrifice in this act of worship.

Similarly, when a person participated in a feast given in a pagan temple in honour of some idol, that person was sharing willingly and actively in fellowship with idols. He was identifying himself with the god represented by that idol in his act of worship, and with all that this idolatrous god symbolised.

This was precisely what some of these Corinthian Christians had been doing: On the one hand, they had been participating in the body and blood of Christ by sharing at the Lord's Table. On the other hand, they had been participating in idol feasts held within the pagan temples.

In addition, they had been participating in the pagan orgies and gross immorality associated with these idolatrous temples, and especially that of Aphrodite. This was the reason why Paul had exhorted them so urgently in v.14 to ...*flee from idolatry*. The apostle appeals to them to have nothing to do with anything, or anyone, that draws them away from God, or from pure and holy conduct. (2 Cor. 6:14 - 7:1)

Paul gives the reason for this moral separation in verse 17:

1 Corinthians 10:17

When Christ instituted the Lord's Supper, he broke one loaf and shared or distributed it among all his followers. Today, whenever his people meet together to celebrate this memorial feast, they break one loaf and share it among all Christ's members. The members of Christ are his body, the Church. (1 Cor. 11:23-26; 12:27; Rom. 12:5)

It does not matter that the bread may have been partially divided beforehand, or that there may in fact have been more than one physical loaf. Nor does it matter that each local fellowship of believers has its own loaf or loaves. The individual loaves are considered collectively as one loaf—just as a batch of several dozen or several hundred loaves is considered collectively as a single batch.

Therefore, the whole body of Christ worldwide—i.e., all believers—partake of this one loaf. The whole body of Christ worldwide shares in the same fellowship with one another, and the same act of worship. As members of Christ's one body (the Church), they share together in remembering his substitutionary and atoning sacrifice at Calvary. All believers taking part in this act of worship are therefore participants in the body and blood of Christ.

What is true of Christian worshippers concerning the Lord's Supper is true also of Jewish and pagan worshippers concerning their religious feasts or sacrifices. If a person joined in celebrating a Jewish feast or sacrifice, then that person became an active participant in that act of worship. Likewise, if a person joined in celebrating a pagan feast or sacrifice, then that person became an active participant in that idolatrous act of worship.

Thus, in verse 18, the apostle says to the Corinthian believers:

1 Corinthians 10:18

Let us consider for a moment the Jewish offerings and sacrifices, infers Paul: On many occasions, when a Jew offered his sacrifices to God, part of that offering was yielded up to God and part was returned to, or retained by, the offerer. Thus, the offerer became directly involved in the sacrifice that he offered. In his act of worship, he was sharing in direct fellowship with the God to whom the sacrifice had been consecrated and offered: i.e., YHWH (Jehovah). (Lev. 7:14; Deut. 12:13-14, 17-18)

Similarly, those who offered their sacrifices to idols became directly involved in the sacrifices that they offered. In their act of worship, they were sharing in direct fellowship with the idols to which their sacrifices had been consecrated and offered. Not only, however, were they sharing fellowship with others in idol worship and sacrifice, but also they were sharing worship and sacrifice with the false gods represented by those idols. They were even sharing fellowship with the evil or demonic spirits associated with the idols or false gods (v.20).

Thus, in verse 19, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 10:19

In the past, the sacrifices offered to God by the Jews were true, real and meaningful sacrifices offered to the only true, real and living God. However, Paul did not want the formerly pagan Corinthians to draw the wrong conclusion from this. He did not want these believers to assume that because Jewish sacrifices were made to the true, real and living God, therefore sacrifices made to idols were also made to true, real and living deities. Thus, the apostle asks:

(19) Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? (NIV)

Am I suggesting that pagan idols have any real existence—either in this world, or in any other world?

Paul answers this question in verse 20:

1 Corinthians 10:20

Here, the truth of the matter emerges. In a single word (*No*), Paul categorically denies that idols have any real existence. They are non-entities. The gods represented by the idols are non-existent figments of people's imagination, and the idols themselves are inanimate and powerless creations of wood or stone. (Isa. 40:17-20) Again, pagan idols may be the objects of God's natural creation, such as the sun, moon, stars, or planets. They may even be objects of this earth, such as trees, plants, or animals.

Two of the planetary gods were the Roman mythological gods, Jupiter and Juno. Jupiter was known as the *king of the gods, and the lord of life and death*. Jupiter was sometimes known as Jove. Juno was known as *the queen of heaven*. Both of these idol gods were worshipped principally at Catoline Hill in Rome. However, through the spread of the Roman Empire, these and many other idol gods were also worshipped in places like Corinth. The pagans in Corinth, then, offered their sacrifices to these and many other local deities.

However, says Paul emphatically, deities such as these do not exist. (1 Cor. 8:4-6) Nevertheless, infers Paul, a much more sinister figure lurks behind the worship of these deities and their idols—and that figure most certainly *does* exist. Thus, Paul declares that when a pagan makes a sacrifice to his god—wittingly or unwittingly—he is making that offering to demons.

Essentially, then, Satan and the fallen angels are behind every idolatrous form of worship throughout the world. Moreover, those who participate in any form of idolatrous worship are in fact participating—or sharing fellowship—with Satan and the demons. Thus says Paul quite plainly at the end of verse 20:

...I do not want you to be participants with demons. (NIV)

In this connection also, the apostle writes in verse 21:

1 Corinthians 10:21

You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons. (NIV)

To drink the cup of the Lord is to participate in all the blessings and benefits that accrue to the believer through the atoning and substitutionary work of Christ. When we drink of the cup, we remember the blood shed on our behalf: i.e., the life of the perfect Lamb of God sacrificed as an atonement for our sin. We participate in the cleansing effected by that shed blood (v.16). We benefit from the sacrificial death of Christ, and from his triumphant resurrection and his glorious ascension.

We benefit from Christ's work to the extent that we died in him and with him; we were raised to newness of life in him and with him; and we are exalted to the heavenly realms in him and with him. When, therefore, we drink the cup and break the bread, we show forth the efficacy of the Lord's death until he comes. (1 Cor. 11:26)

Again, when we participate in this remembrance feast, we are participating directly in the salvation that God has granted us in Christ. We participate in the blessings of regeneration, justification, sanctification, and glorification. This is what we remember at the Lord's Table—and this is why we offer worship, praise and thanksgiving to God.

However, just as a believer shares dynamically in Christ through participating in the Lord's Table, so also a person shares dynamically with demons through participating in idolatrous feasts or sacrifices. Fellowship and communion with demons is just as much a reality to those who participate in idol feasts, as is fellowship and communion with Christ to those who participate at the Lord's Table. Fellowship with demons is a detestable evil. Fellowship with Christ is an inestimable good.

The Lord's people must decide whom they will serve and worship—for they most certainly cannot serve and worship both (cf. 1 Kings 18:21; Matt. 6:24; 2 Cor. 6:15-17). Thus, in verse 22, the apostle Paul states quite emphatically:

1 Corinthians 10:22

When we set up other gods or idols in our hearts, we arouse the Lord's jealousy. When we do anything that causes us to prove unfaithful to the Lord, we provoke him to jealousy.

The Lord is jealous of his possession—and we are his possession. He will brook no rivals in our hearts. He has redeemed us for himself alone, and we cannot belong to another. All the days of our lives, we must pledge ourselves to him and to him alone. (Exodus 20:5; 34:14; Deut. 4:24)

Restraints on Christian Freedom

1 Corinthians 10:23 - 11:1

Some of the Corinthians, however, could not accept this restriction on their freedom of choice. They wanted to be able to do anything that pleased them. They wanted to be able to eat the meat offered in sacrifice to idols. However, they were not prepared to consider the consciences of other believers. (1 Cor. 8:10-12)

These Corinthians contended that all things were permissible to them. Thus, quoting this remark in his reply to them, the apostle Paul says:

1 Corinthians 10:23

"Everything is permissible," asserted some of the Corinthian believers. 'In Christ, we have perfect liberty from the constraints of the Jewish law. Therefore, we are free to disregard the demands of that law. The law forbade this and that. Now, however, everything is permissible.'

One of the problems with this approach lay in the Corinthian's view of the laws given by God. This led them to disregard not only the Jewish laws relating to clean and unclean foods etc., but also to disregard the moral law summarised in the Ten Commandments.

In chapter 6 of this epistle, Paul had rebuked these Corinthians for using the very same argument—*"everything is permissible"*—to support their sexually immoral behaviour. (1 Cor. 6:12) Freedom from the restraints of the Jewish law concerning sacrifices, ordinances, and ceremonies, did not mean freedom from the restraints of God's moral law. The moral law still applied. Christ fulfilled the law in relation to sacrifices and offerings; and he abolished the laws relating to Jewish rites, rituals, and ceremonies. The Lord, however, did not abolish the law of God as a moral code, and as summarised in the Ten Commandments. (Matt. 5:17-19)

Granted, this law cannot save—nor was it ever intended to be a means of salvation. Fallen mankind is incapable of keeping God's law perfectly. But perfect, life-long observance is essential if a person would be saved by keeping the law of God. Even this does not guarantee a person's salvation. This is because that person has been born with an inherently sinful nature for which atonement must be made. As far as fallen mankind is

concerned, salvation is—and ever has been—by God’s sovereign grace and undeserved mercy.

Apart from setting forth the standards of moral behaviour that God requires, the purpose of the law is to demonstrate to mankind that—by this law—he stands condemned. He stands condemned by God’s law because he is unable and unwilling to keep the law, as God requires. In addition, as the apostle Paul declares in Romans chapter 3, the same law that condemns a person cannot also justify that person.

However, even the law that justly condemns mankind for their sin redounds to God’s glory, praise and honour. For, again, that same law is designed to show to fallen mankind that their only hope of salvation lies—not in themselves—but in the sovereign free grace of God. In other words, the law is designed to lead sinners to Christ. (Gal. 3:24)

But, with their failure to distinguish between the *temporary laws* of God and the *permanent Law* of God, some of the Corinthian believers were misapplying God’s Word. Thus, they contended: “*Everything is permissible.*” But, says Paul, “*not everything is beneficial.*” (v.23a) Not everything is for your good. Not everything is for the good of your fellow believers—and you must have regard to their consciences in whatever you do.

“*Everything is permissible,*” insisted the Corinthians. But, replies Paul, “*not everything is constructive.*” (v.23b) Not everything contributes toward the building up of the church in love. (Rom. 14:15; 15:1-2; 1 Cor. 8:1) Again, not everything contributes toward your brothers or sister’s spiritual welfare. You must consider the effect the exercise of your freedom may have on the consciences and conduct of other believers.

Thus, in verse 24, Paul says:

1 Corinthians 10:24

Some of these Corinthians had been thinking of how they might live to please themselves. They had turned their legitimate freedom in Christ into a license to indulge the desires of the sinful nature, or do things irrespective of the concerns and misgivings of other believers (cf. Phil. 2:3-4,21).

Once more, this attitude demonstrated the worldliness and spiritual immaturity of the church at Corinth. These believers claimed to be blessed with outstanding teachers, and with an abundance of spiritual gifts. Clearly, however, in spite of their claims, something was very seriously amiss with this local fellowship and with their witness for Christ.

Even so—as Paul had already made plain—the Corinthian believers were still his beloved brothers and sisters in the Lord. They were still the children of God.

Let us return, then, to the matter under discussion—the exercise of our freedom in Christ. In chapter 8, Paul had begun to speak about foods offered to idols and about the rights and wrongs of eating such foods. In the passage which follows, the apostle enlarges upon this matter, showing when it is permissible, and when it is not permissible, to eat such foods.

Thus, in verses 25 and 26, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 10:25-26

{Cf. Psalm 24:1}

Now then, infers Paul, you must learn to distinguish between that which is right and that which is wrong in the exercise of your freedom. For example, there is a right and a wrong occasion for eating foods that may have been offered to idols.

Clearly, it is always wrong to eat such food when that food forms part of a feast or offering within an idol's temple, or which is consecrated specifically to an idol. On these occasions, the exercise of your freedom to eat any kind of meat would involve you in participation and fellowship with idols. Indeed, such participation and fellowship would not be with idols at all, but with demons (vv.20-21). Eating meat under such circumstances, therefore, is always wrong. In this instance, the exercise of your freedom would be sin.

Having said this, however, infers Paul, there are other occasions when you may eat any kind of meat. For example, you may buy and eat any kind of meat that is sold in the meat market. Some of that meat may previously have been offered in sacrifice to idols. However, you may still eat of it; for—by being offered for sale in the public market—it has lost all its religious connotations. Association with idols no longer contaminates it.

Even so, do not raise questions on grounds of conscience. Accept whatever meat is offered for sale in the meat market as being from the Lord. Do not ask questions about the source of this or that piece of meat—otherwise, you may offend your conscience unnecessarily. Remember that the Lord Jesus has pronounced all foods clean. In addition, all food is consecrated to God by his Word, by thanksgiving and by prayer. (Mark. 7:19; Acts 10:9-16; Rom. 14:14; 1 Tim. 4:4-5)

Remember, too, that the Scripture says,

The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it. (Ps. 24:1 NIV; cf. Deut. 10:14)

Receive, therefore, what belongs to the Lord, and what comes from the Lord, with gratitude and thanksgiving.

This clarified the issue as far as meat sold in the meat market was concerned. However, what about eating meat in someone else's house? Might not that meat have been offered to idols?

To this, Paul replies in verse 27:

1 Corinthians 10:27

Now, infers Paul, when an unbeliever invites you to his home for a meal, you are perfectly free to exercise your Christian liberty in eating any kind of meat that is placed before you. It does not matter if this meat was previously used in idol sacrifice. The reason for this is that the meat is not being eaten in an idol's temple or in connection with idol worship. Rather, it is being eaten in a private individual's home. Therefore, it has lost all its former religious significance. Eat this meat, therefore, but do not ask questions of conscience. Do not ask your hosts how or where they obtained this meat. This might not only offend your conscience, but might also cause offence to the people who invited you to their meal.

In this verse, we note that Paul is discussing the very real possibility of a believer accepting an invitation to eat and socialise in an unbeliever's house. This parallels exactly the situation where the Lord Jesus himself ate and drank with *tax collectors and 'sinners.'* (Luke 5:29-32; 19:5-7)

From this, we learn that the Scriptures provide no support to believers for refusing to eat with unbelievers in the course of an ordinary meal. Nor does God's Word provide support for refusing to associate with unbelievers in ordinary social events. What the Scriptures *do* forbid is fellowship with someone who calls himself a brother—and yet lives a notoriously sinful life. In like manner, the Scriptures forbid any association in the kind of social events that lead to indulgence in ungodly attitudes or behaviour, or which are likely to present us with a particular temptation to sin. As the apostle says elsewhere, we must avoid every kind of evil. (1 Cor. 5:9-11; 1 Thess. 5:22)

Returning now to the passage before us: Paul has just said that a believer is to eat whatever food is placed before him, without raising question about the origin or history of that food.

Then, in verses 28 and 29, the apostle says:

1 Corinthians 10:28-29

(Before considering this verse, we should observe that—in the King James Version and in the margin of the New International Version—the quotation already used in verse 26 is repeated at the end of verse 28. Apparently, however, this is a mistake. The recurrence in verse 28 should be omitted, as it is not contained in the best Greek manuscripts of this passage.)

Now to consider verse 28 proper:

But suppose, infers Paul—when you are sitting at the table for this meal—another person present says to you, “*This has been offered in sacrifice,*” then what do you do? This person has now made you aware that the meat you are about to eat was formerly consecrated and offered to some pagan idol before being served to you.

If, under these circumstances, you eat it, you may offend the person who told you. You may cause him to think that there is no harm in eating meat offered to idols in any circumstances. Indeed, if you eat this meat, he may be led to believe that he too can eat such meat—even within the precincts of an idol’s temple, or at a feast dedicated to an idol.

Technically, of course, the believer remains free to eat this meat—even although he now knows it was previously offered to idols. This is because he is not doing it in an idol’s temple or in connection with an idol feast. Rather he is eating in a private individual’s household where the meat has lost all its religious significance. Nevertheless, for the sake of the person who told him of its connection with idols, the believer must set aside his right to eat any kind of meat. This way, he shows respect for the person who told him, and he avoids offending that person’s conscience.

This is especially true if the person concerned honestly believed that eating meat offered to idols was *always* wrong—even although it no longer bore a religious significance.

In fact, this was not the case. Paul had already made it plain that it was wrong *only* when it involved participation in idol sacrifice or worship. It was no longer wrong to eat such meat once it had been offered for sale in a public meat market, or when it had been bought and used by private individuals in their own homes—as here. The only exception to this would be when those private individuals specifically consecrated their meal to some pagan idol. Then, of course, a believer should not participate in the meal.

Paul had just said that the believer must refrain from exercising his right to eat meat when someone had advised him that this meat was formerly offered to idols. The reason for this was to protect the other person’s conscience. As had been suggested, the other person might not realise that there were certain occasions when such meat could be eaten—or he may have had doubts about the matter. Therefore, to avoiding wounding his conscience, Paul says; *do not eat it* (cf. 1 Cor. 8:7).

Another reason for this restraint is given in the latter part of verse 29:

(29b) ...*For why should my freedom be judged by another’s conscience? (NIV)*

Paul—and any other believer—has complete freedom to eat any kind of meat. Yet, if a believer were to exercise his freedom to eat meat when it might cause offence to another believer, then he would be sinning against Christ, and against that other believer for whom Christ died. Again, if the believer were to exercise his right to eat under these circum-

stances, he would be leaving himself open to the judgment and criticism of the offended believer or of other like-minded believers.

In verse 30, Paul continues:

1 Corinthians 10:30

Paul had no qualms about eating food formerly offered to idols. The apostle knew that idols had no real existence. Therefore, sacrifices offered to them could not become contaminated since they were being offered to non-existent entities. Paul, therefore, was quite happy to accept such meat. He gave thanks to God for it, and he knew that his meal was sanctified by the word of God and by prayer. (Rom. 14:6; 1 Tim. 4:3-5)

However, the apostle did not want to find himself being criticised or denounced because some other believers did not yet fully appreciate the teaching of God's Word on this matter. Perhaps, by their long association with pagan sacrifices in the past, these believers found it extremely difficult to conceive of this meat as being completely free from idolatrous connections. Therefore, to avoid giving unnecessary offence, and to avoid leaving himself open to criticism, Paul refrained from eating under such circumstances. His aim was to please and honour God, and to build up the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. (Rom. 14:13-23)

Thus, in verse 31, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 10:31

So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.
(NIV)

The same principle of restraint applies not only to the eating of certain kinds of food, but also to what we drink—or indeed, to anything else that we do. If there is a possibility that we might cause offence to another believer by something that we do, then we should refrain from doing it. Even if it is a perfectly legitimate interest or pursuit, we must be very careful that the exercise of our freedom does not cause another brother or sister to stumble in the faith.

We may be utterly convinced in our own minds that something is right. We may be able to show from the Scriptures that no sin is involved—since what we are doing is a matter of indifference and a matter of individual conscience. Nevertheless, perhaps because of past associations, another believer sees this situation as wrong, or as exposing him to unnecessary temptation. In such cases, we ought not to offend our brother's conscience. We ought to regard this brother or sister as Christ regards him or her. Out of love for our fellow believer, we must be willing to exercise restraint over our freedom in Christ. Indeed, as Paul says, everything that we do ought to be done for God's glory.

Having regard to the weaker or less informed brother or sister in Christ, the apostle says in verses 32 and 33:

1 Corinthians 10:32-33

Here we see that we must do our utmost to avoid giving unnecessary offence to anyone. Paul is concerned that no one is given cause for offence by a believer—whether those people be other believers (the church of God), or whether they be non-Christians (Jews or Gentiles). Believers must be very careful that outsiders are never given just cause to criticise the church of God, or to blaspheme the name of God. (2 Cor. 6:3)

Paul says in verse 33 that he tries to please everybody in every way. This, of course, does not mean that he adapts his teaching or behaviour to the standards of the world in order

to please the world. Under no circumstances did Paul ever compromise his conduct or his message. The apostle is simply saying that—within the bounds of godliness, love and faithfulness—he does everything in his power to avoid offending others, in order to reach them for Christ. (1 Cor. 9:19-22)

Follow My Example

Then, in the first verse of chapter 11, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 11:1

Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ. (NIV)

This, then, is the way that Paul behaves in order to glorify God and to win others for the Lord Jesus Christ. We, too, must be prepared to sacrifice some of our rights and freedom at times, in order to avoid offending others, and so that God may be honoured in our lives and others may be influenced for Christ.

Thus, says Paul, be like me—but only insofar as I am like Christ. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.

1 Corinthians Chapter 11

Due Respect in Worship

1 Corinthians 10:2-16

At this point in his letter, the apostle comes to a discussion about proper order within the worship services of the church. In two matters in particular, the church at Corinth had tolerated some serious improprieties among certain of its members. These matters concerned due respect of a wife for her husband, and due respect on the part of everyone for the Lord's Table.

Paul Commends the Corinthians

Before Paul deals with the first of these matters, he says in verse 2 of chapter 11:

1 Corinthians 11:2

(Cf. 2 Thess. 2:15)

Judging by the number of matters that Paul has had to correct in this church, we might conclude that the church at Corinth had departed almost entirely from sound doctrine and godly conduct. However, this was not the case. A number of believers at Corinth were still holding faithfully to the teaching that Paul had passed on to them in earlier days—and for this, the apostle commends them. He also commends them for warmly remembering him—presumably, in their prayers and by their individual gifts.

It seems that a sizeable, powerful and vocal minority within the church was causing the undeniably serious problems at Corinth. Probably, these people were the ones who were forming themselves into distinct groups or factions, and claiming allegiance to one or another individual leader. Other believers within the church, however, endeavoured to hold fast to the true apostolic teaching as delivered by men like Paul, and to live godly lives. Thus, Paul is able to praise them for their faithfulness to the Lord.

Having commended the church in this matter, the apostle now turns to another matter: one that, this time, needed urgent correction. Thus, in verse 3, the apostle writes:

Equality and Submission

1 Corinthians 11:3

Now I want you to realise that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. (NIV)

From creation, God had instituted a specific order. Foremost or pre-eminent in this order, is Christ. Unlike man or woman, Christ—or rather, God the Son—is uncreated and has existed with the Father from eternity. The Son is fully equal with the Father in respect to his divine Person, but he subjects himself voluntarily to the Father in respect of his offices. (Cf, John 5:30; 17:4; 1 Cor. 15:27)

Next in God's order is man. In all respects, man is subject to his immediate head: i.e., Christ.

Next after man in God's order of creation is woman—for woman was taken out of man, and was created as a helper and companion for the man. (Gen. 2:18,22-25; Eph. 5:23) Within the order that God has instituted, the woman is subject to the headship of the man. (Gen. 3:16; Eph. 5:22-24; Col. 3:18; 1 Pet. 3:1,5-6)

Equality and Submission Not Mutually Exclusive

A great deal of controversy and confusion has arisen in this area, partly because this passage is sometimes understood to be teaching that Christ is not equal with God, or that a woman is not equal with a man. This, however, is not the case. This passage does not deny the essential equality of the Son with the Father. Nor does it deny the essential equality of a woman with a man.

Within the Godhead or Trinity, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, are co-equal in power, glory, and eternity. That is, as *Persons*, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are equal in all their attributes. However, within the equality of the Godhead, each of these three divine persons performs different functions, offices, or tasks. Therefore, there is an administrative order of subsistence within the Godhead.

For example, by a word of command, God created the worlds. However, he did this through his Son, and he did it by the agency of his Holy Spirit. Each person of the Godhead was essential to the creation of the worlds, but each person performed a different task in that creation.

To take another example: God sent his Son into the world to accomplish the work of redemption. For this purpose, the Son humbled himself voluntarily; took upon himself the form of a servant, and became obedient unto death—even death on a cross. (Phil. 2:5-8) Also involved in the work of redemption was the Holy Spirit. The task of the Holy Spirit is to convict mankind of sin, convince them of their need of redemption, and convert them to Christ. Thereafter, the Holy Spirit continues with his task of sanctification.

So then, here we see that all three persons of the Godhead are equal in power, glory and eternity: i.e., as *persons*, there is no distinction of qualities or attributes between them. However, concerning the task or office that each person performs, there is an administrative order of subsistence or operation between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Father *sends* the Son, and the Son *obeys* his Father and *accomplishes* his Father's will.

In this respect—and in this respect only—the Son *submits* to his Father and does all that that his Father has told him to do. Again, in this respect—and in this respect only—the Father is said to be greater than the Son. (John 14:28)

It is a mistake to assume from this latter expression that the Bible is denying Christ's deity. This, most certainly, is not the case. Those who believe otherwise have completely misunderstood the reality and the nature of the distinction between the essential and eternal equality of the three divine persons. They have also misunderstood the reality and the nature of the administrative role that each of these three persons assumes within the Godhead.

To use an everyday analogy: As *persons*, an employer and an employee are *equal*. Leaving aside individual characteristics, as *persons* there is no essential difference between them. Although one is an employee of the other, they stand on exactly the same level as *people*.

However, in relation to his *work* or *employment*, the employee is *subject* to his employer, and is required to follow his employer's instructions. This, however, does not mean that the employee is no longer equal with his employer as a person. His equality as a person remains entirely unaffected by the task that he performs, and by the position of subjection that he assumes while performing this task. The two matters are completely distinct.

So it is in the Godhead. The essential equality and deity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is entirely unaffected by the task or offices that each of these persons assumes, or by the work that he performs. The two things are completely distinct.

Therefore, when—in relation to the position that Christ occupies temporarily as a servant—he declares: *The Father is greater than I*, there is absolutely no conflict or contradiction when—in relation to his permanent position as God's Son—the Lord Jesus says: *I and the Father are one*. (John 14:28; 10:30)

In these passages, the Lord Jesus is speaking under two completely different sets of circumstances. In the one set, he speaks from the *standpoint of his humanity* and voluntary subjection to his Father. In the other set, he is speaking from the *standpoint of his essential deity* and sonship with his Father. This, the Jews clearly understood. Hence, their attempt to stone the Lord Jesus for blasphemy.

So long as we are able to distinguish between the *person* and the *position* that he occupies, or between the *person* and his *work*, we should avoid misunderstanding the Word of God. Certain it is that God's holy Word cannot involve itself in inconsistencies or contradictions. It cannot affirm in one place, what it denies in another place. God's Word is inerrant and infallible.

Now, then, to apply these lessons to our present discussion of verse 3: We have seen that Christ's voluntary submission to his Father does not involve any denial or compromise of his deity. Nor does the Lord's submission involve any denial or compromise of his essential and eternal equality with his Father and with the Holy Spirit.

What is true of the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is—in its measure—true also of the relationship between a man and a woman; or, more specifically, between a husband and his wife. As *persons*, God created man and woman *equal in status*. However, concerning her *position as a wife*, a woman is *subject* to her husband.

This parallels precisely the situation where the head of Christ is God—although, as we have said, this does not rob him of his equality *as a person* with his Father. Similarly, a wife's subjection to her head—i.e., her husband—does not rob her of her equality *as a person* with her husband. Thus, the apostle writes:

(3) Now I want you to realise that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. (NIV)

The Head Covering

Applying this principle to showing due respect within God's house, the apostle writes in verse 4:

1 Corinthians 11:4

The order that God ordained at creation should be observed not only within the domestic situation, but also within the religious life of the community. In particular, God expects everyone to show due reverence when they attend or participate in any kind of worship service.

Paul begins by referring to the respect that a man ought to show. The apostle mentions two examples from church life—praying and prophesying. Prayer may be seen as representing all those areas of worship that are addressed specifically to God, and that involve us in direct communion with our Father in heaven. This would include not only general prayer, but also petition, intercession, confession, praise, thanksgiving, and such like.

The other example—prophecy—may be seen as representing all those areas of worship where God's Word is addressed specifically to the people, and that involves us in communicating with, and sharing fellowship with, our hearers. This would include not only prophesying itself, but also preaching, teaching, evangelism, personal witnessing or testimony, formal instruction, and such like.

Now, infers Paul, when you engage in either of these groups of activities, you are engaging in fellowship with the Almighty and Sovereign God. Either you are invoking his holy and majestic name in prayer, or you are speaking of that name by making known his Word.

The Lord our God is enthroned in the majestic heights of glory. Although, through his Son, we may come confidently into his presence, yet—when we call upon him in prayer, or speak in his name—we ought to do so with due respect or reverence in our hearts for the most high and holy God. For a man, this means showing respect (i.e., reverence) to his immediate (spiritual) Head—i.e., Christ—by keeping his own (physical) head uncovered in worship. By keeping his head uncovered, a man is indicating his willing, humble and obedient submission to the headship or authority of Christ over him—provided, of course, that a humble, contrite and submissive heart accompanies it.

If, however, a man were to cover his physical head in worship, he would be dishonouring his spiritual Head—i.e., Christ. Such an act would indicate a spirit of rebellion against the headship and authority of Christ. In other words, this man would be refusing to accept or acknowledge Christ's rightful dominion over him.

Then, in verse 5, the apostle declares:

1 Corinthians 11:5

In God's order in creation, a man shows respect to, and submits to, his immediate Head: i.e., Christ. Similarly, a woman shows respect to, and submits to, her immediate head: i.e., her husband. Through submitting herself to her husband, a wife—in effect—is submitting herself to Christ, her husband's Lord: For she is acknowledging the fact that the man—as her head—represents the image and glory of God. (v.7) Thus, when a woman participates in prayer or prophesying, she shows due reverence to God and respect to her husband by covering her own (physical) head.

It is important to observe here that the covering intended is a supplementary covering over the head. It does not refer to the natural covering of the hair. If hair were the covering meant, then—for a man to be *uncovered* during worship—*would mean that he must have no hair!*

Clearly, this is not what the Word of God means to say. Nor does the Greek verb support this interpretation. The Greek verb translated '*to cover*' means 'to cover to the forehead' (as with a veil). If, however, a woman were to participate in worship without a supplementary head covering, this would dishonour her head: i.e., her husband. Failure to cover her head would indicate that person's unwillingness to show due respect and submission to her husband, and due reverence to Almighty God.

The apostle Paul treats this matter so seriously that he adds a powerful supplementary phrase to verse 5:

(5b) ...it is just as though her head were shaved. (NIV)

For a woman to have her head of hair shaved or shorn (lit., 'scraped' or 'sheared') was considered an absolute disgrace. God gave a woman long hair for a natural covering—and this natural covering is her glory. (v.15)

However, under certain extreme circumstances, a woman might have her long hair removed completely. This usually happened to those women found guilty of adultery. Their hair was shaved off ('sheared') to indicate the vile nature of their offence, and its seriousness in the sight of God. Any woman, therefore, seen without hair, or with hair cropped, was considered to be a woman of loose moral character. It is, therefore, a most serious matter when—by direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit—the apostle Paul makes such a dreadful comparison.

We must remember that Paul was not giving his own opinion here, or passing his own private judgment on this matter. Nor is he dealing with a matter that was relevant only to the church at Corinth or only to believers in his own culture or day and age. The very fact that the apostle argues from God's order in creation shows unmistakably that this was not a local, cultural or temporary requirement. It was—and is—a requirement that applies to all of God's people in every age of the church, and in all localities. (Gen. 3:16b; 1 Cor. 11:9-10)

Let us, then, heed these words, not as the words of man, but as they really are—the words of the living, Sovereign and Almighty God.

In verse 6, the apostle continues:

1 Corinthians 11:6

The word that Paul uses here for 'cover' or 'veil' is a word that means an item of clothing for covering the head.

In this verse, the apostle is affirming quite plainly that if a woman refuses to cover her head, she is indicating thereby a refusal to submit to the authority of her husband. She is refusing to acknowledge his headship over her, and is asserting instead her independence from her husband. This, however, is a most serious matter. Thus, the apostle says that if a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off. By this, Paul means that a woman who refuses to submit to her husband, falls into the same category as a woman who proves unfaithful to her husband. (cf. Num. 5:18-19)

However, Paul asserts, it is freely acknowledged that for a woman to have her hair cut off or cropped is utterly disgraceful and dishonourable. Since this is so, and since no Christian woman would wish to be compared with this kind of person, then a Christian woman should cover her head. She should acknowledge God's creation order: Christ is the head of, or has authority over, the man, and a husband is the head of, or has authority over, his wife.

An unmarried woman ought also to have her head covered. Although she is not presently showing submission to a husband, she is still required to acknowledge her position in God's order of creation. Again, she is required to cover her head—as also are married women—*because of the angels*. (v.10)

In verse 7, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 11:7

Man reflects the image and glory of God.

When God created man, he created him righteous and holy. Originally, man bore a perfect image and likeness of God. This, of course, was not a physical resemblance, but a rational, moral and spiritual resemblance.

What was true of the man was true equally of the woman. She too was created originally righteous and holy. She too bore the perfect image and likeness of God in her soul. The woman, however, was the first to fall into sin, and the first to deface the image, likeness

and glory of God in her soul. Subsequently, she led her husband into the same sin and the same degradation of their originally righteous and perfectly holy character.

Since the woman did not listen to her husband's voice, but allowed herself to be deceived by the serpent, God altered the relationship she bore to her husband. From the time of the fall, God placed a wife in submission to her husband. (Gen. 3:16b; 1 Tim. 2:11-15)

Like the man, a woman is still created in the image and likeness of God; although, in both cases, this image and likeness has been greatly defaced by the fall. In Christ, this image is being restored; although not completely in this life. During this life, man is considered as the image and glory of God, whereas woman is considered as the glory of man.

In the marital relationship, a man reflects God's glory in him through submission to Christ, and through love for his wife. A woman reflects God's glory in her through submission to her husband, and through her submission to Christ. It is not, however, possible for a woman to submit to Christ if she does not also show loving submission to her husband.

In verses 8 and 9 the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 11:8-9

Once more, writing as guided by the Holy Spirit of God, the apostle Paul connects this situation with God's order in creation. Firstly, God created man—i.e., Adam. The LORD, however, declared that it was not good—i.e., not suitable, not appropriate, or not fitting—for man to be alone. Thus, God said that Adam should have a suitable helper and companion.

God demonstrated to Adam that nothing in his existing creation could ever prove to be a suitable helper and companion for him. Then, the LORD created woman: i.e., Eve—the mother of all living.

When God created Adam, he did so from the 'dust of the ground,' and he breathed into Adam the breath of life. However, when God created Eve, he created her from Adam or out of Adam's side. Thus, we have the order of creation: God created man first. Later, the LORD created woman *from* the man, and as the only suitable helper and companion for the man. This is what Paul means when he says in verse 8:

(8) For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; (NIV)

This is further explained in verse 9, where the apostle says:

(9) neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. (NIV)

God did not create the man for the woman. On the contrary, God created the woman for the man. The woman was specifically created by God for the man, and as man's only suitable helper and companion.

This is the order of creation, and this is the reason that God gives in his holy Word for the creation of woman. In order, therefore, to acknowledge the place that God has assigned to her in his order of creation, a woman ought to show submission to a man—and especially to her own husband—just as Sarah did to Abraham. (1 Pet. 3:1-7)

Under no circumstances, however, must we take these remarks to infer that a man may take advantage of a woman, or that a husband may take advantage of his wife. This is most certainly not the teaching of God's holy Word. On the contrary, God's Word forbids any such abuses.

God created woman *from* the man, and *for* the man. However, the LORD created the woman as man's God-given helper and companion. He created her as the only one in

whom a man could find fulfilment, or to whom he could be bonded in love and affection. (Gen. 2:21-25)

A woman, therefore, is not second best. She is second in the order of creation—as far as humankind is concerned. However, as a *person*, God created her equal with the man. It is only in relation to her *position* in the order of creation, and as a wife, that God requires a woman to acknowledge the headship of the man, and to submit to that headship.

Similarly, however, God commands a husband to love his wife—even as Christ loved the church. If, therefore, a husband loves his wife, as God requires, then there will be no question of him taking advantage of his wife, or of his position as head of the household. (Eph. 5:25,28)

God created woman out of man, and for man. Thus, in verse 10, the apostle Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 11:10

For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head. (NIV)

Although God could have created Adam and Eve simultaneously, he did not do so. The LORD God chose to create man first. Later, when no suitable helper was found for Adam, God created woman.

This does not mean that woman was created as an afterthought. God does not make mistakes. From eternity, he deliberately planned to follow this pattern and order. Woman was as much a part of God's eternal plan as was man. This is self-evident. Apart from the woman, God's plan for the replenishing of the earth could not have been accomplished. Apart from the woman, a man could never be totally united to another person in love and affection. Thus, we can see that the woman was just as necessary to the fulfilment of God's eternal purposes as was the man.

In verses 8 to 10, the apostle said:

(8) For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; (9) neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. (10) For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head. (NIV)

In acknowledgement of God's order in creation, a woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head. A *sign of authority* means 'a token' or 'indicator of being under someone's authority'—in this case, a husband's.

The sign of authority was usually taken to be a veil, or other similar form of head covering. By wearing such a head covering, a woman was acknowledging her position in God's order in creation. She was also indicating her submission to her husband. In addition, the veil or other similar head covering indicated that this was a woman of decorum and modesty. This was particularly important in a society where a woman without a head covering was considered immodest.

Again, no godly woman would ever have presumed to approach the presence of God without this external covering or sign of authority on her head. This was because they not only desired to indicate godly and loving submission to their husbands, but also because they desired to show due reverence to Almighty God. However, due reverence cannot be shown to God without submitting to God's ordained order in creation.

Furthermore, when anyone approached the presence of God—as in prayer or worship—they came into the presence of innumerable holy angels. These mighty created beings *veil their faces* in the awesome presence of God. The glory and majesty of his presence

overwhelm them. Angels, however, represent a far higher creation than mankind—a creation that worships in the immediate presence of God, and that serves him throughout the universe. These holy beings—who have never fallen—expect fallen, but redeemed, men and women to show due reverence to God and to their Redeemer.

It is because of the concern shown by the holy angels in this matter that the injunction for a woman to cover her head applies not only to married women, but also to single women. Although a single woman is not indicating submission to a husband, she is still required to acknowledge her position in the order of creation, and to cover her head because of the holy angels.

Having written of these things, the apostle Paul does not want to leave his Corinthian readers with the wrong impression respecting the relationship between a man and a woman. Thus, in verse 11, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 11:11

God never created mankind with the intention that the male should be completely independent of the female. God created each to complement the other. In the order of creation, each is dependent on the other. Thus, in verse 12, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 11:12

In the beginning, God created woman from man and for man. Subsequently, however, it is the woman who produces male or female. Yet, in the natural course of events, she cannot do so without the assistance of the man. Here, then, we see just one example of the mutual dependence that God intended should exist between a husband and his wife. Each needs the other. Each was created for the other. Each finds fulfilment in the other.

Yet, to let us know that—in and of itself—the husband-wife relationship is not sufficient and complete, the apostle adds:

(12b) ...But everything comes from God. (NIV)

Woman came from man. Mankind is now born of woman. Yet, both men and women must acknowledge that life—and everything else—comes from God. God grants or withholds the right or ability to conceive and produce life. The Lord gives, and—at times—the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord! (Gen. 25:21; 29:31; Job 1:21)

Primarily, therefore, men and women are wholly dependent on God. Secondly, they are mutually dependent on one another.

Example from Nature

Continuing, therefore, with the matter under discussion, the apostle says in verse 13:

1 Corinthians 11:13

The previous verse emphasised the complete dependence of the man and the woman on God. It is fitting, therefore, that both man and woman should acknowledge their total dependence on God by showing reverence to God and respect for one another in prayer, and in other forms of worship.

In a man, this reverence is shown by coming into God's holy presence with his head uncovered. In this way, the man acknowledges his submission to Christ as his Head.

In a woman, reverence is shown by coming into God's holy presence with her head covered. In this way, a woman acknowledges her submission to her husband as her head,

and to Christ. By covering her head, a woman also acknowledges her position in God's order of creation. In addition, she shows deference before God's mighty and holy angels.

In view of all this, Paul infers, we ought to make our own godly judgment on this matter, asking ourselves this question:

(13b) *...Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? (NIV)*

Then, in verse 14 and 15, the apostle adds:

1 Corinthians 11:14-15

Paul now appeals to propriety, and to the lesson of nature itself to illustrate the case.

At creation, God made man with shorter hair (relatively) than woman. This was one of the distinguishing marks between the sexes, and one that God ordained should be observed in perpetuity. It is appropriate and natural for a man to have shorter hair. It is equally appropriate and natural for a woman to have longer hair.

Indeed, nature itself teaches us that if a man has particularly long hair, it is a disgrace to him. For this distinction belongs to the woman. However, if a woman has long hair, this is both natural and her glory. Indeed, in the natural realm—as opposed to the spiritual realm—this long hair is given to her as a covering. From this natural example, or analogy from nature, we learn that God gave long hair to a woman as a distinguishing feature from the man. In the natural realm, this long hair is given her as a covering.⁵

The natural realm, however, is not the same as the spiritual realm. In the natural realm, a woman's long hair serves as a covering. However, if nature itself requires a woman's head to be covered by long hair, how much more does religion or spiritual worship require an equally distinctive covering on the head?

It may be said that the natural covering of long hair is the only covering required by a woman in worship. But, in this case, Paul's whole argument would be pointless and superfluous. However, as we said earlier, it is impossible for the passage to bear this interpretation, without doing violence to the text and context. If we say that a woman must cover her head in worship, and if we say that this covering is her hair, then—by a logical necessity, and by the principles of sound exegesis—we must also say that men must cut off their hair completely! For a man is required to uncover his head in worship. But, if *hair* be the head-covering intended, then a man must remove his hair!

Clearly, this is an absurdity, and it is not what the apostle intended to say. A man *removes any supplementary* covering from his head in worship. Similarly, a woman *places a supplementary* covering over her head in worship. This is the only interpretation that the passage will bear. This is the only lesson that we can draw from the analogy of nature where woman alone is given a long and full covering of hair.

Thus, in verse 16, the apostle declares:

1 Corinthians 11:16

It has been argued that Paul intended this instruction only for the church at Corinth, and that he did so for local and cultural reasons pertaining to that area alone. However, in this verse, the apostle clearly repudiates this contention. Here, Paul makes it abundantly clear that this was the uniform teaching and practice among all the churches of God.

⁵ *covering*: the word used for 'covering' here is different from the word used for 'cover' or 'covering' earlier in this passage. Earlier occurrences referred to a (supplementary) item of clothing placed over the head/forehead (e.g., a veil). The word used on this occasion can refer either to an item of clothing (such as a cloak or mantle) or to the natural covering of hair.

Whatever anyone may say, what Paul has written here is the Word of the Lord, given by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. (1 Thess. 2:13) Those who contend against the Word, do not contend against the servant of the Lord who bears that Word, but against the Lord God himself. (1 Tim. 6:3-4)

These instructions represent God's order in creation, and the reverence required in his holy presence. Let each one of thus, then, come humbly and submissively into the presence of God with heads and hearts bowed; and let us worship the Lord in the splendour of his holiness. (Ps. 29:2)

Abuses at The Lord's Table

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Paul now addresses one of the other major abuses taking place in the church at Corinth: a serious lack of reverence for the Lord's Table, and desecration of this sacred remembrance feast.

The apostle begins by saying in verse 17:

1 Corinthians 11:17

In verse 2 of this chapter, Paul had praised many in the church at Corinth for remembering him, and for holding steadfastly to the teachings that he had passed on to them. However, here in verse 17, the apostle says he has no praise for them. What they were doing in relation to the Lord's Supper could not possibly be commended or approved.

In the latter part of verse 17, Paul had said that their meetings did more harm than good. It was a very sad and serious state of affairs when the meetings of the church turned out to be harmful instead of beneficial. This was especially so when the meeting in question was the Lord's Supper and the associated love feast usually held immediately before the breaking of bread.

What God had intended as a spiritual blessing and a means of grace for the strengthening of the church, the Corinthians had turned into a meeting that brought shame and disgrace upon the church. These dishonourable forms of church gatherings were resulting in, or arising from, the divisions among the church members. Hence, the meetings were causing more harm than good.

That such divisions did exist is confirmed in verse 18, where the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 11:18

It had been reported to Paul that—when the Corinthians assembled as a church—they divided themselves into groups or factions, instead of maintaining the unity of the church in the bond of peace. (1 Cor. 1:10; Eph. 4:3-4)

One of the reasons for these divisions—or 'schisms'—is explained below. Another, and possibly related reason, was the fact that this church was already divided into several different factions or cliques—each faction claiming allegiance to a particular leader or teacher. (1 Cor. 1:10-12; 3:4)

In any event, the apostle Paul felt he had adequate and reasonable grounds for believing at least part of what had been told him concerning the divisions within the church, and the reasons for them. Thus, in verse 19, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 11:19

Paul recognised that differences would arise in the church over a variety of issues. Yet, he also recognised that—in the providence of God—these differences could serve a useful purpose: They exposed mistakes or errors, and they brought to the fore those who had God’s approval.

In general, differences of opinion may produce one of two reactions or responses:

1. **Negatively:** a desire to promote or pursue a personal belief or point of view, and to persuade others to adopt this point of view.
2. **Positively:** a desire to maintain harmony and unity within the church of Christ, to heal rifts or potential rifts within the church, and gently to persuade others to submit to the rule of Scripture.

The first response or reaction is self-centred and divisive. The second response or reaction is God-centred, God glorifying and unifying. Those in the first category sow seeds of discord among the members of the church. By resolutely maintaining their position, they may cause other believers to split from the main body. These believers may then form a distinct group or faction within the church, or they may separate themselves altogether from that particular church. (Acts 20:30; cf. Acts 15:5)

In matters of fundamental doctrinal importance, such an extraordinary step may occasionally prove necessary. Invariably, however, such a break causes pain and regret. In matters, however, which do not touch upon the fundamentals of the faith, such divisions and splits are without excuse and totally unnecessary. (cf. Titus 3:9-11)

Those, however, in the second category are those within the church who see the inherent dangers in party splits. As soon as any serious difference becomes apparent, they endeavour with God’s help and with much prayer to resolve the issue, and to heal the wounds. Their intention is to maintain the unity of the body (the church), and to glorify God’s name. Thus, by prayer, by appeal, and by exhortation, they do all in their power to prevent splits from occurring, and to bind together in love and harmony the body of which Christ is Head. These are the people who are seen to have God’s approval.

Now Paul comes to address the specific nature of the abuses that were taking place at the Lord’s Table, and that merited severe censure. Thus, in verses 20 and 21, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 11:20-21

Frequently, when the early church met together for the Lord’s Supper, they also shared together in a fellowship meal. Later, this fellowship meal was known as the ‘love feast’ or Agape Feast. Because of continuing abuses at this feast, however, it was subsequently prohibited at the Lord’s Table by the Council of Carthage. At the time that Paul wrote, however, this fellowship meal was apparently common practice. Similar fellowship meals also existed at Jewish and pagan sacrificial services.

When coming to such a meal, each person would bring with them a contribution of food or drink to be shared in the common fellowship meal. The rich usually contributed substantial amounts of food and drink. The poor, however, could not afford to contribute much toward the meal. Nevertheless, the meal was supposed to be shared equally among all the members of the local fellowship.

Integrated with this fellowship meal was the Lord’s Supper—the breaking of bread and the drinking of the cup in remembrance of the Lord’s death. The abuses that Paul addresses concerned the fellowship meal or love feast itself. However, as these abuses bore directly upon the Lord’s Supper, the apostle had to point out to the Corinthians the very serious

nature of their offences. In fact, they were guilty of desecrating the Lord's Table and despising the body and blood of the Lord. (1 Cor. 10:16-18)

Thus, in verse 20, Paul declares,

"When you come to together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat." (NIV)

Although this is your professed intention, it is certainly not what you are actually doing. For what you are doing is profaning the Lord's Table, or treating that which is holy as though it were common. You are therefore guilty of sacrilege.

The Corinthians had turned their love feasts into a common meal—but a common meal in which some of the participants were unable to exercise due restraint or moderation. They were treating the Lord's house like an eating and drinking establishment. As soon as a sufficient number of the better off members arrived, they pooled their contributions of food and drink, and began eating their meal. They did this without waiting for other members to arrive, and without sharing their contribution with other poorer members of God's church. Consequently, many of the poorer members, who arrived later, were excluded from the meal and found themselves with little or nothing to eat.

Again, by the time the church was ready to celebrate the Lord's Supper, several of their members had over-indulged, and therefore were not in a fit condition for the remembrance feast. Others had drunk to excess, and were coming to the Lord's Table in an intoxicated state (cf. 2 Pet. 2:13-14; Jude 12-13).

Clearly, this was an abuse of the very highest order, and one that required the application not only of severe warnings, but also of severe punitive discipline. Thus, in verse 22, the apostle asks:

1 Corinthians 11:22

Paul makes it abundantly plain that the proper place for eating and drinking as freely as one can afford, is at home; or, at least, outside the bounds of God's church. These Corinthian believers should have eaten their main meals at home, so that they would not have had to start eating the fellowship meal before others had arrived (v.34). Had they waited, they could have contributed some of their food and drink to other believers, and shared together in the fellowship meal. Instead, it seems that these better off believers brought their main meals with them to the church, and shared only with others who had done the same. Thus, together, they ate and drank to excess.

In this way, however, these believers were despising the church of God, and showing scant regard for those believers who were effectively excluded from the fellowship meal. Thus, too, they were humiliating the poorer believers. By leaving the poorer believers with little or nothing to eat, they were making them feel as though they were inferior members of Christ's church. How offensive this must have been to the Lord! (Prov. 17:5; Jas. 2:5-6)

Almost at a loss for words, the apostle Paul asks in the latter part of verse 22:

(22b) ...What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not! (NIV)

In other matters, the apostle had praised and commended the Corinthian church—but not here. Paul finishes his series of rhetorical questions on verse 27 with an emphatic *certainly not!*

Under no circumstances whatever would the apostle praise, approve or commend the Corinthians for despising God's church, humiliating its poorer members, and desecrating the Lord's Table by their arrogance, greed, insensitivity, and lack of self-control.

Fearful, perhaps, that the Corinthian Christians had lost sight of the real significance and sanctity of the Lord's Table, the apostle reminded them forcefully of what they should already have known. Thus, in verses 23 and 24, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 11:23-24

(23) For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, (24) and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." (NIV)

The Greek preposition at the beginning of the first sentence can mean that the information that was received from the Lord Jesus was not received directly but through others: That is, by apostolic tradition, or by oral teaching from those who had heard the Lord. However, this is not the most natural or satisfactory interpretation of the preposition or the sentence in this verse or in the immediate context.

It is probably better to understand it as meaning that the apostle received this teaching about the Lord's Supper directly from the Lord himself. This would be independent of the teaching that the Lord Jesus had passed on to the other apostles on the night of his betrayal, since that event occurred before Paul's conversion. This is in line with the fact that the apostle Paul received specific revelations from the Lord, and did not in fact meet the leaders of the Jerusalem church for some time after his conversion. (Gal. 1:11-24; 12:1-2)

Receiving his instruction, then, from the Lord Jesus himself, the apostle Paul passed on these instructions to all the churches for which he was responsible—including the church at Corinth.

In verse 20, the apostle had said,

(20) When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat. (NIV)

The apostle points out to the Corinthian believers that they ought to have been fully aware of the nature and purpose of the Lord's Supper. However, since they seem to have forgotten these things, and were now treating the Lord's Table with contempt, Paul feels compelled to remind them again of these most important matters.

Thus, Paul states that the instructions concerning the Lord's Supper that he had passed on to them had been received from the Lord Jesus himself. These solemn instructions had been in the nature of a permanent command, statute or ordinance. This command, statute or ordinance was to be binding upon the church throughout all ages—until Christ's return.

The apostle then relates the actual words of the Lord Jesus, spoken to his disciples on the night of his betrayal, and while they were sharing in the Passover meal. At that time, the Lord Jesus had instituted a new covenant between God and his people. (This replaced the former old covenant enacted between God and his people, with Moses as the mediator).

During the Passover meal, the Lord Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and said to his disciples,

(24b)... "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." (NIV)

The bread represented the body of the Lord Jesus. It could not have been his actual literal body, since the Lord Jesus was holding the bread in his hand when he said, "This is my body..." The bread, therefore, *symbolises* his body.

After saying, "This is my body," the Lord added these words, "...which is for you..."

The bread symbolises the Lord's real body, which is for us (believers in Christ): i.e., the Lord's body is—or was then about to be—given up on our behalf. (Matt. 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19) Here, the Lord Jesus was speaking of the sin offering that he was about to make on behalf of all his people. (Although, of course, at the time Paul wrote, that offering had already been made.) The Lord Jesus voluntarily yielded up his body to the tree, in order that he might bear our sins in his own body, and endure the wrath of God on our behalf. (Gal. 1:4; 1 Pet. 2:24; cf. Lev. 16:22)

However, in and of itself, the sacrifice of a *body alone* as a sin offering is not sufficient to make atonement for the soul. In order to make atonement for the soul and effect forgiveness of sin, the *blood* of the sacrificial victim must be shed. For without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness. Therefore, not only did the Lord Jesus give up his body to the punishment of our sins, but he also shed his blood to effect forgiveness of our sins and to cleanse our souls and consciences from all unrighteousness.

Thus, at the Lord's Table, one symbol is required to represent Christ's body—and that symbol is bread. Another symbol is required to represent Christ's atoning blood—and that symbol is the cup, or the cup of communion.

Speaking now of this second symbol, the apostle says in verse 25:

1 Corinthians 11:25

*(25) In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."
(NIV)*

When the Passover meal had ended, the Lord Jesus took the (third) cup, and gave thanks to God. He then passed the cup among his disciples, telling each of them to drink of it. Before passing the cup round, however, the Lord had explained to his disciples that this cup represented the new covenant that God was making with his people—Jesus Christ himself being the Mediator. This covenant would be sealed and ratified by the shed blood of God's own Son—the sinless, spotless Lamb of God. (Matt. 26:27-28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; Heb. 9:15-28)

Because the blood shed was that of a perfect sacrifice, and because atonement was thereby made for the sins of all his people, salvation would be guaranteed to all those who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is these redeemed saints of the Lord who are commanded to remember this sacrifice whenever they break the bread and drink the cup. In view of the solemnity and gravity of the events surrounding this memorial supper, each of the Lord's people ought to conduct himself or herself in an orderly and reverent manner when they come to the Lord's Table.

Thus, in verse 26, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 11:26

(26) For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (NIV)

Neither the Lord Jesus himself, or any of his apostles, laid down a rule commanding his people to meet at specific intervals for the Lord's Supper. Among the Jews, the cup of remembrance taken every Passover was a yearly event. Among believers, however, it became common practice to break bread every Lord's Day; i.e., on the first day of every week. (Acts 20:7)

Paul, however, points out that—whenever believers celebrate the Lord’s Supper—they are proclaiming the Lord’s death until he comes. This feast was to be a perpetual reminder of the necessity and cost of Christ’s sacrifice at Calvary, in order to redeem his people. By meeting together around the Lord’s Table, therefore, his people were proclaiming the absolute necessity of their Saviour’s sacrificial and atoning death—until the time that he returned in power and glory to gather his people home.

Such is the true nature and purpose of the Lord’s Supper. But, if events of such solemnity and gravity as these are being remembered at the Lord’s Table, it is the duty and responsibility of all believers—including those at Corinth—to come to the Lord’s Table with heart and mind duly prepared. Each one of us ought to show due reverence and awe in the presence of the God who sacrificed the life of his own beloved Son to make atonement for our sins.

This, however, was what several of the Corinthians Christians were manifestly failing to do. Bearing in mind their disgraceful conduct at the Lord’s Supper, the apostle declares to these believers in verse 27:

1 Corinthians 11:27

(27) Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.
(NIV)

These Corinthians had been guilty of showing gross contempt for the Lord’s Table. Indeed, by their conduct, they had despised the Lord’s Supper and everything for which it stood. However, for those who disdain such a holy remembrance feast, the apostle has strong words:

(27) Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.
(NIV)

Anyone who eats the bread or drinks the cup in an unworthy or unseemly manner becomes guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. Anyone who eats and drinks at the Lord’s Table, without discerning the Lord’s body, becomes guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.

Before proceeding further, it may be necessary now to identify more clearly those to whom Paul is referring here. On reading words such as these, sincere and honest believers sometimes become unduly alarmed or unsettled in their minds, without genuine cause. This happens because they fear that these remarks may be addressed specifically to them.

When, however, Paul speaks of coming to the Lord’s Table in an unworthy manner, he is not referring to those believers who come to the Lord’s Table *with a due and proper sense of their own unworthiness*. Those who feel such a sincere sense of their own personal unworthiness, have no reason to stay away from the Lord’s Table for fear of sinning against him—for it is not to these that this Scripture passage refers.

Similarly, *those who doubt of their worthiness* to eat at the Lord’s Table should not on that account stay away. For, although their faith may be weak, they have done nothing that would debar them from remembering the Lord at his table.

When, in verse 27, the apostle Paul speaks of those who eat and drink in an unworthy manner, he is speaking of those who—like the Corinthians—*show contempt for the things of God; and especially for the Lord’s Supper*. In their case, they have despised the Lord’s

Table by treating the love feast and the Lord's Supper as though it were an ordinary meal. Even worse, during the course of this meal, they have greedily over-indulged to the point of gluttony, and have drunk excessively to the point of intoxication.

It was in this state, and in this frame of mind that a number of these Corinthians had come to the Lord's Table. It is to such people as these that the apostle Paul addresses this most solemn warning:

(27) Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. (NIV)

Those who behaved in this manner were becoming very close to treading underfoot the blood of Christ through which they were sanctified (cf. Heb. 10:26-31).

There are, of course, other ways in which believers can render themselves unworthy of the Lord's Table. But it must amount to much more than a genuine heartfelt feeling of unworthiness. This latter kind of unworthiness should not prevent anyone from coming to the Lord's Table.

Concerning, however, those who—like the Corinthians—thought they could participate in the Lord's Supper under virtually any circumstances, the apostle declares in verse 28:

1 Corinthians 11:28

(28) A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. (NIV)

Two people alone know a person's true state of heart and mind: One is God, who sees into a person's heart or mind. The other is the person himself, who knows his own heart. Thus, each individual believer ought to scrutinise his own heart before God, and ensure that there is nothing in his heart or life that would render him unworthy to participate in the Lord's Supper. (2 Cor. 13:5)

As has been said already, this passage of God's Word is not meant to exclude those who feel a sincere sense of their own unworthiness. Rather, it is meant to challenge those whose lives are completely at variance with their profession as believers. For instance, those who are deliberately practising some unconfessed and unforsaken sin, or who are living with little or no regard for the teaching or principles of God's holy Word, ought to question in their hearts whether they should be sitting at the Lord's Table.

On the other hand, those who absent themselves from the Lord's Table *without necessary cause* ought to question in their hearts whether they might not be sinning against the Lord by disobeying his command and ordinance. (Heb. 10:22-25)

Thus, it is self-examination, and not judgment by others, that is required here. Moreover, it is for this reason that the apostle said in the first part of verse 28:

(28a) A man ought to examine himself...

Then, in verse 29, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 11:29

(29) For anyone who eats and drinks without recognising the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. (NIV)

It is no light matter to behave as the Corinthians had been doing at the Lord's Supper. Indeed, it is a most serious offence to come to the Lord's Table without due regard to the Lord's body: i.e., to the cause, cost and purpose of the Lord's sufferings and death.

At the Lord's Supper, the bread symbolises the Lord's body given up to the cross as atonement for our sins. This is the offering, corresponding to the scapegoat. Under the old covenant, the scapegoat *typified* the atonement offering for the sins of the people. Symbolically, the sins of the people were laid on the head of the appointed sacrificial goat (i.e., the 'scapegoat'). This scapegoat then bore away these sins to a solitary desert place. (Lev. 16:8,10,20-22)

Under the new covenant, the offering of the body of the Lord Jesus Christ *actually* atones for, and bears away, the sins of all his people. These sins are removed to a place where God will never again recall them to mind. (Heb. 10:16-18)

The other element in the Lord's Supper—the cup—symbolises the Lord's blood that was shed to ratify or make effective the sacrifice of atonement, and to reconcile us to God. This shedding of blood corresponds to the sacrificing of the perfect victim as an offering for sin. Similarly, this sacrifice corresponds to the blood which, under the old covenant, the high priest applied to the altar. Some of this sacrificial blood was also sprinkled on and before the mercy seat (or atonement cover) to make atonement for the sins of the people. (Lev. 16:9,11,14-19)

What, however, the old covenant *typified and foreshadowed* the new covenant *actually fulfilled*—once-for-all. This new covenant between God and his people was ratified through the shed blood of the Lord Jesus. By that shed blood—i.e., by the merits of Christ's substitutionary and atoning death—God has guaranteed to us an eternal redemption. (Heb. 9:12,19-28; 10:10-14)

To come, therefore, to the Lord's Table in an unworthy manner, was to despise the perfect sin offering made by the Lord Jesus at Calvary. It was to treat with gross irreverence—if not contempt—the body and blood of Christ. The Corinthians demonstrated such irreverence or contempt by refusing to recognise the sanctity of that sacrifice, and of the solemn remembrance feast that the Lord Jesus himself had instituted. Thus, the apostle says that those who fail to recognise the Lord's body eat and drink judgment on themselves. (Cf. Rom. 13:2)

The word translated 'judgment' is a word meaning 'condemnation.' Although it carries a different meaning now, the KJV translation 'damnation' is equivalent to the word 'judgment' or 'condemnation.' The idea is that these people were bringing upon themselves God's temporal judgments—not that they were exposing themselves to everlasting perdition at the final judgment. This, apparently, was true of false professors in another similar situation elsewhere. It was not, however, true of the backsliding and worldly Corinthians. They, it seems, were genuine believers.

To explain further what he means by these remarks, the apostle Paul writes in verse 30:

1 Corinthians 11:30

(30) That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. (NIV)

The judgments to which Paul refers were of the kind illustrated in this verse. Because of their extreme irreverence at the Lord's Table, God had sent physical or psychological ailments upon some of these believers. Thus, a number of them suffered from sicknesses or diseases.

Indeed, God had even punished some of them by death. These, perhaps, were the more responsible members of the church who ought to have behaved in a reverent and seemly manner at the Lord's Table. It may be that, because of their gross misconduct, the Lord took their lives to prevent them from committing further grievous sin. It may also have been because of the disgraceful example that their wicked conduct had set to other believers.

We should observe that this is one passage in God's Word that shows a direct *causal relationship* between sin and sickness, or death. (Exodus 15:26; Job 33:19-30; Ps. 32:3-5; 107:17-20) However, these are the exceptions rather than the rule. All sickness and death is related to the fall of man. Nevertheless, not all sickness, illness or disease is related to specific personal sin. On many occasions, God sends sickness or illness—not as a punishment for sin—but as a means of trying, purifying and strengthening the faith of his beloved saints. (John 9:1-3; 2 Cor. 12:7-10; 1 Pet. 1:6-7)

In the case of the Corinthian believers, however, God's Word tells us explicitly that their unseemly and irreverent behaviour at the Lord's Table was the cause of these afflictions among their members. And these things happened to them because they failed to examine themselves, and because they failed to recognise the body of the Lord in the communion supper.

Thus, in verses 31 and 32, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 11:31-32

(31) But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. (32) When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world. (NIV)

If we examined our own hearts and lives before coming to the Lord's Table, we would not find ourselves being judged and disciplined by the Lord.

However, even although these believers had been guilty of this undeniably serious sin, they had not committed the unpardonable sin. This is evident from verse 36 where we are expressly told that those whom the Lord disciplines—whether by sickness or by death—are being disciplined so that they will not be condemned along with the world.

Two things emerge here:

1. It has to be admitted that some of the Corinthian believers were behaving in such a disgraceful and worldly fashion that their regeneration by the Spirit of God might reasonably have been doubted. Yet, Paul dispels any such doubts when, in verse 32, the apostle speaks of them as *'not being condemned along with the world'*.
2. Similarly, it has to be admitted that some of these believers had sinned so grievously that they had brought upon themselves the judgments of God—including sickness and death. Yet, and in the light of verse 32, it becomes evident that they had not forfeited their salvation in Christ as a result of their grievous sin.

There were other individuals, however, in other churches who came under God's eternal wrath and final condemnation. Like the Corinthians, these people feasted at the Lord's Table, Unlike the Corinthians, however, they did so with an unregenerate heart, and an un sanctified mind. Both Peter and Jude speak of these individuals as vile or filthy blots and blemishes on the love feasts of the churches. Unlike the Corinthians, these individuals were condemned with the world—*because they belonged to the world*.

These men had never experienced the regenerating grace and power of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, they were attempting to corrupt and pervert the minds and conduct of the believ-

ers who met at the Lord's Table. Such conduct, however, could only anticipate the enduring wrath of God. (2 Pet. 2:10,13-18; Jude 1:4,12-13)

Whatever their faults and failings concerning the Lord's Supper, the Corinthian believers had not degraded themselves or others in this manner or to this extent. The Corinthians belonged to the Lord. Although they were spiritually immature and very worldly, they were still God's beloved and redeemed children. This is why God disciplined them so that they would not be condemned along with the world, and so that his church would realise that God punishes sin and purifies his people. (Deut. 8:5; Ps. 94:12-14)

Thus, in concluding his remarks on this subject, the apostle Paul says to these dear saints in verses 33 and 34:

1 Corinthians 11:33-34

Paul exhorts the believers at Corinth to recognise the Lord's Supper for what it is: a sacred fellowship supper and a remembrance feast to the Lord.

Concerning their associated love feasts, they were to ensure that they had eaten sufficiently at home before coming to this fellowship meal and to the Lord's Supper. For, at the love feast, the believers were required to share liberally and willingly with those who had little or nothing to bring. In this way, everyone would share together in this meal.

Again, the church members were not to over-indulge themselves during the love feast. Rather, they were to ensure that they remained in a fit state of mind and body to participate in the sacred remembrance feast of the Lord's Supper. Thus, they would not incur God's displeasure or judgment, but rather would be blessed in abundance as they met together to remember the Lord, and to proclaim his death 'until he comes'.

On these, and other related matters, the apostle declares he would give more detailed instructions when he arrived. (1 Cor. 4:17-21)

1 Corinthians Chapter 12

Gifts of the Holy Spirit

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

The apostle Paul now deals with another matter on which the Corinthian church had sought his advice and instructions: spiritual gifts.

Before their conversion, many of these Corinthian believers had been accustomed to worshipping idols, and participating in pagan services and sacrifices. Their involvement in these pagan worship rituals sometimes resulted in their being translated temporarily into a state of ecstasy—often associated with ecstatic utterances or gibberish.

Again, although idols did not exist as living entities, evil spirits made use of idols to contact the pagan worshippers. Often, these evil spirits would assume control of the person's mind or body, in order to communicate with others in the group. Of course, the Lord God expressly forbade his people from becoming involved in any of these occult and evil practices.

This, then, was the background to the situation that Paul was now about to address in the Corinthian church. Although, these believers had forsaken their former pagan practices, some of them were seeking similar experiences through the Holy Spirit. Apparently, in their spiritual immaturity and worldliness, some of these believers thought that the Holy Spirit was little more than a much more powerful version of the spirits to whom they had previously been accustomed. This attitude, however, led some in the church at Corinth to abuse or misuse the genuine gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Paul now writes to correct this situation. Thus, in verse 1 of chapter 12, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 12:1

Yes, God does indeed bestow spiritual gifts upon his people. However, these gifts bear no resemblance or relationship to the so-called gifts or experiences that the Corinthians may have encountered formerly from the spirits (i.e., evil spirits). Nor do the gifts of the Holy Spirit produce any ungodly, unruly, or disorderly behaviour among those using the gifts—as was common in pagan worship rituals. Of these matters, Paul did not want the Corinthian believers to remain ignorant or uninformed. (1 Cor. 14:40)

The apostle further explains what he means by saying in verse 2:

1 Corinthians 12:2

Before their conversion, some of these Corinthians would have come under the powerful influence of demons when they had participated in idol worship or pagan sacrifices. As Paul observes, of course, idols themselves were mute or speechless since they were lifeless and powerless. However, behind the facade of mute and powerless idols, lay a highly intelligent and very powerful world of evil spirits or demons.

These evil beings exerted a powerful and potentially dangerous influence over the minds of these pagan worshippers. Consequently, this could produce all kinds of bizarre effects and behaviour in the lives of the devotees to these pagan cults. Often, the worshippers would become involved in overtly evil and vile behaviour, either by themselves or with other worshippers; or they would begin to utter all kinds of evil, slanderous, and lying remarks—particularly against the true and living God. This was one of Satan's ways of

attacking the things of God, since—as a created, fallen and immensely inferior spirit, he could not attack God more directly.

Thus, in verse 3, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 12:3

From the outset, the apostle Paul wants to make it abundantly plain to the Corinthian church that there are certain things that a believer can and cannot do when he is speaking by the Holy Spirit, or when he is properly exercising any gift that the Holy Spirit has granted to him.

Those who claim to speak by the Holy Spirit, or who claim to be exercising any other spiritual gift, must show by word and deed that they are producing the *fruit* of the Holy Spirit. Thus, no one speaking by the Holy Spirit can ever pronounce a curse (lit., *anathema*) against, or otherwise speak evil of God's Spirit or of any other person of the Godhead. No one exercising a spiritual gift can live a consistently unholy or sinful life at the same time.

On the other hand, no person can wholeheartedly confess Jesus as his Lord, except by a work of God's Sovereign grace in his heart, and by the gracious operations of the Holy Spirit on his mind. Such a person never speaks lightly or irreverently of God's Holy Spirit; nor does he despise the genuine gifts of the Holy Spirit, which God bestows on individual believers as he sees fit. (John 16:13-15)

All genuine gifts of the Spirit, however, must be exercised in accordance with the teaching of God's Word, for the edifying of the church, and for the glory of God—not for the elevation or gratification of self.

Contrary to what some of the Corinthians seemed to think, not all believers are expected to possess the same gifts. Thus, in verses 4 to 6, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 12:4-6

(4) There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. (5) There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. (6) There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. (NIV)

We should observe here that all three persons of the Godhead are involved in the distribution of spiritual gifts or services: *the same Spirit* (v.4), *the same Lord* (v.5), and *the same God* (v.6).

In verse 4, the apostle states that there are different kinds of gifts. There are many varieties of spiritual gifts—and only some of them are mentioned in these chapters to the church at Corinth. Again, not everyone possesses—or is intended to possess—the same gift or gifts. Rather, the Holy Spirit distributes each gift to whom he will.

In verse 5, the apostle says that there are different kinds of service. For example, although not all are mentioned here, there are pastors and teachers, other kinds of spiritual teachers, deacons, helpers, administrators and many others within God's church. One form of service is different from another—although several believers may be involved in the same service or office. However, whatever the particular service to which one is called, the same Lord Jesus Christ apportions these services to whom he will. (Eph. 4:11-13)

In verse 6, the apostle says that there are different kinds of working or operations. The gifts or services of the Holy Spirit are assigned to particular individuals. The Spirit imparts these gifts or services on the understanding that God the Father will work or operate through that person's gift or office to build up his church and to magnify his own name.

Spiritual gifts or services, therefore, are not given for personal use, but for God's use and God's glory.

From this, we can see that the Godhead determines which believer should receive which spiritual gift, or be called to a specific task or office within the church. It is not, therefore, appropriate for a believer to seek any gift, service or office that is contrary to God's will and purposes for him. And it is not God's will or purpose that every believer should be equipped with the same or similar gifts—as Paul is about to demonstrate. Rather, God apportions a variety of gifts and offices—all of which are to be used to benefit his church and glorify his name. (Rom. 12:4-8; 1 Pet. 4:10-11; Heb. 2:4)

Thus, in verse 7, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 12:7

Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.
(NIV)

Spiritual gifts are not given for personal use or for show or ostentation—but for the common good of the church. Spiritual gifts are not given for self-exaltation or self-glorification—but for the edifying of others, and for the glory of God's great and holy name. Every gift that the Holy Spirit bestows, he bestows for the good of the whole church: i.e., the entire body of Christ. (1 Cor. 14:12,26; Eph. 4:12)

In verse 8a, the apostle continues:

1 Corinthians 12:8a ⁶

(8a) To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom,... (NIV)

In the two verses that follow, nine different spiritual gifts are mentioned—all of them distributed by the same Spirit to whom he will:

1) **message of wisdom**

To one (or several) particular individuals, God gives the message or word of *wisdom*.

Apparently, this godly and practical wisdom reflects a degree of spiritual maturity that comes from consistent and close fellowship with God. This also implies a regular and prayerful study of, and meditation on the Word of God, and a more advanced level of maturity in bringing forth the fruit of the Spirit.

This is the wisdom of the Spirit, or that wisdom that comes down from God above. The Corinthian believers made much of their worldly wisdom—but the wisdom that comes from God as a gift of his Spirit is the only kind of wisdom that can be used to edify and strengthen the church. (1 Cor. 2:6-7; cf. 1 Kings 3:5-13; James 3:17)

Such wisdom includes clarity of understanding in relation to spiritual matters, and the ability to elucidate or expand on God's truths to others. This wisdom also includes the ability

⁶ In the section that follows, some of the spiritual gifts mentioned by the apostle may have been intended only for the early church. However, others gifts are still relevant to the church today. To avoid a confusing switch between tenses at various points, the present tense has been used throughout most of this section. This ought not to be taken to imply that all the gifts mentioned in this passage are still granted to the church today, although clearly several are. (GL)

to make good or sound judgments, both in spiritual and in practical matters. (Cf. Acts 6:3,10; 1 Cor. 2:6; Col. 1:28)

In verse 8b, the apostle says:

1 Corinthians 12:8b

(8b) ...to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, (NIV)

2) message of knowledge

Here, apparently, the Holy Spirit grants to certain believers a degree of *knowledge* in Biblical truths beyond many others. Once again, we are speaking of knowledge of spiritual matters or of the truths of God's Word. Essentially, spiritual knowledge is closely related to the wisdom just mentioned, and both ought always to be applied in love.

Probably, this gift is granted to certain individuals within the church to enable them to apply spiritual knowledge, understanding and discretion in teaching or instructing other believers. Since it is a spiritual gift, rather than a natural, acquired or learned ability, the 'message of knowledge' differs from ordinary intellectual knowledge or understanding alone. Thus, this gift too is given to selected believers for the edifying of the church.

Then, in the first part of verse 9, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 12:9a

(9a) to another faith by the same Spirit... (NIV)

3) faith

This does not refer to saving faith—for saving faith is not restricted to certain believers, as this faith is.

The faith to which reference is made in this verse is more probably an exceptional degree of faith: That is, the God-given and Spirit-inspired ability to believe in God, and to remain true and faithful to God—even under extreme trials and difficulties.

Prophets, apostles and martyrs exhibited this kind of faith. Again, this is the kind of faith spoken of by the writer to the Hebrews in chapter 11 of that book. (Heb. 11:32-40)

In the second part of verse 9, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 12:9b

(9b) ...to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, (NIV)

4) healing

To another believer, the Holy Spirit gives the gift of *healing*.

In the original, the phrase reads 'gifts of healings' (both 'gifts' and 'healings' are in the plural). This may indicate that all kinds of healing ministries are intended—not only the miraculous.

Miraculous healings were carried out in the name of Christ, and by his almighty power. Such healings, therefore, were instantly effective.

For the same reason, any person healed in the name of Christ did not subsequently suffer a relapse. The ability to heal in this manner was one of the signs given by God to the apostles to authenticate their mission and office. (Matt. 10:7-8; Mark 16:20; Acts 3:6-7; 19:11-12)

Then, in verse 10, the apostle adds:

1 Corinthians 12:10

to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. (NIV)

In this verse, a further five different gifts of the Spirit are enumerated. These are:

5) **miraculous powers**

More wide-ranging than the gifts of healings alone, this was the gift of performing outstanding or notable miracles in the name of the Lord, and as a clear demonstration of God's almighty power (for example, Moses before Pharaoh in Egypt).

These miracles or deeds of power authenticated the person performing them as a genuine servant of the Lord, and therefore acting in his name and by his authority.

6) **prophecy**

Prophecy is a gift of the Holy Spirit whereby God reveals through his servants what he wants his people to know or to do. This element of prophecy corresponds largely to preaching and teaching.

Prophecy may also include the God-given ability to foretell future events or circumstances. This, in turn, included the ability to foretell infallibly what would happen if God's message were not heeded. Such were the holy prophets of the OT, and such too were those in the early days of the church to whom the Holy Spirit imparted the gift of prophecy.

7) **distinguishing between spirits**

This gift is probably related to the gift of prophecy and to other similar teaching gifts. The ability to distinguish between spirits was given to certain individuals to enable them to distinguish true prophecy or teaching from false prophecy or teaching.

In 1 John 4:1-6, all believers are told to exercise discernment in what is being taught to them, by testing the spirits. The gift mentioned here, however, was probably a special or exceptional ability given to certain believers, which enabled them to discriminate consistently and accurately between that which was true and that which was false, and to act accordingly for the benefit, defence and edification of the church.

8) **speaking in different kinds of tongues**

In order to maintain consistency with the interpretation of this gift which the Scriptures itself provides for us in Acts chapter 2, this passage here can only refer to the same gift: That is, the God-given ability to speak fluently in a language or dialect not previously known or learned.

The purpose of this gift was to communicate the word of God and the message of the Gospel to all those people whose first language was not Aramaic, Greek or Hebrew. This included the many foreign visitors to Jerusalem from various other parts of the Middle East and beyond.

In keeping with their former pagan practices and experiences, however, a number of the Corinthian believers seemed to think that the gift of tongues referred to speaking while in a state of ecstasy, or in a heightened state of emotion. (Several pagan tribes follow this practise even today.) This is what they were formerly accustomed to expect and to experience—when involved in the worship of idols.

Paul, however, corrects this misapprehension concerning the meaning and use of tongues. As he will explain later, God is not a God of chaos and confusion, but of peace and order. Tongues were permissible. But only when used as God intended and made plain at Pentecost. (Acts 2:1-12; 1 Cor. 14:33)

9) *the interpretation of tongues*

Certain people were permitted to speak God's Word in a foreign language for the benefit of those individuals who were not familiar with the more customary Greek, Aramaic or Hebrew (depending in which area the church was located).

However, whenever a person spoke in a foreign tongue, another believer—with the gift of interpretation—was to translate to the church everything that was being said. In this way, the whole church benefited from the instruction in God's Word—even although two different languages were being spoken.

In the last two verses of this chapter, the apostle has enumerated nine different gifts. Now, Paul explains how and by whom these gifts are distributed. Thus, in verse 11, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 12:11

All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines. (NIV)

When Paul says "all these," he is *not* implying that every gift of the Spirit is included above. In fact, those mentioned above represent just a few of the spiritual gifts that God gives to his people. Other gifts are mentioned in such passages as Romans chapter 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians chapter 4. (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11-13)

However, by saying "all these," the apostle *is* implying that every one of these and the other spiritual gifts originate from the same source: namely, God the Holy Spirit. Thus, the apostle declares that all these gifts are the work—or operation—of the same Spirit. One single source—the Spirit of God—distributes a variety of gifts between each of God's children. Thus, the apostle says in the latter part of verse 11:

(11b) ...and he gives them to each one, just as he determines. (NIV)

From this, we see that the Holy Spirit *gives* or *grants*... and the Holy Spirit *determines*...

Here, incidentally, we see a clear reference to the divine personality of the Holy Spirit.

The allocation of any particular gift or gifts to each child of God is expressly determined beforehand by the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit, therefore, chooses and apportions the gift or gifts that he sees fit to bestow on each one of us.

The Corinthians failed to recognise the sovereign hand of God the Holy Spirit in distributing these gifts to whom he will. Thus, these believers not only misunderstood the nature of the gift of tongues, but they also mistakenly believed that everyone should possess that particular gift, and that the possession of that gift implied a greater level of spiritual maturity or commitment. However, by holding to this belief, these Corinthian saints were ignoring or disregarding the work of God's Holy Spirit in apportioning specific gifts to certain individuals within the church, in accordance with his sovereign will and purposes.

The Corinthians were mistaken in assuming that every believer should possess the gift of tongues (to the exclusion of, or in addition to, any other gifts). What every believer ought to possess and produce is not the *same gifts* of the Spirit, but the *same fruit* of the Spirit—the greatest of which is love. (1 Cor. 13:13; Gal. 5:22-23)

Diversity of Gifts

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

Paul now stresses the unity of Christ's body, the church. Yet, although the body of Christ is one, it consists of many parts—and each part of the body performs a different, but necessary, function. Thus, every part working together in harmony is the ideal expression of Christ's body in action. To this end, the apostle says in verse 12:

1 Corinthians 12:12

God created the body in such a way that every individual part has a necessary function to perform, in order to maintain the wellbeing of the whole body. Without each individual part, the body would be incomplete, and unable to function as fully as God intended that it should.

So it is with the body of Christ—the church. God arranged and equipped the members of the church in such a way that each member is required for the proper functioning of the church. God has endowed each member with a particular gift or ability. These gifts ought to be used to further the ministry and work of the church, and to glorify the name of the Lord. (Rom. 12:4-5)

Emphasising again the many gifts distributed to the members of the one body, the church, the apostle says in verse 13:

1 Corinthians 12:13

Although the church consists of many members, and although each of the members has different gifts, yet they all received these gifts from the same source—the Holy Spirit. By that one Holy Spirit, every elect member of the church was regenerated or spiritually baptised into the body of Christ. Regardless of his or her nationality, colour, creed, race, or position in society, each believer was called to repentance and faith in Christ by the effectual operation of one Holy Spirit.

By that one Spirit, every single believer had the thirst for salvation created within his soul. Moreover, by that same Holy Spirit, he was then drawn to the wells of salvation; the source of living water and eternal life—the Lord Jesus Christ himself. When they took of that living water, all believers 'drank' of one and the same Holy Spirit: i.e., they all had their spiritual thirst fully met and satisfied by experiencing the regenerating and sanctifying power of God's Spirit. (Isa. 44:3; Ezek. 36:25-27; Matt. 3:11)

There are many different spiritual gifts to be found among the members of the church. However, every one of these gifts originates from one source—the Holy Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit gives to each believer whatever gift he considers most appropriate. Since each gift is distributed sovereignly by the Holy Spirit, then each gift is necessary to the proper functioning of Christ's body.

Though, in the eyes of men, some gifts may seem less important than others, this is not so in God's eyes. God has given every believer a specific gift—a gift that is not only valuable in itself, but also is essential to the proper operation and organisation of the church. Thus, in verses 14 to 16, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 12:14-16

These verses are self-explanatory. They simply highlight the fact that we should be content with the gift that the Holy Spirit has been pleased to give us. We should not consider that—because we do not possess one particular gift—therefore we do not possess a worthwhile gift. Even worse, we should not imagine that—because we do not possess one particular gift—therefore we do not belong to the body of Christ.

As has been said before, each kind of gift—however seemingly unimportant—is essential to the proper working of God's church. Each individual gift is just as essential to the proper functioning of Christ's body, the church, as is each individual part or member of the human body to the proper functioning of that body.

Moreover, the Holy Spirit gives a specific gift to every member of God's church. Thus, in verses 17 to 20, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 12:17-20

God gives to his people different gifts—not the same gifts. The church requires a variety of gifts in order to function as God intended, and to carry out the tasks that he has appointed for it. God works to one overall plan for the church, and he equips each individual member with a particular gift to be used in helping to fulfil that plan. (Cf. 1 Cor. 3:5-7)

Thus, the whole body of Christ—the church—comprises many different, but interrelated and essential, parts.

It may seem that some parts are more important than others, or that some gifts are more valuable than others. However, in God's eyes, every gift is valuable and necessary. Thus, in verses 21-26, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 12:21-26

Everyone in God's church is needed. No one is less important or less esteemed in God's eyes than others. God has given each believer a distinctive gift, talent, or ability; and each believer has been given a distinctive and essential role to play in God's church.

If, however, a believer is not using his gift in the way that God intended, or if he is hiding his gift, then he is hindering or harming the work of the church. Even those believers whose gifts seem to be less important are required to use their gift to help in the church's work and witness.

Thus, working together, each believer complements the other. Each believer is concerned for the other. Each believer provides mutual support and encouragement for the other. In addition, each believer suffers or rejoices with the other in the work of the Lord.

The apostle Paul is now about to specify just a few examples of spiritual gifts. Before he does so, however, he declares in verse 27:

1 Corinthians 12:27

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. (NIV)

Until now, Paul has been emphasising that each believer is a part or member of Christ's body—and indeed, he repeats this thought again in this verse. However, this verse expands on the original thought by making it abundantly clear that the parts or members of Christ's body cannot function independently of the body; i.e., they cannot operate independently of Christ or of his church.

In this verse, Paul begins by saying,

...you are the body of Christ... (v.27a)

In other words, you are completely inseparable from Christ. You form a mystical spiritual part of his body, the church, and you cannot detach yourself from it. You cannot exercise your gift to the glory of God and for the good of the church if you attempt to do so apart from your union and communion with Christ and with his church (v.12; Rom. 12:5).

Every one of us has God-given *natural* gifts, talents and abilities that we could utilise without reference to God or to his church. However, we cannot do this with *spiritual* gifts, talents, or abilities. Each gift that a believer possesses must be exercised as a recognised and essential function of Christ's body. Each spiritual gift must always remain under God's sovereign control; and it must be used with the sole intention of glorifying God and furthering the work of Christ on earth.

Having noted the inseparable nature of the gifts and their functions from union and communion with Christ's body, the apostle now provides some specific examples in verse 28. We should observe, however, that this list is not intended to be exhaustive.

In verse 28, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 12:28

And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues. (NIV)

Paul has already made it plain that all gifts are equally important and equally necessary. However, God has arranged each of the gifts in a certain order of priority. Thus, in order of priority, the *apostolic* office and ministry comes first. The *prophetic* office and ministry comes second. The *teaching* office and ministry comes third—and so on down the list to those speaking in different kinds of tongues. In this enumeration, the gift of tongues comes last in order of priority (see vv.7-11).

This may be why the Corinthian believers had run into such serious difficulties with their church order and worship. They had taken a gift that—when used as God intended, and although important and necessary in its proper sphere—was nevertheless last or very low *in order of priority*, and they had misapplied and elevated that gift to first place. Effectively and in practice, this meant of course that they had downgraded the higher priority gifts and offices such as instruction in the faith as provided by apostles, prophets, or teachers.

Apparently, the Corinthians felt that personal and emotional experiences were more important for spiritual edification than teaching or instruction. (We are assuming here that these believers had misunderstood the nature and purpose of the gift of tongues, believing this gift to be a Christianised version, or the Christian equivalent, of their former pagan ecstatic utterances.)

However, by neglecting the teaching of the Word, and by placing undue emphasis on lower priority gifts, the Corinthian's church order and worship began to suffer. Eventually, this resulted in strife and divisions within the fellowship.

The Corinthians tended to believe that *every* believer should possess certain gifts—especially the gift of tongues (at least, in the form in which they understood it). However, this would have been contrary to the rule and example of Scripture, which asserts quite plainly that God's Spirit distributes *different* gifts to each believer—as he sees fit.

(The gift of salvation, which is common to all believers, is not one of the gifts belonging to this discussion.)

To illustrate the distinction between the various gifts, the apostle asks in verses 29-30:

1 Corinthians 12:29-30

Not every believer was an apostle. Not every believer was a prophet. Not every believer was a teacher. Nor did God intend every believer to speak in tongues.

The Corinthians were mistaken in implying—if not openly teaching—that every believer should possess and exercise particular gifts. They were even more mistaken in leading people to believe that failure to possess a particular gift (such as tongues) was a sign of spiritual immaturity.

We have already noted just how spiritually immature and worldly this church was. Therefore, it was hardly in a position to accuse other believers of being spiritually immature or of lacking God's blessing in some way because they did not possess the gift of tongues. In any event, as we have seen, the Corinthians had apparently misunderstood the nature and purpose of the gift of tongues.

If every believer possessed the same gifts, this would destroy the diversity of gifts and services within Christ's body. In addition, it would place an undue and unhealthy interest upon one particular gift. Consequently, other gifts would tend to be neglected—even although these other gifts held a higher priority in God's sight.

No, says Paul. God has given everyone different gifts. (This, of course, is not to be understood in an *absolute* sense, since several believers may possess the same gift).

Let each believer accept the gift that God has given him, and use it in the way that God intended, and for the glory of God's name. Then, the whole church will be edified and strengthened in the faith and the work of missions and outreach will be greatly enhanced. After all, God's name is glorified and Christ is exalted by preaching, teaching and witnessing—rather than by personal experiences.

Stressing this particular point, the apostle adds in verse 31a:

1 Corinthians 12:31a

Paul exhorts the Corinthian believers not to be over-zealous for the lower priority gifts. Some of these were necessary only for the early days of the church in which these believers lived and worshipped. In God's eyes, however, other gifts had a much higher priority and were applicable to the church in all ages. Therefore, the apostle encourages these believers to desire earnestly the greater gifts, and to exercise those gifts that really mattered—the spiritual gifts that would build up God's church, and would benefit God's people.

Apart from the gift of teaching already mentioned, higher priority gifts might include helping and serving others. They might also include praying specifically for individual believers, helping in the administration of the church, and sharing all good things with a brother or sister in need. (Rom. 12:6-8)

However, even more important than all the *gifts* of the Spirit, is the *fruit* of the Spirit—and the greatest of these is love. This is the subject to which Paul now turns his attention in chapter 13.

Beginning, however, with the latter part of verse 31 in chapter 12, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 12:31b

(31b) ...And now I will show you the most excellent way. (NIV)

1 Corinthians Chapter 13

The Supremacy of Love

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

1 Corinthians 13:1

Speaking of himself, the apostle Paul declares that he may be a great orator or a singularly outstanding speaker (although, in fact, Paul concedes that he was neither). The apostle to the Gentiles may be able to present his message clearly, powerfully, and with copious and easily understood illustrations. He may be a most eminent and capable public speaker. His message may resonate, as it were, with the majestic power and authority of the holy angels of God.

If, however, Paul—or any other servant of God—did not possess the love of God in his heart, his fine-flowing language would amount to nothing. If he did not love his hearers with the genuine love of Christ, then that person's message would be hollow and insincere. Indeed, says Paul, he would be *a resounding gong or a clanging symbol*. He would be creating nothing more than a harsh and meaningless noise.

Words without love are words without the Spirit, without warmth, and without life.

Then, in verse 2, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 13:2

One of the highest priority gifts was the gift of prophecy. In both the Old and the New Testament Scriptures, God made known his word and his will through the prophets whom he had called and appointed to his service. These holy men of God did not declare their own thoughts, ideas or words. Rather, they declared the thoughts, counsels, and words of God, insofar as God saw fit to reveal his purposes to them.

The prophets, therefore, were the spokesmen of God. They were divinely authorised and empowered to reveal God's word and will, or to bring God's message, to the people. They made known the mysterious things of God to the people, and explained the meaning and significance of God's word. (Matt. 13:11; Rom. 16:25-27; Col. 1:25-27)

As we have already noted, and as the apostle Peter tells us, these men never spoke by their own authority or with their own wisdom. Rather, they spoke with and by God's authority and wisdom. The Holy Spirit of God inspired them, and every word that they uttered was the very word of God. (2 Pet. 1:19-21; see also 1 Thess. 2:13)

However, if Paul—or any other servant of God—should hold such a high office as a prophet (or apostle) of God, but did not have a heart of love for the people, his prophetic gift and office would amount to nothing. Without genuine love for his hearers, his prophetic insight and teaching, and his ability to explain spiritual mysteries, could not and did not take the place of the fruit of the Spirit in his life. Moreover, love—the love that is the first fruit of the Spirit—is more important in God's eyes than the gift of prophecy or any other spiritual gift.

So also with those who possess a remarkable degree of faith. They might possess such faith that nothing might seem impossible for them to accomplish through prayer. They might be so strong in their faith that even mountains could be removed by their earnest intercession with God. Nevertheless, if they did not possess the love of God in their

hearts, their outstanding faith could not profit them or anyone else in the least. They would be of no account in the eyes of God.

We must remember that even those whose faith is as minute as a grain of mustard seed are capable of moving mountains. Moreover, if such faith springs from a heart of love, then that person is more blessed, and a greater blessing to others, than those who imagine that they have great faith—or any other spiritual quality—but lack love. (Matt. 17:20; 21:21)

In verse 3, the apostle continues:

1 Corinthians 13:3

Without love, the most exceptional demonstration of generosity or benevolence toward the poor amounts to nothing. Without love, the ultimate sacrifice of life itself is to no avail.

Those who give cheerfully, willingly and generously to the work of the Lord, receive a blessing from the Lord. Those who give out of a loving and caring heart receive a rich reward in this age and manifold more in the age to come. Similarly, those who—from a heart of love—sacrifice their lives for their faith, or on behalf of others, enter a rich and blessed inheritance in glory. However, without love, no amount of self-surrender or self-sacrifice can avail anything in the sight of God.

Whenever we perform any action—for good or bad—God considers the motive of the heart. Concerning good actions, God considers whether love—or some other motive—prompted that action. If prompted by love, then we receive the approval and the blessing of the Lord. (Matt. 6:1-4; Luke 21:3-4)

Moving on now to verse 4, the apostle begins to describe the true nature of godly or spiritual love:

1 Corinthians 13:4

Love is not simply an emotional feeling or experience. Rather, love is a complete set of attitudes that govern the way that we live, and the way that we treat other people. When we are living in the love of God, and demonstrating something of God's love toward our neighbours, then we are living as God intended. Moreover, when we are living as God intended, then we will experience the good feelings that God's love produces within us. These feelings, however, remain subjective experiences, and therefore susceptible of change.

In its purest and godliest form, then, love seeks either to promote the good of others, or to refrain from harming others. Thus, when people or circumstances tax our patience, we do not respond in kind. Rather, we bear with our adversities. We bear our sufferings and afflictions with great patience and endurance. We do not act unwisely or in haste. Rather, under all circumstances, we persevere in our faith and in a godly and loving manner of life. (Eph. 4:2)

Love, too, is kind. It is thoughtful. It is considerate and understanding. It goes out of its way to help those in need. It cares for the burdened and the distressed. It visits the lonely, the housebound or those in hospital or residential homes. It sympathises with and supports the sorrowing, the grieving or those who are hurting inwardly.

Again, love does not envy. It does not desire to possess the good things that others possess. It does not set its heart on the things of this world. It does not covet other people's income, wealth, or even such things as health, strength or ability. Rather, love humbly and gratefully accepts whatever good and gracious gifts the Lord God is pleased to provide out of the rich abundance of his grace and mercy. *A crumb of God's mercy is riches for me.* (GL)

Again, love does not boast. It does not speak great things of itself. Love acknowledges that it owes everything to the hand of the Lord—and that he alone is great. In him alone, love boasts. In him alone, love rejoices. As the Scripture says, *Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.* (1 Cor. 1:31)

Love is not proud. It does not exhibit an inflated ego. It does not seek to dominate or control others. It does not seek a position of prominence or eminence. Rather, love is humble. Love is contrite. Those who love God and love their neighbour seek the lowliest position, and they seek to associate with the lowly and the contrite in heart.

These are they who love the Lord. These are they whom the Lord loves with an everlasting love, and who are supremely blessed.

Then, in verse 5, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 13:5

Love is not rude. It does not act or respond in a shameful or disgraceful manner. Even when severely provoked, love does not retaliate arrogantly or contemptuously. Rather, where possible, it endeavours to calm a troubled or potentially explosive situation by answering gently, and with understanding and concern. (Prov. 15:1)

Again, love is not self-seeking. It does not seek to advance its own interests, but the interests of others. Love does not seek to pursue the way of selfish ambition and material gain. Rather, it is ambitious for the things of God, and for the welfare of his church. Love seeks to serve God, and to promote the good of others. (Rom. 15:1-3; 1 Cor. 10:24,33; Phil. 2:3-4)

Yet again, love is not easily angered. Unjustified anger is sin. Love covers over a multitude of sins. (Prov. 10:12; 1 Pet. 4:8) It does not respond in anger without just cause. Rather, it turns aside the wrath of man by answering kindly and aptly. (Prov. 25:11)

Once more, love keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not harbour bitterness or resentment in the heart. The bitter heart, the resentful heart, or the unforgiving heart is a heart that is itself unforgiven and that is not at peace with God. Moreover, a heart that has not experienced the forgiveness and peace of God is a heart that is devoid of the love of God.

Those, therefore, who have the love of God filling their hearts, must of necessity demonstrate that love by forgiving others—just as God has forgiven us. (Col. 3:12-14)

Coming now to verse 6, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 13:6

Love takes no pleasure in that which is sinful. It refuses to delight in iniquity, but rather it detests the practice of sin—and has no desire to promote sin in any shape or form. (Contrast Rom. 1:32)

Again, love has no desire for unrighteousness. Rather, it pursues the way of righteousness and truth with all its heart. Those who love God, and whose hearts are filled with God's love, do not seek close fellowship with those who live in darkness, but only with those who walk in the light. Therefore, love rejoices in the truth, and in righteousness of life. (Rom. 12:9-10; 2 John 4-6; 3 John 3-4)

In verse 7, the apostle Paul continues:

1 Corinthians 13:7

Love endures forever. (SS 8:6-7)

Love *always protects*. Love is so extensive that it is prepared, if necessary, to protect others physically by laying down one's own life to spare that of another. (1 John 3:16-18)

The KJV says of love that it *Beareth all things...* Both the meaning 'to protect' (or 'to cover over') and the meaning 'to bear' can be derived from the Greek word (στέγω, *stego*), used in the original. If, with the KJV, we translate [love] 'beareth all things,' this just means that those who are filled with God's love are prepared to endure all things. They are prepared to bear all afflictions patiently, trusting in God to keep them and to deliver them in the hour of trial. (Gal. 6:2)

This leads us on to the expression, [love] *always trusts...* (Or believes or has faith in). Those who love God trust God implicitly. They continue to maintain confidence in God even when everything seems to be going against them: For they know that God is faithful, and that he cannot deny his word or his promises. (Rom. 8:28)

The expression, 'always trusts,' may however be understood with the KJV, 'believeth all things...' In this case, the object of a person's trust or confidence may be mankind in general or believers in particular. Here, the emphasis is on a loving heart that is prepared to trust men and women despite their shortcomings, and even although they may at times prove unreliable or untrustworthy. If this was the apostle's primary meaning, Paul did not intend this as an exhortation to act unwisely, or even foolishly or gullibly, toward those whom we know to be untrustworthy. Rather, it would have been intended as an encouragement to see the best in people, and to give them the benefit of the doubt unless there was clear evidence to the contrary.

[Love] *always hopes...* Against all odds, love continues to hope. The hope spoken of here is not the insecure and shifting hope of the world, but the believer's certain hope in God. Nothing can shake love's resolve to continue hoping in God, or in the firm assurances and promises of God. (Rom. 8:23-24) Hope continues steadfast to the end, for hope's anchor lies bedded in the Rock that cannot move. The hope, therefore, which fills the Christian's breast, is the rock-solid assurance that God will accomplish everything that he has solemnly promised in his holy Word. (Heb. 6:19)

[Love] *always perseveres...* In view of the certainty of the fulfilment of God's word and God's promises, love continues to persevere. Despite the obstacles, trials and difficulties, it perseveres in the way of truth, righteousness and holiness of life. It seeks to follow the Lord Jesus wherever he may lead.

These promises, of course, affect not only the believer's attitude and behaviour toward God, but also his attitude and behaviour toward other people. Because of the love of God toward him, the believer demonstrates all the characteristics of his God-given, and Spirit-inspired, love to other people. Thus, concerning this love, Paul declares:

(7) It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. (NIV)

Then, in verse 8, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 13:8

The gifts and faculties that God gives to men and women will one day pass away. However, the fruit of the Spirit will endure forever. The first fruit of God's Spirit is love—that love which comes down from God above, and which is returned to God and extended to our neighbour. It is the love of God shed abroad in the believer's heart by the Holy Spirit. This love never fails. This love can never pass away.

Prophecies, however, represent one of the gifts of the Spirit—a gift that the Holy Spirit imparts on limited occasions, and for a limited period. Once a gift has served its purpose, that gift ceases or is withdrawn.

Similarly, with the gift of tongues: As a gift of the Spirit, tongues were given to certain individuals to permit them to declare the word of God in other languages. But, once again, when this gift had served its purpose, it ceased or was withdrawn. (Acts 2:4-11)

So also with knowledge: This gift probably refers to the ability given to some individuals to understand and to expound thoroughly, clearly and comprehensively, the meaning of God's Word. This gift too, however, will one day pass away—for one day, we will have no further need of spiritual instructors.

Whether in time or in eternity, however, love will never pass away. It will endure throughout the eternal ages.

In verses 9 and 10, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 13:9-10

Those who prophesied or spoke in the name of the Lord did so because they had first spent much time in the presence of the Lord. There, God revealed to them his will and purposes for his people, and laid upon his spokesmen or prophets the responsibility to declare his Word faithfully. Even so, the prophet's knowledge of God's will and purposes was partial—although sufficient for the purpose that God intended.

The exercise of all of God's gifts is in some degree partial or limited. This is because we are finite human beings, and therefore can barely begin to comprehend the ways and thoughts of the infinite God, who is Eternal Spirit. Therefore, our knowledge of God and his ways is partial. Prophecy, too, is partial—and so is every other spiritual gift.

One day, however, that which is partial and imperfect will disappear; or, rather, that which is perfect and complete will supersede it. This will happen when we experience in our body and mind the full and complete perfection that God has planned for us, and for which he has destined and redeemed us at inestimable cost.

In verse 11, Paul uses a human analogy:

1 Corinthians 13:11

On this occasion, Paul is not so much speaking about the differences between spiritually mature and spiritually immature believers. Rather, he is contrasting our present experience of the Christian life with that which we have yet to experience in heaven's glory. This is explained further in verse 12, where the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 13:12

In Paul's day, mirrors provided a very poor reflected image. What the apostle is saying is that our finite knowledge and understanding of God and his ways of necessity must be limited, partial or incomplete. It is as though we were viewing the things of God through a dull mirror, or a mirror with a poor reflecting surface.

We fully understand everything that is necessary to salvation and godly living. Nevertheless, many other spiritual matters remain something of a mystery to us. One day, however, we will fully understand these glorious mysteries. Because, one day, we will see our Saviour face to face; and, when we see him, we will know him as he is. (1 John 3:2)

Everything that will then benefit us to know in glory will be revealed to us: For then, our minds will be completely sanctified and glorified or perfected—and we will be able to understand.

In conclusion, therefore, the apostle writes in verse 13:

1 Corinthians 13:13

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. (NIV)

Above all the gifts of the Spirit stand faith, hope and love.

Faith is that unfailing confidence in God, trusting him wholeheartedly to fulfil every promise of his Word, and remaining steadfastly assured that God will prove utterly faithful. This is the kind of faith that moves mountains. (Gal. 5:5-6; Heb. 11:1-2)

Hope is that settled assurance on the Rock of our salvation—the Lord Jesus Christ. We remain assured that his finished work at Calvary, and his continuing intercession for the saints in glory, will keep us throughout this present life and will bring us ultimately and safely to eternal glory. (Heb. 6:18-20)

However, above both faith and hope stands *love*—the greatest of all.

It was love in God's heart that impelled him to give his one and only Son for fallen, sinful men and women. It was love in the heart of the dear Son of God that compelled him to descend to this earth, and to endure in his own body the agonies of the cross as a sacrifice for sinners.

It is love in the hearts of God's redeemed people that cause them to worship and praise the Lord for all that he has done—and is continuing to do—for them. Again, it is God's love in the hearts of his people that causes them to demonstrate genuine love, mercy and compassion to others.

Love never harms another. Love never wrongs another. Love never speaks or thinks evil of another. Above all other attributes, love comes nearest to expressing the likeness of God as it is found in man.

Let us, then, pursue the way of love, mercy, compassion, kindness and understanding. Above all other qualities, however, love stands supreme. (1 Pet. 1:21-22; 1 John 4:7-21)

1 Corinthians Chapter 14

Seek Gifts that Edify the Church

1 Corinthians 14:1-17

Paul has just emphasised the importance of spiritual fruit in a believer's life—and foremost among the fruit of the Spirit is love. The apostle, however, does not wish to minimise God-given spiritual gifts. Thus, in chapter 14, he encourages the Corinthian believers to seek spiritual gifts—providing that they seek them for the good of the church, and are prepared to exercise their gifts in a genuine, caring and compassionate spirit of love. To this end, Paul writes in verse 1 of chapter 14:

1 Corinthians 14:1

Paul exhorts the Corinthian saints to pursue the way of love: i.e., to consider others before themselves, and to minister practically to the needs of others. However, the apostle also exhorts these believers to 'eagerly desire' spiritual gifts. The Holy Spirit imparts these gifts to God's people. He does not do so, however, for the recipient's own personal use or benefit, but for the benefit of others. The purpose of spiritual gifts is to bring glory and honour to God's name by building up the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

As has been noted already, certain spiritual gifts have a higher priority than others. One such gift is the gift of prophecy. Prophecy involved making known the will of God to the people, or expounding or interpreting God's Word and will. Therefore, Paul encourages the Corinthian believers to seek earnestly for this gift, that they may become better acquainted with the Holy Scriptures. Then, by using this gift, they may edify and strengthen the whole church. (Cf. Num. 11:25-29; see also 1 Thess. 5:20)

Unlike the gift of tongues, prophecy was a spiritual gift that benefited the many. Within the church, the meaning of words spoken in tongues was understood by only a few—at most. Prophecy, however, was a form of teaching that everyone in the church understood, since it was teaching expounded in the common language or dialect of the people. Therefore, everyone received some measure of spiritual blessing and encouragement from prophetic teaching (vv.24-25).

Concerning the limitations of tongues within a church situation, the apostle writes in verse 2:

1 Corinthians 14:2

Before proceeding further, we should observe that the word translated 'tongue' here is the common Greek word (γλῶσσα) both for the organ of speech itself and for distinctive (foreign) languages. Nevertheless, this same Greek word can bear the meaning of 'ecstatic utterances', as was found in Hellenistic and other pagan religions. However, that this was not the meaning intended by the apostle Paul appears evident from his quotation from the Old Testament Scriptures, which he cites in verse 21 below. There, the apostle writes:

In the Law it is written: "Through men of strange tongues and through the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people, but even then they will not listen to me,"
{Isaiah 28:11,12} says the Lord. (1 Corinthians 14:21 NIV)

Clearly, then, Paul's use and meaning of the word 'tongues' in this quotation cannot differ from his use and meaning in the present passage. Without doubt, the passage from

Isaiah chapter 28 can refer only to a distinctive foreign language (the language of the Assyrians), and not to ecstatic utterance. Since Paul then uses this passage to support and illustrate his present discussion, it is reasonable to assume that he is referring to distinctive foreign languages throughout this entire section. Let us bear this in mind when trying to understand some of the expressions or modes of speech that follow.

We will return now to our consideration of verse 2.

When a person speaks in a tongue, no one else can understand him. The only exceptions to this are, if the hearer understands that particular language, or if an interpreter is present to translate the message. As a rule, however, those in the church at Corinth who spoke in tongues did not benefit or edify others. Only God understood what that person had said. From this it is evident that some of the Corinthian believers had been using the gift of tongues (or what they claimed was the gift of tongues) for their own personal benefit and not for the edification of the church or to assist foreign language visitors.

As far as the Corinthian church as a whole was concerned, the mysteries uttered in the Spirit by the speaker remained mysteries. This was because the person speaking in a tongue was not expounding the message in a language that everyone in the church could understand, nor was an interpreter being given the opportunity to do so.

By contrast, those who spoke in a familiar language edified and benefited the whole church. In this case, the hearers understood clearly the mysteries (or truths) uttered in the Spirit—for the speaker was expounding the Word of God in the everyday language of the people. (Cf. 1 Cor. 2:7-10; 15:51; see also Rom. 16:25-26)

Thus, in verse 3, Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 14:3

In the passage, we are dealing with the gift of prophecy given to the early church. This is distinct from the prophetic office to which the Lord called and appointed certain of his people, particularly during the Old Testament period. Those prophets who served God in this capacity were inspired by his Holy Spirit to speak authoritatively in the name of the Lord. When speaking by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, their words were the words of God. Those who rejected the words of these holy and God-appointed prophets were rejecting the Word of God and rebelling against the Lord.

The gift or ability given to the early church to prophesy—or to declare the Word of the Lord—does not imply the corresponding gift of divine inspiration or infallibility in teaching, nor does it imply that the person prophesying has been called to the divinely appointed office of prophet. Both the prophetic office and apostolic office were special divine callings and appointments. As a rule, only those who held one of these offices could speak authoritatively in the name of the Lord, and only their words or teaching was inspired by the Holy Spirit of God, and hence was infallible or inerrant.

The gift of prophecy given to the early church, therefore, was of a much more general nature; corresponding more closely to proclaiming, revealing, or preaching and teaching the Word of God. Again, prophetic messages did not necessarily include an element of futurity, although on occasions (especially with the divinely appointed and inspired prophets of the Old Testament) they did.

We return now to Paul's remarks in verse 3.

Those who make known the will of God and expound the Word of God in clearly understood language, benefit the entire church. Through the teaching of God's Word, believers are strengthened in their faith; they are encouraged to persevere, and they are richly and abundantly comforted in all their trials and difficulties. (Cf. Acts 13:15; 14:21-22; 15:32)

Thus, through the gift of prophecy—and other *teaching* gifts—the church of God receives spiritual edification and blessing. By this means, God’s people are built up in their most holy faith. (See esp. 2 Pet. 1:19 - 2:2)

Contrasting the gift of tongues with that of prophecy, the apostle writes in verse 4:

1 Corinthians 14:4

It may appear from Paul’s phrasing of this verse that he is speaking of tongues in a manner that does not conform to the example at Pentecost in Acts chapter 2, for the apostle appears to suggest that the Corinthians could use this gift for their own personal benefit. However, Paul is not alluding to a variation of the gift of tongues or something like ‘ecstatic utterance’ here. Rather, he is dealing with the situation that then existed among some of the Corinthian believers. They had indeed been using (or misusing) this gift for their own personal benefit, instead of for the benefit and blessing of the church. Thus, they were edifying only themselves.

From this verse, we observe by inference that the Lord did not intend the gift of tongues to be used extensively or predominantly in church worship services. As can be seen elsewhere, tongues were not intended for communication with other believers (unless they were foreigners who did not understand any of the common languages). Rather, the primary purpose of the gift of tongues was to declare the wonders of God *to unbelievers*—in their own particular language or dialect. (Acts 2:11; 1 Cor. 14:21-22)

It is also clear from verse 4 that the church benefits from those gifts of the Spirit that involve a teaching or expository ministry. This includes the prophecies of the early church, together with all other forms of teaching in sound doctrine and principles.

In verse 5, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 14:5

Paul has nothing against speaking in tongues as such. It was, after all, a gift of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, Paul wishes that all the believers at Corinth possessed and used this gift—provided they did so in its proper place. As far as church worship services were concerned, however, the apostle would much rather that the Corinthian believers sought the gift of prophecy for the mutual edification of the church. This way, they could instruct one another in comprehensible language. Then, the whole church would be encouraged and strengthened in their faith.

It is for this reason that Paul says that prophecy is greater than tongues. Undoubtedly, this is true for the believer. Prophecy has a much higher priority than tongues, for prophecy is intended for believers and for the upbuilding of the church in love. Tongues, however, is not primarily intended for believers, but as a demonstration of God’s power to unbelievers (cf. 1 Cor. 12:28,31).

Even so, if a person who speaks in a tongue is able to interpret what he says, then he may bring a message from God’s Word to the church in that tongue—provided the message be properly translated. If, however, the speaker is unable to interpret what he says, and if no independent interpreter is present, then he must refrain from speaking to the church in a tongue.

The fact that Paul mentions *interpretation* in connection with tongues, demonstrates once more that the language in question was capable of intelligent interpretation or translation. This could be true only of recognised foreign languages or dialects—not of ecstatic utterances. By their very nature, ecstatic utterances are incapable of interpretation in the commonly accepted sense of the term.

Paul has made it plain that anything spoken publicly in the church must be for the strengthening, encouragement and comfort of its individual members. Therefore, all teaching from God's Word must be proclaimed or rendered in a clearly understood language.

To demonstrate this point further, the apostle writes in verse 6:

1 Corinthians 14:6

Paul might very well decide to pay a visit to the church at Corinth (as indeed he planned to do). On arrival, however, he may then speak to the church in a completely unfamiliar language. Nevertheless, how would that profit the church? What spiritual advantage would they obtain from Paul's message? Even if the apostle declared the Word of God with much fervour and power, how would that benefit the Corinthian believers if they did not understand one word of what he was saying? It is, therefore, unwise—if not absurd—to speak to believers in a tongue that they do not understand.

Paul concedes that it will not benefit the church in the least unless he makes known the Word of God in terms that the church members can easily understand.

- Therefore, the apostle speaks of benefiting the church through *revelation*: i.e., making known and laying bare the truths of God's Word to the heart and mind.
- He speaks of benefiting the church through *knowledge*: i.e., an explanation of the more advanced truths of God's Word by those who have studied that Word thoroughly and prayerfully.
- Paul speaks of benefiting the church through *prophecy*: i.e., through making known the will and purposes of God for his people, or expounding the Word of God to his people.
- Again, Paul speaks of benefiting the church through some *word of instruction*: i.e., through formal instruction in doctrine or in the teachings of God's Word. In this way, God's people would come to a better understanding of the principles and practices of God's inerrant and infallible Word.

Paul now makes use of some everyday analogies to illustrate his point. Thus, in verse 7, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 14:7

For musical sounds to have meaning, the composer or musician must arrange the sounds in a certain order. Random sounds constitute disorder, cacophony or chaos. On the other hand, musical sounds produced from a proper arrangement of notes and chords constitute a distinct melody or harmony.

In verse 8, Paul makes use of another familiar analogy:

1 Corinthians 14:8

A sequence of notes played at random on a trumpet or bugle does not give any meaningful signal to anyone. Only when a distinctly recognisable call to arms or to battle is sounded clearly on the trumpet or bugle, will the signal be understood and obeyed.

To convey an intelligible message to the minds of the hearers, and to prompt them to readiness or action, sounds must convey a distinct meaning, or a recognisable and clear signal. Thus, in verse 9, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 14:9

The words that we speak must be intelligible to our hearers. Our hearers must be able to understand the message that we bring to them from God's Word. Otherwise, they will receive no benefit and no blessing from the message. Moreover, if the hearers do not understand our message, we might as well be speaking into the air.

Thus, it is important that we proclaim the truths of God's Word not only in the everyday language of our hearers, but that we do so without needless embellishment or anything else that might detract from the Word of the living God or from the operations of the Holy Spirit in and through that Word.

In verses 10 and 11 the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 14:10-11

Throughout the world, people speak many different languages and dialects. Yet, every one of those languages and dialects is clearly understood by the respective native speakers.

No language is without meaning. Every language in the world is coherent and capable of translation or interpretation. Without an interpreter, however, most languages are foreign to everyone except the native speakers. However, in the case of the native speakers, everyone understands that particular language.

Thus, infers Paul, when you speak to a local church fellowship, your message should be in the language that is indigenous to these believers. Everyone present should clearly understand what you are saying.

Here, again, we note that Paul is referring to recognisable foreign languages—not to other forms of speech, such as ecstatic utterance.

In verse 12, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 14:12

So it is with you. Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church. (NIV)

The Corinthian believers had shown great zeal in pursuing particular spiritual gifts. For the most part, however, they had been misusing or abusing these gifts.

Although—and perhaps because—he loves them dearly, Paul censures their behaviour and misapplication of God's gifts. However, the apostle does not forbid them from seeking to exercise spiritual gifts—provided they do so in love. Nevertheless, Paul exhorts the Corinthians to seek earnestly for those gifts that will be of greatest spiritual benefit to the whole church.

The gift of tongues was not intended primarily for use among believers, but as a witness to God's power among unbelievers. However, gifts like prophecy, preaching, and teaching, were intended primarily for the people of God, and for making Christ known to a lost and perishing world (vv.3-4). Therefore, says Paul, seek the kind of gifts that glorify God's name by strengthening the church and by proclaiming the Gospel to the world (1 Cor. 12:31).

Thus, in verse 13, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 14:13

However, says Paul, if someone in your fellowship does decide to speak to the church in a tongue, then he ought to pray for the ability to interpret what he says. In this way, his message will edify the church, for his hearers will understand the message once it has been interpreted (vv.27-28).

In verse 14, the apostle turns from speaking in a tongue to praying in a tongue. Thus, he writes:

1 Corinthians 14:14

Paul supposes the case where he might pray to God in a tongue. However, it is unlikely that anyone else present on that occasion would understand what Paul was saying to God. He would be praying in the spirit—and God alone would understand his prayer (v.2).

In this case, the apostle's mind or understanding is said to be '*unfruitful*': i.e., his mind is not bearing fruit for the benefit of others. As far as other members of the church are concerned, Paul's mind, or his intellectual gift and faculty, is unproductive.

What, then, is the apostle's response to this hypothetical situation?

He replies to this in verse 15:

1 Corinthians 14:15

Essentially, Paul is saying that—in all circumstances—he will make his preaching and his praises understandable to the church. Yes, he may indeed pray or sing to God in the spirit. However, if he does so, his mind will be fully engaged in making his message clearly understood by everyone in the church. (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16)

In verse 16, the apostle demonstrates why it is essential to present a clearly understood message at all times:

1 Corinthians 14:16

Here we see the futility of bringing any message to the church that is not clearly understood by virtually all of those present.

In the church at Corinth at that time—as in many other early churches—there was apparently a section set apart for those seeking information about the Christian faith, or for those receiving basic instruction in the faith. These learners (Gk., *idiotes*) may have had a very elementary knowledge of Christian matters. They needed the faith explained to them in simple, unambiguous terms—in their own native language.

These enquirers or learners certainly could not be expected to understand those Christians who spoke in tongues, or who prayed to God in the spirit. Moreover, if they did not understand what these other Christians were saying, they would be unable to add their 'Amen' to their words of prayer or praise (vv.23-25).

The same, of course, would be true of any other believers who could not understand the message, regardless of their level of spiritual maturity. Thus, in verse 17, Paul says:

1 Corinthians 14:17

The person speaking in tongues or praying in the spirit may be giving thanks to God well enough. However, since others do not understand a word he is saying, the speaker is not benefiting them in the least. Their prayer is of no value to the church as a whole (vv.4,6).

Tongues Are a Sign for Unbelievers

1 Corinthians 14:18-25

In verses 18 and 19, the apostle Paul declares:

1 Corinthians 14:18-19

In view of the Corinthian's attitude toward some of the apostles—including Paul—they would have thought even less of them if the apostles themselves had been unable to speak in tongues. However, as we know from the events at Pentecost, all the apostles received this gift from the Holy Spirit for use in the Lord's service. The apostle Paul, of course, did not receive the gift at this time, but on a later occasion.

Thus, Paul is able to say to the Corinthians that he could speak in tongues more than they. Even so, how would speaking in tongues benefit the church? Thus, continues Paul in verse 19, it is preferable by far to speak five intelligible words to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.

From this, we learn that it is much more important to instruct others in easily understood language—and with love—than to use God's gifts for our own personal use, or as a demonstration of our supposed spiritual maturity or abilities. God's gifts are given that we might serve him by serving others (vv.3-4). Thus, let us use our gifts to honour the Lord, to strengthen and encourage the church, and to present the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ to the world.

In verse 20, the apostle continues:

1 Corinthians 14:20

Clearly, Paul is inferring that some of the Corinthians were acting like children concerning their use of spiritual gifts—especially, the gift of tongues. Instead of demonstrating spiritual maturity and using this gift as God intended, they were displaying spiritual immaturity by flaunting this gift in a wholly inappropriate manner, and contrary to its intended purpose.

Now, says Paul, in relation to all things evil, be as children: i.e., be as though innocent and ignorant of this world's evil ways. However, in relation to your thinking, be adults. Remember that you have the mind of Christ. Therefore, use your mind as Christ intended. Use his gifts as the Holy Spirit intended: Not for ostentation or display, but for God's glory.

Then, in verse 21, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 14:21

{Cf. Isaiah 28:11-12}

When Paul speaks of the Law in this verse, he is speaking comprehensively of the entire Old Testament Scriptures. The passage that the apostle cites is taken from Isaiah 28:11-12.

When the Jews refused to listen to the voice of God's prophets speaking to them in a language they could understand, the Lord punished them by sending a nation against them whose language they could *not* understand.

The Jews had refused to heed the word of the Lord spoken plainly to them through his prophets in their own tongue or language. Now, held captive among a people who spoke a foreign tongue, they soon found that this strange tongue brought them no blessings from the Lord. Indeed, this unfamiliar tongue was suited only to the unbelieving and ungodly nation who spoke it among themselves.

Thus, infers Paul, pay heed to the word of the Lord when it is spoken to you in a language that you can understand: For you will not benefit in the least from hearing God's word if it is spoken to you in an unfamiliar tongue.

To this end, the apostle writes in verse 22:

1 Corinthians 14:22

The primary purpose of the gift of tongues was to demonstrate something of God's remarkable power and glory to unbelievers by declaring to them in their own language or dialect the wonders of God and the message of eternal salvation. (Acts 2:11) Prophecy, however, was the declaration of God's word and will in the common everyday language of the people.

On the one hand, therefore, the Lord intended the gift of prophecy to be used for the benefit of believers and for a church situation. On the other hand, however, the Lord intended the gift of tongues to be used primarily as a witness of God's power to unbelievers, and for the mission of the church in a multi-lingual world.

Thus, in verse 23, Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 14:23

The apostle supposes the situation where the Corinthian believers meet together as a church. At this meeting, everyone speaks in tongues. Paul supposes further that into this meeting come some enquirers or unbelievers. Then, asks Paul, what will these enquirers or unbelievers think when they see and hear everyone in the church speaking in tongues?

Since they are not familiar with foreign languages or dialects, these visitors will be unable to understand one word of what the various speakers are saying. However, they will observe that you appear to be acting and speaking strangely—if not bizarrely. On witnessing these strange events, will not these enquirers or unbelievers imagine that you are all out of your mind? How, then, will these people benefit from hearing the word of the Lord? For they have not heard it. At least, they have not heard it in their own language.

At this point, it may be objected that this was the very situation for which the gift of tongues was given: namely, *for use in the presence of unbelievers*. Moreover, at this very meeting, Paul is supposing that some unbelievers are present.

However, this objection is not valid. The unbelievers and enquirers present on this occasion *spoke the same language as did the believers*. These unbelievers, therefore, did not need to hear God's word spoken to them in another tongue. Indeed, they did not understand foreign tongues. Therefore, in their case, the use of tongues would be inappropriate.

The unbelievers, among whom God intended the gift of tongues to be used, were those who did not speak any of the local languages or dialects: namely, foreign speaking Jews and unbelievers from various parts of the world.

1 Corinthians 14:24-25a

Here, then, we see the difference between the use of tongues and the use of prophecy or preaching within the worshipping church situation.

Paul supposes that a church worship service is in progress. At this service, different members of the church are taking it in turns to prophesy or expound the word of the Lord in clearly understandable terms, and in the native language of their hearers.

At some time before or during the meeting, some unbelievers or enquirers come into the fellowship. They hear the Scriptures being clearly proclaimed and explained, and—by the grace of God—they begin to understand the message.

As they listen to several different speakers each bringing a message from the Word of God, the Holy Spirit convicts these visitors of their sin. The word spoken by those who are prophesying or preaching has exposed them to the truths of God's Word. These truths have judged their hearts and lives and brought their sins to light. The incisive and penetrating Word of the Lord has laid bare the innermost secrets of their hearts. (Cf. Acts 2:36-38; Heb. 4:12-13)

Thus, continues Paul in the latter part of verse 25:

1 Corinthians 14:25b

Having had the most intimate secrets of their hearts exposed by God's Word, these unbelievers find themselves forced to acknowledge their sin to God, and to confess to the power and presence of the Lord among the worshipping believers.

These visitors were convicted and convinced of their sin and need of redemption because they understood the message. Therefore, the Holy Spirit was able to apply the truths of that message to their hearts and souls.

However, had the believers in this church been speaking in tongues when the unbelievers arrived, how would these visitors have been convicted of their sin or convinced of their need of redemption? As Paul said in verse 23, they would merely have concluded that the believers were out of their mind. Thus, we see the need for an orderly and rational form of worship in the church.

Orderly Church Worship

1 Corinthians 14:26-40

With the necessity for orderly church worship in mind, the apostle writes in verse 26:

1 Corinthians 14:26

Here we see something of the variety of gifts that the Holy Spirit imparts to the Lord's people. Paul anticipated that, when the Corinthian believers met together as a church, each one would come with a contribution to make to the worship service. One or more would contribute a hymn. Others would contribute a word of instruction. Others would make known a revelation of the Spirit from God's Word. Others would bring a message from God's Word in a tongue. Still others would interpret that message so that the whole church could understand and benefit from what was being said. (1 Cor. 12:8-11)

In all these ways and more, the church was being edified and strengthened as believers shared together in fellowship, in worship, in prayer, and in feeding on the Word of God.

It was, however, essential that each of the gifts be exercised in order, and with due reverence and restraint. Thus, by way of reminder, Paul declares in verse 27:

1 Corinthians 14:27

Paul did not absolutely forbid the use of tongues or foreign languages within the church worship services. However, the apostle insisted that—when tongues were used—they must be used in an orderly manner: viz., one speaker at a time—and then no more than three speakers during any one service.

Additionally, if tongues were being used within a church service, then someone must be present to interpret what was being said. In this way, the whole church could benefit from the prayer or message. This, of course, meant that the tongues-speaker would need to ensure in advance that an interpreter was available in the church, and would be able to translate his message. Clearly, then, this could apply only to those who spoke in a recognisable foreign language—since only then could an interpreter agree to translate the message.

However, what was to happen if no interpreter was present on that particular occasion—and yet the speaker in tongues believed he had a message to deliver from the Lord?

Well, clearly, if he had a message from the Lord, the Lord would ensure that an interpreter was on hand to translate that message. However, in the event that no interpreter could be found, Paul is unambiguous (v.28):

1 Corinthians 14:28

Here we see, then, that Paul—writing by inspiration of the Holy Spirit—absolutely forbids speaking in tongues in the church when an interpreter is not present. If the church cannot participate or benefit by understanding the message, then the message must not be brought. The one who speaks in tongues should not speak publicly, but remain silent—speaking only to himself and to God.

Then, in verse 29, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 14:29

During a church worship service, two or perhaps three believers should take turns in making known the Word or will of God, or bringing to the church some word of prophecy or encouragement from God's Word. They should then expound or explain the significance of their message.

Meanwhile, those who are listening to the message should weigh up carefully everything that the speaker is saying. They should compare the message with the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ, and of his apostles and prophets. By thus comparing Scripture with Scripture, they would enrich and bless their souls, and would advance spiritually and practically in the teaching of God's Word.

In verses 30 and 31, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 14:30-31

If, while someone is prophesying, a revelation comes to another person in the church, the first speaker should stop to allow the second person to make known his message from the Lord (vv.6,26).

Since these meetings were being conducted under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, he—the Spirit of God—could determine when one speaker had said sufficient to complete his message, and when another speaker should take over. No difficulties should arise in observing such a practice, since the services were to be conducted in a regular and orderly manner.

Thus, in verse 32, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 14:32

This verse clearly tells us that these prophets were able to exercise complete control over the delivery of their message. They could stop whenever circumstances required.

Although delivering the Lord's message or expounding God's Word, these prophets did not claim that they were unable to stop speaking (when required) because they were speaking as the Holy Spirit motivated them. On the contrary, it was for this very reason—because they were under the Holy Spirit's control—that they were able to stop whenever required: for example, to allow another individual to speak.

Thus, the Holy Spirit is seen to maintain order and discipline in the services of the church, and to prevent disorder or chaos. To this end, the apostle Paul says in verse 33a:

1 Corinthians 14:33a

Let us look to the services of God's church. If reverence, order, peace and harmony mark these services, then we may truly say that the Lord is there, and that the Holy Spirit is present in our midst. However, if a lack of reverence, a lack of order, or a lack of true peace and harmony mark the church services, how can we say that the Lord is there? How can we claim that the Holy Spirit is in control, if reverence, order and peace are absent from the meeting?

The Scripture tells us quite plainly:

(33a) For God is not a God of disorder but of peace... (NIV)

Let the peace of God reign in our hearts, in our lives, and in our worship services. Then we will experience the true blessing and power of the Lord in our midst. For God is not glorified by show, ostentation or even by remarkable personal experiences, but by humble, contrite and obedient hearts.

Paul now moves on to speak of the role of women in the church worship services:

1 Corinthians 14:33b-34

Verse 34 is not intended as an absolute prohibition on the participation of women in church services. If the apostle had intended this prohibition to be absolute, it would have contradicted the clear examples and instructions elsewhere in God's Word, including Paul's own words in chapter 11 of this epistle.

The apostle had just been speaking about the orderly exercise of spiritual gifts. However, in case any misunderstanding should arise about who might possess and use those spiritual gifts that were of a more public nature, or which involved proclaiming God's Word to the church, the apostle reminds the Corinthian believers of God's Law: A woman is not permitted to speak (or teach) during the services of the church. She must show submission to the Lord and to the man by remaining silent during public services.

A woman must not usurp her God-appointed position in relation to the man by speaking in any church service or meeting that is attended by both men and women. She may speak, of course, at those meetings of the church that are attended exclusively by women.

A believing woman, however, may prophesy or pray in the meetings of the church. She may do this on condition that she follows the relevant Scriptural injunctions that require her to show the sign of submission to the man, and due regard to the holy angels. (1 Cor. 11:5,10; Luke 2:36; Acts 2:17,18; 21:9)

In verse 35, the apostle continues:

1 Corinthians 14:35

It is perfectly understandable and reasonable for a woman to desire to ask questions about certain matters—but she must not do so at the church services. Rather, she should

wait to ask her husband at home. In the case of an unmarried woman or a widow, she should ask her pastor, deacons, or other church leaders to answer her questions.

Apart from the Scriptural exceptions to which reference has been made already, it was shameful for a woman to speak in the public meetings of the church. To do so, was to disregard her position in relation to the man and in relation to the holy angels. Thereby, a woman brought dishonour and disrespect on her own person.

The apostle Paul had no desire to see these dear sisters in Christ disobey or disregard the principles of God's law. Apparently, however, some of the Corinthian believers found it difficult to accept Paul's injunction, which forbade women from speaking in church—even although this injunction had been given by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and was in fact the Lord's command.

Thus, in verse 36, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 14:36

Did the Word of God begin and end with you Corinthians? Are you the only people to receive God's Word? Are you therefore the only ones qualified to interpret or expound the meaning of God's Word?

Of course not! You are not the only church to whom the Word of God has come. Moreover, you certainly have no right or authority to interpret the Word of God in accordance with your own personal views, or differently from the churches of God in other places.

What I, Paul, write to you in this letter, I write—not as the opinion of man—but as the command of the Lord.

To this end, the apostle writes in verse 37:

1 Corinthians 14:37

Let those at Corinth who claim to be spiritually mature or spiritually gifted, acknowledge that I, Paul, speak to you by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The responses I have given to you in my letters are the teachings and commands of the Lord Jesus. I am relaying these commands to you as the Lord's divinely appointed servant. (1 Thess. 4:1-2; 2 Pet. 3:2)

We must remember, of course, that Paul had been called and appointed to the apostolic office by the risen Lord Jesus Christ himself. As a divinely appointed apostle, everything that Paul declared to the churches, in his preaching or teaching capacity, was to be received by all the church members as the very word of God. That word was and is inerrant. It was and is infallible. It was and is unchanging. Most importantly, those who rejected the words and commands of the inspired apostles were rejecting the words and commands of the Lord himself. It is a fearful thing to reject or disregard God's holy Word because we cannot or will not accept its teaching!

In verse 38, the apostle adds:

1 Corinthians 14:38

If a person chooses to disregard the Lord's commands, or the instructions of his inspired apostles, he will find himself disregarded. Those who oppose the teachings of the Lord will find themselves opposing God. And we cannot fight against the Lord and ever hope to win.

Although, in faithfulness to God, the apostle must provide these words of correction, yet, in love for his fellow believers at Corinth, Paul has no desire to dishearten or discourage the saints there. Thus, in verses 39 and 40, the apostle adds:

1 Corinthians 14:39-40

Paul encourages the brothers at Corinth to continue to prophesy, or to make known the Word and will of God. Thus, they would be edifying the church, and would be glorifying God's name among his people and beyond.

The apostle also encourages these believers to permit speaking in tongues—providing this is done in the manner already described (i.e., with interpretation) (vv.26-28).

Whatever spiritual gift a person exercises in the church, it should be done in a fitting and orderly way.

If these instructions are heeded and practised, this would go a long way toward healing the disagreements and divisions within the Corinthian fellowship.

1 Corinthians Chapter 15

Eyewitnesses to the Resurrected Christ

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

In chapter 15, the apostle Paul comes to the very foundation of the Christian faith—the reality and significance of Christ’s resurrection.

Even in the early days of the church, some people denied the literal bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus from the grave, or they attempted to explain away this momentous event. Without the resurrection, however, there can be no salvation and no hope of eternal life for anyone.

In chapter 15, therefore, the apostle Paul goes to some considerable length to remind the Corinthians of the fact of the resurrection. The apostle insists upon this fact as essential to their salvation. Furthermore, he demonstrates unequivocally the competence, reliability and trustworthiness of his sources concerning the resurrection of Christ.

The evidence presented in the following pages ought to be more than sufficient to convince any competent and unbiased court of law of the reality of Christ’s resurrection. Nevertheless, even if human courts should reject the testimony presented to them, this testimony remains forever valid: For it is the testimony of God’s Word concerning his Son. As such, we must regard as infallible and incontrovertible this testimony and evidence to the resurrection of Christ.

Inspired and guided, then, by the Holy Spirit, the apostle Paul writes in verse 1 of chapter 15:

1 Corinthians 15:1

Paul desires to remind his fellow-believers at Corinth of the imperishable and unchangeable truths of the Gospel, which they had heard and accepted.

Under the preaching of the apostle Paul (and of Apollos), the Corinthians had heard that Christ died for sinners. They had heard that the Lord Jesus was buried, and that he rose again on the third day—as foretold in the Scriptures, and by the Lord himself.

The death, burial and resurrection of Christ were essential to God’s plan of salvation. From before the creation of the world, God had decreed his Son to be the Lamb slain to make atonement for sin once-for-all. (Heb. 9:12; 10:10; 1 Pet. 3:18; Rev. 13:8)

God cannot fail to accomplish his plans, nor can anyone thwart or hinder his intentions. In full accordance with God’s eternal plan, the Lord Jesus laid down his life at the cross for sinners. Subsequently, the Lord was laid in the rock-hewn tomb of Joseph of Arimathea; and, from that tomb, he arose on the third day—by the almighty power of God. Thus, by his triumph over sin, death, hell and the grave—including his resurrection from death—the Lord Jesus demonstrated that God had fully accepted his sacrifice of atonement.

This, then, was the Gospel that Paul had preached at Corinth—and that other genuine apostles had preached. This was the message that the Corinthians had heard and received, and this was the Gospel—or Good News of salvation—on which they had taken their stand.

Thus, in verse 2, the apostle Paul declares:

1 Corinthians 15:2

Through faith in this Gospel message, the Corinthians had received the gift of salvation. By faith in the Word of God concerning the death, burial and resurrection of his Son, they had received the forgiveness of sins. By God's grace, the Corinthian believers had been cleansed in Christ's precious and redeeming blood.

By accepting this message with all their heart and soul, these believers were conceding that God's Word was true and wholly trustworthy. By free and sovereign grace, God had regenerated them by his Holy Spirit unto new and eternal life. Now, indeed, by God's grace, the Corinthian saints possessed a sure and certain hope for time and for eternity. For they grounded their hope—i.e., their absolute confidence in God, and their assurance of ultimate glory—in the risen, glorified and exalted Lord Jesus.

The Scriptures make it abundantly plain that none of God's redeemed children can ever lose their salvation (although God may, and will, discipline them to prepare them for future glory). Since God bestows salvation upon his children as a gift, salvation cannot be withdrawn. Christ has already paid the full price of our redemption, and this payment guarantees eternal salvation to all who are born of God's Holy Spirit.

From time to time, believers may entertain numerous doubts and fears. During the course of their lives, they may pass through many trials and difficulties. Yet, by his grace, God will keep them secure in their salvation until the end: i.e., until they meet with their Redeemer in glory.

Those who do not persevere until the end are those who have never been regenerated by the Holy Spirit. They may have heard the Gospel message, and obeyed it for a while—but only superficially: i.e., they have not done so with a renewed or regenerated heart or life. Thus, for one reason or another, they will ultimately abandon their profession—although they may continue to make an outward show of 'religion' or church attendance. (Matt. 13:3-9, 18-23)

Possibly, it is to such people that Paul is alluding when he adds in the latter part of verse 2,

(2b) "...if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain." (NIV)

It is, however, possible that the apostle was merely speaking hypothetically of certain of the Corinthians.

Paul now begins to relate in detail the nature and power of the Gospel message—that message which he had already passed on to these citizens of Corinth (and elsewhere).

Two principal sources bear witness to the resurrection of Christ. These are:

- The testimony of the Old and New Testament Scriptures; and
- The testimony of numerous reliable and trustworthy eyewitnesses.

To attempt to discredit or explain away either of these sources is not only absurd, it is dishonest, foolish and futile. It is the product of a mind desperately, but vainly, trying to deny or suppress the truth.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a well-attested and well-established fact. In verse 3, therefore, the apostle Paul begins to set forth in detail the truths of the Gospel—laying special, but essential emphasis on the death, burial and resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

Thus, in verse 3, the apostle declares:

1 Corinthians 15:3

Paul, of course, had not been present at the crucifixion, burial and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. As a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, however, he may have been in Jerusalem at this time. Nevertheless, at this stage in his life, Saul of Tarsus utterly opposed Christ and rejected out of hand the teachings of the Lord Jesus.

Following Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus, it is possible that Ananias explained to this former persecutor in some detail the truths about Jesus, and about the purpose of his death, burial and resurrection. However, the newly converted Paul did not depend on human testimony for the teaching that he received and later passed on to the churches—including the church at Corinth. Rather, Paul received his teaching directly from the Lord Jesus himself, as had the other twelve apostles.

Paul, however, probably received his teaching during the period that he spent in Arabia, not long after his conversion. (Gal. 1:11-12,17) Only after this period—i.e., about three years later—did Paul go up to Jerusalem to meet some of the other apostles. In view of the delay involved, Paul could not have received his teaching from these other apostles. (Gal. 1:18-19)

The teaching, then, that Paul had passed on to the Corinthians had been revealed to him directly from the Lord. What, therefore, Paul taught—in common with the other apostles—was the word of the Lord. However, since this teaching came directly from the Lord, and since this message was essential to salvation, it was of paramount importance. This teaching contained the Gospel or good news that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures. Christ had laid down his life at Calvary to make atonement for sin.

In fulfilment of the Scriptures, Jesus was the Lamb of God—the Lamb slain from before the creation of the world. He was the Suffering Servant of Jehovah, spoken of by the prophet Isaiah. His death, burial and resurrection fulfilled both the Old and New Testament Scriptures, and the express teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ himself during his ministry on earth. (Isa.53:1-12; Matt. 12:40; 20:18-19)

In view of these facts, the Corinthians, and all other believers, were under a solemn obligation to receive and believe these truths as the word of the Lord, and as facts that were completely reliable and trustworthy. It was of first importance that they (and we) believed that Christ died for our sins—in exact fulfilment of the Scriptures.

This, however, was only the first step. In verse 4, the apostle adds:

1 Corinthians 15:4

The Scriptures record how and where the Lord Jesus was buried. The Word of God tells us that he was buried in the unused tomb of a rich man: i.e., Joseph of Arimathea. (Matt. 27:57-60; cf. Isa. 53:9)

That Word also tells us that a great stone was rolled against the entrance to the tomb; that the tomb was officially sealed, and that a 24-hour guard was placed on the tomb. This was to prevent anyone from interfering with the grave, or attempting to remove the body after nightfall. (Matt. 27:62-66)

However, not the stone, the seal nor the guard could prevent the Lord Jesus from rising from the dead on the third day—as he had foretold. When the women arrived at the tomb, they found the seal shattered, the heavy stone removed, and the guards no longer there—having fled the scene, after being petrified at the sight of God's holy angels. (Matt. 28:1-10; Luke 24:1-8)

Following this remarkable event, one witness after another—individually and collectively—testified to seeing or meeting with the risen Lord Jesus. (Acts 1:1-3; 13:29-31)

All these things happened as foretold in the Scriptures—and in accordance with God's eternal purposes for his people's salvation. (Acts 2:23-24,32-39)

In the verses that now follow, the apostle Paul amasses some of the first-hand evidence of numerous eyewitnesses. These people testified to the literal, physical or bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Only those who, wilfully and wickedly, are determined to reject the truth could set aside or explain away such an accumulation of first-hand testimony. No amount of learning or philosophical insight, however, can ever excuse those who repudiate the truth, or who spiritualise the literal, physical or bodily resurrection of Jesus, the Son of God.

After saying in verse 4 that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, the apostle adds in verse 5:

1 Corinthians 15:5

Following his resurrection, of course, the Lord Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene and to the other Mary. (Matt. 28:8-9) Those who had remained with him to the last, found his presence with them at the first.

Among his apostles, the Lord appeared first to Peter—the spokesman for the Twelve. Later, Jesus appeared to the 'Twelve' themselves. (Luke 24:33-43) (This term, 'the Twelve,' is used collectively for the original twelve disciples; although, of course, Judas Iscariot was not present; and, on one occasion, Thomas was absent from the group when the Lord appeared.)

The Lord's appearance to these formerly dispirited and despairing disciples produced a remarkable and transforming effect on their lives and witness. When they saw that the Lord had indeed risen, they rejoiced. (John 20:18-31) After Pentecost, these same men proclaimed the name of the risen Lord Jesus fearlessly among the Jews and Gentiles, being prepared to suffer and die for the one they now knew to be living, reigning and coming again.

Then, in verse 6, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 15:6

For those of us who accept this testimony for what it is—the testimony of honest and reliable witnesses, as recorded in the inerrant Word of God—this places the literal and physical resurrection of the Lord Jesus beyond all doubt.

It is devious and discreditable to infer that these five hundred or more witnesses were experiencing mass hallucination, or to propose some other equally fanciful and foolish explanation. Facts are facts—no matter how much certain people refuse to acknowledge them. Moreover, the fact that Christ died, was buried, and rose from the dead is beyond dispute.

Individually and collectively, these five hundred believers continued to bear witness to the risen Lord Jesus. As Paul notes, however, at the time he wrote to the Corinthian church, some of these believers had 'fallen asleep' or died in the Lord.

This appearance of the Lord Jesus to over five hundred of his followers probably took place in Galilee where Jesus had said previously that he would meet with his disciples. It is very unlikely that such a large group would risk assembling anywhere near the city of Jerusalem, since the Jews in that locality were particularly hostile to the Lord's followers—especially, around the time of the crucifixion and resurrection. (Matt. 28:10,16-20)

Paul now moves on to cite some other witnesses of the Lord's resurrection. Thus, in verse 7, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 15:7

Here we find a most significant and convincing eyewitness to the reality of the Lord's resurrection. The James mentioned here is apparently neither James the son of Zebedee nor James the son of Alphaeus (Matt. 10:2-3)—both of whom Jesus had called to be his followers and apostles. Rather, the James mentioned here is James the Lord's half-brother. By this time, the Lord's brother, James, had become one of the principal leaders of the Jerusalem church. (Gal. 1:19; Jas. 1:1; Jude 1:1; cf. Mark 6:3; 1 Cor. 9:5)

However, we must remember that during Jesus' earthly ministry—and in common with the Lord's other half-brothers—this James had refused to believe that Jesus was the Christ, or to accept his claims. (John 7:2-5; cf. Mk. 3:21) Only after seeing the risen Lord, was James convinced of Jesus' claims. Only then did he join with the apostles as a believer, and subsequently as a leader in the early church. (Cf. Mark 3:21; Gal. 1:19; 2:9)

According to the historian Eusebius, James later died as a martyr for the sake of Christ's name. (Eus: *Ecclesiastical History*, 7:19)

If, then, the highly sceptical and disbelieving James—the Lord's brother—became convinced of Jesus' claims only on account of his resurrection from the dead, what other testimony to Christ's resurrection could we seek? Could James have been mistaken about seeing his own half-brother alive again, after having been crucified and buried? Of course not! The thought is absurd. It was because of whom he saw—Jesus risen from the dead—that James was convinced of the truth, and became a true follower of the Lord, and a leader of the church.

In addition, in verse 7, Paul says that the Lord Jesus appeared to all the apostles. Since he has already mentioned the Twelve, he must now be speaking more generally of the other disciples of Jesus who were sometimes known as apostles. These would include people like the seventy whom Jesus had sent out to teach; in addition to many other disciples not named individually in the Gospel records.

These men were messengers or ambassadors of Christ. They represented his name through the preaching of the cross, and through the exercise of various miraculous and spiritual gifts. Unlike the Twelve, however, these 'auxiliary' apostles did not possess the authority to speak the very words of God. This office was reserved for the divinely inspired servants of God: i.e., those whom God called and appointed to the prophetic office in the OT, or whom the Lord Jesus called and appointed to the apostolic office in the NT.

In verse 8, the apostle Paul cites his own experience of the risen Lord Jesus. Paul, the one-time blasphemer and persecutor of God's church, was travelling to Damascus with letters of authority from the chief priests and leaders of the Jews. They had authorised and commissioned this Pharisee to arrest all the (Christian) believers in that area.

While still on the road to Damascus, however, the Lord Jesus appeared to Paul—then called Saul. As a result of this personal encounter with the risen, glorified Lord Jesus, Saul of Tarsus was converted. (Acts 9:1-22)

It is to this experience that the apostle refers when he writes in verse 8:

1 Corinthians 15:8

Paul had seen the risen Lord Jesus in person. Consequently, he became utterly convinced that Jesus was indeed the Son of God and the promised Messiah of the OT Scriptures.

In verse 8, Paul refers to himself as 'one abnormally born.' His conversion to Christ had been so unexpected, and—in human terms—so unlikely and irregular, that the apostle compares the experience to the unexpectedness or irregularity and trauma of a spontaneous abortion or miscarriage. Yet, Paul—the former persecutor of God's church—was God's choice as the servant of Christ and of the everlasting Gospel.

Paul himself fully realised that he owed everything to the grace of God. In justice and righteousness, God could have punished and condemned Saul of Tarsus for persecuting the believers—often, even to death. Nevertheless, in his abundant grace and mercy, God redeemed and forgave this once-violent and virulent man. For, as James says, mercy triumphs over judgment.

Recalling God's immeasurable grace and mercy toward him, the apostle writes in verses 9 and 10:

1 Corinthians 15:9-10

Considering how once he had despised and abused the church of Christ, Paul reckons himself the least of the apostles (although, in God's eyes, he stood on an equal footing with all the others). (Acts 8:3; 22:4-5)

As Paul is careful to point out in his various letters to the churches, he did not take the apostolic office upon himself. (Indeed, no man is entitled to assume the apostolic office, or to be appointed or elected to that office by any individual or body of men apart from the will of God. As with the OT prophetic office, those only can be recognised and sent forth as apostles whom the Lord has personally and explicitly called and appointed to that office—as with the twelve apostles, and Paul.) (Rom. 1:1,5 11:13; Gal. 1:1)

Paul, however, held such a divinely appointed commission from the Lord. Paul's divine commission was in marked contrast to a number of so-called apostles who were grievously troubling the church at Corinth and elsewhere.

It was, therefore, by the sovereign grace of God that Paul had become Christ's ambassador, and the apostle to the Gentiles. In this task, he excelled. It is probable that the apostle put more zeal into proclaiming Christ and building up his church, than formerly he had put into opposing Christ and attempting with intense fervour to destroy his church. (Gal. 1:13-17,23)

It could not be said, therefore, that Paul did not work as hard or labour as tirelessly, as any of the other apostles. We know from his own testimony of the great hardships that this apostle suffered for the sake of Christ's name.

However hard Paul worked, he attributed everything to the grace of God. Paul felt that he owed everything to God, including his ability to proclaim Christ fearlessly among the Gentiles, and to impart God's truth to his church. (Eph. 3:7-9; 1 Tim. 1:13-17)

The Corinthian believers, of course, had heard the Gospel not only from Paul and Apollos, but also from some of the other apostles. Thus, in verse 11, Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 15:11

The Gospel that the Corinthians had heard from the apostles included the proclamation of Christ's crucifixion, burial and resurrection. This was the message they had received and believed. This, they had accepted as the testimony of God's Word.

The resurrection of Christ was central to the message of the Gospel. As Paul had already demonstrated, the resurrected Lord Jesus had been seen at different times and in different places by hundreds of competent, reliable and trustworthy witnesses.

The Absolute Necessity of Christ's Physical Resurrection

1 Corinthians 15:12-19

Within the church at Corinth, some individuals or groups vehemently denied any possibility of a literal, physical resurrection of the Lord Jesus. In fact, like the Sadducees, these people claimed that there was no such thing as a resurrection of anyone—either now, or in the future.

Paul, therefore, felt it vitally important to deal with this matter. Moreover, he intended to do so before any further and lasting damage could be caused to the believer's faith. Paul did not want the Corinthian believers to lose their confidence in the truthfulness of God's Word as proclaimed to them by the apostles: those apostles, that is, who spoke and wrote to them by inspiration of God's Holy Spirit. Thus, in verse 12, Paul asks:

1 Corinthians 15:12

The essence of the Gospel is Christ crucified and risen from the dead. Christ died for our sins, and rose again for our justification. (Rom. 4:25)

This—asserts the apostle Paul—is the message that is proclaimed everywhere concerning Christ. This is the message that you believers at Corinth heard and accepted. You did not believe on a still dead Christ, but on the risen Christ. How, then, can some of your own number actually say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

These errorists and false teachers at Corinth were not denying the resurrection of Christ only. They were teaching that there was no such thing as a bodily resurrection of anyone—either now, or in the future. Presumably, these false teachers believed in the immortality of the soul—even some pagan philosophers believed this much! However, these poor souls at Corinth certainly did not believe in the rising again of a once-dead physical body.

(Clearly, they had never heard of Lazarus—and even if they had, they would have explained Lazarus away into a figment of the witnesses' over-active imagination: This, in spite of the fact that the Jewish authorities had plotted to kill Lazarus because Jesus had raised him from the dead! Desperate people resort to the most amazing subterfuges to avoid or evade the truth.)

The error, however, that was threatening to take root at Corinth was of a most insidious and serious kind. To deny the resurrection led inevitably to a denial of certain other fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith. To begin with, a denial of Christ's physical resurrection undermined the entire Christian Gospel. This is because it involved a denial of the doctrines of the atonement and of justification. A still-dead Christ cannot make a full atonement or propitiation for sin without a subsequent resurrection. God does not justify sinners on the basis of Christ's vicarious and atoning death alone, but on the basis of his Son's vicarious and atoning death, resurrection, and ascension to glory. It was essential, therefore, that Paul combated this grievous error vigorously, and that he explained to the Corinthians once more the true nature and purpose of the resurrection.

These false teachers in the church at Corinth claimed that there was no such thing as a resurrection of the body. In answer to this false assertion, Paul declares in verse 13:

1 Corinthians 15:13

If, in fact, there is no physical resurrection from the dead, then Christ could not have risen from the dead.

From this it follows, that the guards at the tomb must have been petrified for no logical reason; the women must have imagined an empty tomb with the neatly folded grave-

clothes; the terrified disciples in the upper room must have seen an apparition when they imagined that they saw the Lord Jesus; and every one of the competent and reliable witnesses must have been grossly deceived or deluded!

To expect anyone of sound mind to accept such a fanciful hypothesis is either irrational in the extreme or the expectation of a spiritually blind mind.

In verse 14, the apostle continues:

1 Corinthians 15:14

Without the resurrection, there is no evidence that God has accepted his Son's sacrifice of atonement for the sins of his people. Without the resurrection, the prophecies of the Scriptures and of Christ concerning his rising again have proved to be false.

Again, without the resurrection, there is no forgiveness of sin or justification of the believing sinner. Without the resurrection, there is no Gospel to proclaim and no hope of salvation for anyone (vv.17-18).

Thus, to deny the literal bodily resurrection of Christ is to deny the fundamental truths of the faith. It would be useless, therefore, to preach Christ, and just as useless to believe on Christ, if we were to accept the fallacy that Christ had *not* been raised from the dead.

Then, in verse 15, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 15:15

If all these things are true, then we apostles—and other servants of the Lord—have been guilty of preaching falsehood. Indeed, we have even borne false witness against God, if it is true that the dead do not rise. For we have solemnly proclaimed to everyone that God raised Christ from the dead. But, if the dead are not raised, God could not have raised his Son. Therefore, we must be testifying deceitfully and dishonestly to something which God did not say and that we did not see (cf. Acts 2:32-36; 10:39-42).

1 Corinthians 15:16

If there is no such thing as a resurrection of the body, then Christ's body has not been raised. Those numerous witnesses who attested on various occasions to the truth of the resurrection must have been greatly mistaken as to what they saw. Similarly, those followers who ate and drank with the Lord Jesus after his resurrection must have imagined this time of fellowship with the Lord. Again, those who heard the Lord Jesus explain the Scriptures to them after his resurrection must have been imagining—or inventing—this discussion. But how could formerly dejected believers invent or imagine such truths as completely transformed their beliefs and attitudes?

The list could be continued—but the point has been made. The Lord Jesus arose—otherwise, there would be no Holy Spirit in the hearts and lives of all his redeemed people.

1 Corinthians 15:17

Without the bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus, there is nothing and no one in whom to believe for eternal salvation. Without the resurrection, there is no hope of future glory. All those who thought they had received salvation through faith in the crucified, buried and resurrected Lord Jesus, have been greatly deluded. They are still in their sins.

This, then, represents some of the consequences of denying the literal bodily resurrection of Christ. This is the reason why Paul had to write to the Corinthians at such length on this matter, in order to correct their views on this most important point of doctrine.

Throughout the centuries, philosophers (and theologians influenced by materialistic or humanistic philosophers) have denied the literal, bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Even today, there are those who deny, allegorise, spiritualise or otherwise explain away the truth of the resurrection as it is revealed in the Word of God. Thus, we must know the Word of God, and hold fast to its teaching. For the testimony of God's Word is to be accepted and believed before the word and teaching of any sinful man—however well-educated and well read that person may be in philosophy or religion.

In verse 18, the apostle Paul draws yet another logical but alarming conclusion from a denial of the resurrection:

1 Corinthians 15:18

If there is no resurrection, then Christ has not been raised; no atonement has been made for sin, and no justification is available for the sinner. We are yet in our sins. Even worse, those who have died believing that their sins were forgiven have not in fact been forgiven. Moreover, if this is so, their appearance before God is not for judgment unto reward, but for judgment unto condemnation. They are lost—lost for all eternity.

Thus, we can see that a Gospel without the resurrection is no Gospel at all. It is a message of despair. It is a declaration of no hope for those who sought their hope in God.

The outcome of such false teaching is stated succinctly by the apostle Paul in verse 19:

1 Corinthians 15:19

Those who have no sure and certain hope for eternity, have no hope worth having. If a sinner cannot be assured absolutely of his sins forgiven and his reconciliation with God through faith in the crucified, buried and resurrected Redeemer, then he has no assurance worth holding on to.

However—glory be to God—the risen Lord Jesus Christ provides the believer with exactly this assurance; and very much more besides. Because Christ arose, and because he now lives and reigns in heaven, every child of God receives from the Father and the Son the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is the Comforter or Counsellor. He is the one whom the ascended, glorified Lord Jesus sent to take his place in the believer's heart and life. He is the one who seals the believer unto God, and who guarantees that every child of God will be presented faultless and blameless in God's presence.

This is because the Holy Spirit is the one who sanctifies the believer, or who applies to his life the meritorious and cleansing effects of the Saviour's work of redemption, including his shed blood. None of this would have been possible, however, if Christ had not risen from the dead. Glory to his name!

The Indisputable Evidence of Christ's Resurrection**1 Corinthians 15:20-28**

Far from being a message of despair, therefore, the Gospel is the message of eternal hope and joy—for Christ crucified is Christ risen: as Paul now proceeds to demonstrate in verse 20:

1 Corinthians 15:20

Contrary to what these Corinthians believers were being told by certain false teachers in their midst, the dead do rise: and, in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead by God's almighty power.

Though they may deny any possibility of a physical resurrection, these errorists must somehow explain how more than five hundred witnesses testified to seeing in bodily form the risen Lord Jesus (v.6). They must also explain how this same risen Lord Jesus met with many others of his disciples at different times and in different places, over a period of six weeks. (Acts 1:3) And these false teachers must explain how this same Lord Jesus ate and drank with his followers—if dead bodies are not raised! (Luke 24:41-43; Acts 1:4-5)

Clearly, those who deny the resurrection are blinding their minds to a patently obvious truth: Christ did arise from the dead—as he had foretold. In addition, since Christ arose, there must be a resurrection of the dead—a literal, bodily resurrection. Moreover, since there is a literal, bodily resurrection of the dead, then it is certain that one day everyone else will be raised. To this end, Christ is the firstfruits—the offering and pledge to God of the abundant harvest to follow: i.e., of everyone who belongs to him, and whom he will raise to be with him forever.

Paul now uses the analogy of mankind's relation to the first and second Adam. Thus, in verses 21 and 22, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 15:21-22

Because of Adam's sin and rebellion against God, death passed upon all mankind—spiritual, physical, and eternal death. One man's sin brought the entire human race under condemnation: for all mankind is united to Adam by common descent. Everyone, therefore, is born with the contamination of that original sin. Everyone has a sinful nature; and, because of that sinful nature, everyone becomes guilty of personal sins in attitude, inclination, thought, word and deed.

However, just as all those who are united to Adam die, so all those who are united to Christ will be made alive.

Here, we must make a clear distinction between those who are united to Adam and those who are united to Christ:

- *Everyone without exception is united to Adam*, because everyone has descended from Adam and Eve, and therefore has inherited their first parents' fallen sinful nature. Therefore, everyone without exception would die because of sin.
- However, by the grace of God, *everyone without exception who is united to Christ* by regeneration of the Holy Spirit and through personal faith in his name is delivered from death to life. Christ has paid the penalty of sin in every one of these individual's lives—both the sinful nature inherited from Adam (original sin), and their own actual or personal sin. (Rom. 5:12-21)

By his grace and by his Holy Spirit, therefore, God calls and regenerates the ungodly. He justifies all those whom, from eternity, he has predestined unto life and who repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. (Rom. 6:23)

All Christ's own will indeed be raised: i.e., his entire church worldwide, or the universal company of all truly regenerated children of God. In accordance with the Scriptures, and at the proper time, they will be raised. Thus, in verse 23, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 15:23

All will be raised. The fact that Christ has been raised as the firstfruits presented as a wave offering to God, is proof that the entire harvest is being prepared and must also be presented to God (cf. Lev. 23:10-12).

This, however, will not take place until Christ comes. Then, all those who belong to Christ will arise to be with him forever. Then, the entire harvest of the redeemed will be gathered home by the reapers—the holy angels. The bodies of all those who have died in Christ will be resurrected and translated or transformed into glorified spiritual bodies. Those still alive at the Lord's appearing will be caught up to be with him, and their bodies will be translated and glorified. (1 Thess. 4:13-18)

(In this passage, the apostle Paul is speaking only of the resurrection as it relates to believers (the righteous). Elsewhere in his letters to the churches, the apostle deals with the resurrection as it relates to the unrighteous.)

The return of Christ for his own, of course, will mark the end of this present world order; and the culmination of Christ's present mediatory reign and work on behalf of his people. Thus, in verse 24, Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 15:24

Then, the consummation of the age will occur. This present age will be wound up; this present world order will pass away, to be replaced by a new world order over which Christ will reign with his Father forever and ever. (Dan. 7:13-14)

Before this happens, however, the Son of God must complete his present reign over his church and people—bringing to a conclusion, the present phase of the kingdom of God. Then, he must hand over this kingdom to his Father: For, when the Lord Jesus presents his church to God, this part of his work will be finally completed.

Firstly, however, the glorified Lord Jesus must bring about the total destruction of every dominion, authority and power. All must yield to him. All must acknowledge him as the Eternal Son of God: the one who is King of kings and Lord of lords. Thus, in verse 25, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 15:25

Christ will continue to reign until every enemy has been subdued. He will demonstrate his sovereign power and authority over every created being when he causes all mankind and every created spiritual being to submit to him, and to yield to his judgment (cf. Acts 2:32-36; Eph. 1:20-23).

The expression, 'under his feet' is the familiar term used in connection with victorious or conquering armies when they are said to place the peoples of their subjugated territories 'under their feet'. Literally, this referred to the placing of the neck of the conquered people (or their leader) under the feet of their conqueror's leader as a sign of subjection, victory and rule over that people and their leader. It implied that full power, authority and rule had been assumed by the conqueror over the conquered, and that the conquered would remain henceforth in complete submission to their conqueror.

In a similar manner, Christ will conquer completely and subdue entirely every power and authority throughout the created universe.

In verses 26 and 27a, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 15:26-27a

{Cf. Psalm 8:6}

Since the fall of man, the one enemy that no one could overcome was death. Ultimately, death claims every individual who is born into this world—except for those few whom God has taken directly into his presence.

As a rule, however, no one has been able to conquer death. The exception, of course, was Christ. When he arose from the dead, the Lord Jesus demonstrated that death had no claim over him. It could not hold him. Rather, the risen Christ exercises power and authority—even over death and the grave. Again, the risen Lord Jesus exercises complete power and authority over Satan—the one who instills the fear of death into those who have no security in Christ, and who subjects them to lifelong bondage.

Over all these enemies, the risen Christ rules gloriously and triumphantly. Moreover, by his almighty power and authority, he will certainly overcome death for us and in us. (Isa. 25:8; Hosea 13:14; Luke 20:36)

This does not mean that we will not die. Rather, it means that when he raises us up to be with him, death will never again have any claim over us. He will have destroyed—or rendered ineffective—death's power over our mortal bodies once-for-all. By his power, he will clothe us with an immortal, imperishable and spiritual body. Concerning these things, Paul will have more to say later.

(26) The last enemy to be destroyed is death. (27a) For he "has put everything under his feet"... (NIV)

He (God) puts everything in creation under the feet of his Son: i.e., under his Son's supreme rule, power and authority. Everything, including death, will be rendered inoperative and powerless.

When Paul says that God has put everything under Christ's feet, he is alluding to Psalm 8, verse 6. There, the psalmist says:

(6) You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet. (NIV)

Here, the psalmist is speaking of the fact that God created mankind, and gave him dominion over the natural creation, placing everything under his control. By the fall, however, mankind lost the ability to exercise full control or dominion over God's creation.

By contrast, the Man Christ Jesus showed total and unwavering obedience to God. Therefore, he is qualified, uniquely and fully, to rule over God's creation. Above all others, the Man Christ Jesus rules supreme—and he will yet bring into complete subjection everything in heaven above and on the earth beneath that still attempts to resist his rule.

However, in case anyone should misunderstand what Paul had just said about God placing everything and everyone in subjection to the Son of God, the apostle adds in verse 27b:

1 Corinthians 15:27b

Everything and everyone has been placed under Christ's complete control—everything and everyone, that is, throughout the entire creation. This, of course, excludes God the Father; for God the Father is not a created Being.

Even the highest of the holy angels will continue to submit to, serve and obey Jesus, the Son of God. Like mankind, angels are created beings—although, of a much higher and more powerful order than mankind. God, however, is uncreated and infinitely pure Spirit. Like his Son, the Father does not and cannot submit himself to his own creation. On the contrary, the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—rules eternally and sovereignly over everything they have made.

The eternal and uncreated God, therefore, does not place himself under his Son's control. Rather, he places the entire *created* universe under his Son's rule—until his work is completed.

Then, in verse 28, the apostle Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 15:28

Once the Lord Jesus Christ has brought absolutely everything into subjection to his sovereign and universal rule, and once he has banished all our enemies, including death itself, he will then hand over dominion to the Father. At this point, the Son will subject himself to his Father.

This in no way implies any inferiority of the Son's person or attributes in relation to the Father. However, this point is often misunderstood because of a failure to distinguish between two entirely separate matters.

We will attempt to illustrate this distinction by the use of a human analogy:

Parents and their children are equal as individual *persons*. However, in relation to their *position* within the family, the children are subject or subordinate to their parents. There is no contradiction. The children's essential qualities and attributes *as persons* are in no way diminished by the *subordinate position* that they occupy in relation to their parents. The two matters are entirely distinct.

So it is within the Godhead. *As Persons*, and in respect of their essential being and attributes, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are co-equal and co-eternal. However, in relation to the *position* or *office* that each of these Persons occupies within the Godhead, or in relation to the *work* that he performs, there is an order of subordination or submission to the Father. For example, the Father is said to send his Son (for our redemption), and the Son submits voluntarily to his Father's will. Similarly, the Holy Spirit is said to proceed from (or be sent by) both the Father and the Son. Thus, in relation to his work of regeneration and sanctification, the Holy Spirit is subordinate to the Father and the Son.

However, in respect of their essential being or Person, and of their personal attributes, both the Son and the Holy Spirit are fully and eternally co-equal with the Father. There is no diminution of their divine Person, or of their essential deity, because of the work that they perform, or of the position or office that they occupy. The two matters are entirely distinct.

Summarising these points then:

- *Equality relates to the Person himself*, together with all his essential and divine attributes.
- *Subordination or submission, however, relates only to the person's position, office or work.*

Thus, we see that subordination or submission does not affect in any way whatsoever the essential and divine attributes of his person or nature. The two matters are entirely distinct.

The Resurrection Body

1 Corinthians 15:29-34

The apostle Paul returns now to the matter of the resurrection and to the pointlessness of suffering for Christ if Christ is not risen, and if there is no certain hope of future glory. Thus, in verse 29, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 15:29

It is virtually impossible to establish the precise nature and purpose of this form of baptism. Over the centuries, commentators have offered various explanations. One of these is the idea that certain believers at Corinth were baptised vicariously, on behalf of other believers who had died before they could be baptised.

Some early heretical sects did indeed practise this form of baptism, including the Marcionites and Cerinthians. However, substitutionary or proxy baptism never received the official sanction of the church.

In mentioning this practice, Paul is not necessarily approving of it. He is merely using it to illustrate his point concerning the resurrection. Essentially, the apostle is saying, 'What is the point of baptising people on behalf of those who have died, if there is no resurrection of the dead?' Further, what is the point of practising baptism at all; for when you do so, you are demonstrating symbolically that person's death, burial and resurrection with Christ? But this would be a pointless exercise if Christ had not risen from the dead.' (Rom. 6:3-5)

It has been objected that Paul does not actually censure this form of baptism to which he is alluding. (However, this may have been one of the matters that he planned to remedy when he visited Corinth personally.) At the time of writing this letter, however, the apostle may not have wished to be sidetracked from the main issue by dealing with irregular baptismal practices. It would have involved a major digression from the matter presently under discussion: namely, the fundamental truth and importance of the resurrection.

In verses 30 and 31, Paul moves on to his own experiences for the sake of Christ:

1 Corinthians 15:30-31

What about the other apostles and I? asks Paul. What is the point of exposing ourselves daily and hourly to the greatest hardships and dangers, if there is no resurrection? Why suffer persecution for preaching Christ as crucified, risen and coming again, if that persecution could be avoided by omitting all reference to a risen, returning Lord Jesus? (2 Cor. 4:7-12)

Ungodly people do not like to hear that Christ arose. For, if this were true—which it most certainly is—then this means that every word that the Lord Jesus spoke and taught, and everything that the Scriptures said about him, must also be true. But, if these things are true, then this means that Christ will come one day to judge the world in righteousness, and to deal with those who have denied his name and loved their sinful way of life. (Acts 17:31)

Therefore, when the unbelieving (or wilfully disbelieving) world hears the message of the risen Christ, these ungodly individuals resent the message and cruelly persecute the messengers. However, infers Paul, this resentment and persecution could be avoided if we were not compelled to preach Christ as crucified and risen from the dead.

But, for these reasons and more, declares Paul in verse 31, *I die every day...*

Here, the apostle concedes that he has been, and will continue to be, subjected to the most brutal of sufferings—almost to the very point of death. Yet, he endures these sufferings because he cannot and will not cease to preach the truth: namely, that Christ died, that he was buried, and that on the third day, he arose in triumph from the grave; from there to ascend to his Father's own right hand in glory. (2 Cor. 11:23-28)

In verse 32, the apostle expands on his sufferings for Christ:

1 Corinthians 15:32

{Cf. Isaiah 22:13}

We might interpret the reference to wild beasts either literally or figuratively. Although Paul was a Roman citizen, and therefore supposedly exempt from punishment in the arena, this law was not always strictly observed. It is known from secular history that a number of Roman citizens were indeed put into the arena to face wild animals—as were many Christians under the reign of the Emperor, Nero.

However, at the time Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthians, he was in Ephesus. His reference, therefore, to fighting with wild beasts would seem to be intended metaphorically of some of the more hostile and abusive citizens of Ephesus—possibly, including those whom Paul had offended concerning the temple of Artemis. (Acts 19:23-41)

What, though, would be the point of Paul allowing himself to be exposed to such hostility and abuse from these ‘wild animals’, if there was no resurrected Christ to proclaim? Then, of course, there would be no message of forgiveness, atonement and reconciliation with God. The whole exercise of preaching the Gospel would be utterly futile. Indeed, declares Paul quoting the prophet Isaiah:

(32b) *...If the dead are not raised, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.”*
(NIV: cf. Isaiah 22:13; cf. Luke 12:19)

Let us live this life to the full. Let us satisfy our every natural desire and craving. Let us exult and glory in this present body—for tomorrow we die. If there is no resurrection of the dead, then there is nothing for which to hope after death. Moreover, if there is no resurrection of the dead, we need not worry about, or fear, any future judgment.

Such is the consequences of denying the resurrection. Thus, in verse 33, the apostle warns:

1 Corinthians 15:33-34

In respect of the resurrection, some of the Corinthian believers were in the gravest danger of being deceived and misled. This had happened, though, because these believers had been associating with the wrong kind of company (false apostles and teachers), and had been permitting that company to have fellowship with them.

Don’t you know that *“Bad company corrupts good character”*? asks Paul—apparently citing the Greek comic dramatist and poet, *Menander*.

If these believers continued to associate with these false teachers, and if they continued to permit them to have fellowship in the Corinthian church, then their erroneous and evil teaching would influence eventually what the Corinthian church believed (cf. 2 Tim. 2:16-19). No one, however, was at liberty to believe any teaching other than that which the inspired apostles of the Lord Jesus had already delivered to this church.

Paul, therefore, exhorts these immature and wayward believers to come to their senses. The apostle enjoins them to stop sinning against the Lord by tolerating this evil in their church, or among some of its members, and by listening to such erroneous teaching (cf. Joel 1:5).

Paul is commanding this church to have nothing to do with anyone who denies the resurrection. Such men do not speak from God or for God; nor does anyone else who denies that Christ arose—literally and bodily—on the third day.

Apparently, however, some of these church members were ignorant—inexcusably and wilfully ignorant—of what God had said about these things. This, however, was a matter of shame, says the apostle. If they had heeded the teaching of the Lord Jesus—the same teaching which the apostles had specifically passed on to them—and if they had heeded the Scriptures in general, they would have known the truth about the resurrection. (1 Cor. 15:1-3)

And had they been in possession of, or had they retained, the truth, then these false teachers would not have been able to mislead the church or its individual members. Consequently, they would have failed to gain ground within the church. Rather, the church leadership would have recognised their sinful teaching for what it was, and could have dealt with it vigorously and effectively.

Thus, Paul exhorts the church in the strongest possible terms to cleanse out this evil from among them. It was de-stabilising their faith in Christ and in the truths of God's Word. These deceived Corinthian believers must now come back to the true teaching of God's Word. They must learn, or re-learn, the truth as God had revealed it, and as his Spirit-inspired apostles had delivered it to them. (Cf. 1 Cor. 5:6-8)

How are the Dead Raised?

1 Corinthians 15:35-41

In Paul's day—as in every other period of the world's history—there were those who doubted the resurrection because it lay beyond the capacity of the human mind to comprehend. If people cannot understand or explain something in terms of human science or human reason, then—according to them—that thing cannot exist or cannot happen.

This type of reasoning, however, is vitally flawed and wholly fallacious—as Paul is about to demonstrate. How can finite man expect to understand the ways or the power of the infinite God? Moreover, because finite man cannot discover God by human reasoning, but only by revelation, fallen man, in his folly, denies not only the power but also the existence of God.

Some may yet concede the existence of God, but deny his power to raise the dead. They argue that once a person is dead and buried in the grave, his body decays or is absorbed into the ground. How, then, can that person's body possibly be restored to life?

It is in answer to questions such as these that the apostle Paul begins by saying in verse 35:

1 Corinthians 15:35

Paul envisages someone questioning the possibility of the resurrection on the very grounds mentioned above—namely, a person's total inability to comprehend God's *power* to raise the dead, and therefore a denial of God *ability* to raise the dead.

Influenced, perhaps, by the materialism and rationalism of their Greek (Hellenistic) culture, these people could not understand how a dead body could be restored to life. They found this especially difficult to comprehend if the body had lain in the grave for some time and had become subject to serious decay or dissolution.

Even supposing a resurrection were possible, they could not understand the point or the purpose of bringing back to life a mortal, corruptible, perishable human being; and, according to the (false) philosophy of their pagan culture, a body that was essentially evil. Clearly, they had not understood the nature or the power of the resurrection, nor indeed had they understood the nature or the power of the resurrection body.

Thus, in response to this very serious misapprehension, the apostle continues by saying in verse 36:

1 Corinthians 15:36

The phrase translated *How foolish* may be rendered as a strong exclamation, '*Fool!*'

In many parts of Scripture a 'fool' is one who is devoid of moral and spiritual understanding and values, or who is morally and spiritually deficient. In the present passage, the word 'fool' means to be unlearned, ignorant, undiscerning, devoid of common sense, or lacking prudence or sound judgment.

By using this expression, the apostle is demonstrating his amazement at the Corinthian's senselessness, lack of intelligence or understanding, or even downright stupidity. The believers at Corinth, of course, had no excuse at all for such appalling ignorance of the resurrection. They had been well instructed in the past. Even the very principles inherent in nature itself should have taught them all they needed to know about the principle of the resurrection.

Thus, Paul now uses a familiar analogy to illustrate his point: he alludes to the practice of a farmer sowing his seed in anticipation of an ultimate harvest.

A seed sown in the ground has to lie dormant beneath the soil—sometimes for months—before it begins to show any signs of life and growth. The farmer or sower sows it in the ground. Outwardly, the bare seed appears to be dead—but it is not actually so, for the principle of new life (reproduction) is contained within each seed (cf. John 12:24).

At God's appointed time, that seed will begin to develop and grow. Eventually, it will burst through the soil into a new form of life. It will rise from underneath the ground.

Then, in verses 37 and 38, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 15:37-38

The seed that is sown—whether of wheat, or of some other kind—is not the seed that will rise. In fact, the bare seed does not rise at all. Rather, from the principle of reproduction and growth inherent within it, that seed is transformed into a new living plant. God has clothed the seed with a new body. It is this new body, or new form of life, that rises from the ground—a new body that is perfectly adapted to its new environment above the ground.

We should note, of course, that although the body is new, the plant still bears a relationship to its original form—the seed from which it sprang.

Thus, infers Paul to the Corinthians, we can see that the body that is laid in the ground will rise again—by God's power. However, the Lord Jesus will transform that body so that it is perfectly adapted for life in its new environment: i.e., in God's presence. At the resurrection, our new body will still bear a relationship to our original body; but it will be changed, glorified, and rendered an immortal body.

(In passing, we may note from verses 37 and 38 that seed reproduction and development is not merely a natural process. God, who, in the first instance, imparted the principle of reproductive life to every living thing, continues to sustain and control the natural processes by investing each new seed with its own particular body, and degree of growth and fruitfulness, that he has determined. God rules over nature, as well as over mankind and angels. (Cf. Gen. 1:11; Ps. 104:14; 1 Cor. 3:7))

Moving on now to verse 39, the apostle Paul continues his argument:

1 Corinthians 15:39

Even in this present natural world, there are various categories or classifications of 'flesh'; i.e., genera and species of animal life. Mankind, animals, birds, fish, and microscopic organisms are all living creatures, but they do not all have the same kind of flesh or body. Each has the 'flesh' or bodily conditions and organs appropriate to its own environment. Each is specifically adapted to live in that environment (land, sea, or air).

Thus, we can be sure that—when the Lord raises the dead—he will transform or translate our bodies so that they are perfectly adapted to our new environment.

In verse 40, Paul continues:

1 Corinthians 15:40-41

In verse 40, the word translated '*celestial*' or '*heavenly*' (bodies) (Gk., ἐπουράνιος) can refer to the body of glorious and majestic holy angels in heaven. Again, this expression and is used sometimes in connection with the celestial glory of the Lord Jesus Christ himself. (cf. 1 Cor. 15:48)

Some commentators believe that—in Paul's day—the phrase '*heavenly bodies*' was not used to refer to the astronomical heavenly bodies, as it is today. However, in view of the widespread and ancient interest in the science of astronomy (and the superstitious involvement with astrology), the sun, moon and stars may well have been referred to as '*heavenly bodies*'—even in antiquity. We will assume, therefore, that Paul was referring to the planetary and stellar bodies in the heavens. The apostle's explanatory or qualifying remarks in verse 41 would appear to require this interpretation.

Paul is saying that there are very clear distinctions between one kind of heavenly body and another (e.g., between planets and stars) and between one kind of earthly body and another (e.g., between mountains and rivers). In addition, there is an even greater contrast between the heavenly bodies and the earthly bodies.

Each of these bodies, however, is invested with a particular splendour, magnificence or glory. God has adapted each to operate within its own particular sphere of existence; and, within that sphere, God's glory is seen to shine forth from his creation.

The sun, moon and stars each exhibit the handiwork of God. Each is distinct. One star differs from another; stars differ from planets, and these heavenly bodies differ from the earthly bodies. Each one, however, is adapted to occupy a particular place in God's creation, and to bring glory to the name of the Creator.

On earth, the various terrestrial bodies, such as mountains, rivers and lakes, accomplish the same purpose. God has adapted each such body to occupy its own place; to serve his purposes, and—through their splendour or magnificence—to bring glory to the name of the Creator, and to witness to his existence and divine power.

If God can so bestow splendour, beauty or magnificence upon these heavenly and earthly bodies, how much more can he bestow splendour, beauty or magnificence upon those redeemed bodies that he raises from the dead?

How great indeed will be the glory of our transformed bodies when the Lord Jesus comes to gather his people home! Glory to his name!

The Nature and Power of the Resurrection Body

1 Corinthians 15:42-49

From these analogies from the natural world, Paul now moves on to describe the nature, power and glory of the resurrection. Thus, in verse 42, he writes:

1 Corinthians 15:42

Our present body is mortal. It is adapted for life in this age and for this environment only. It is subject to the effects of sin: illness, disease, decay, ageing and death; and, finally, to dissolution in the grave, the flames or the sea.

However, this same body will be raised. Then, it will be imperishable. Then, it will no longer be subject to the effects of sin: That is, it will no longer be subject to illness, disease, decay, ageing or death—for, like death, sin will be abolished, and death itself will no longer exist to exercise any claim over our new body. The Lord will adapt our resurrected body for the glorious age and environment to come.

In verse 43, the apostle continues:

1 Corinthians 15:43

Our present mortal body is a body of dishonour. Not that God created it this way. On the contrary, God created Adam and Eve's bodies in signal honour, beauty and glory—perfect and wholly honourable in every respect. However, because of Adam and Eve's fall into sin, they brought shame and dishonour upon the body (including the mind) that God had given them. Our first parents used—or rather, abused—that mind and body when they did what God had expressly forbidden them from doing.

Thus, Adam's sinful nature is conveyed to all his posterity: i.e., to all humanity. Because we have inherited this sinful nature from Adam, and because of our own personal sins, our body has become a body of dishonour. Even so, it is a body that—in the case of the elect—God has redeemed and has made the temple of his Holy Spirit. Yet, for all this, it remains a body encumbered with the manifold effects of sin.

When, however, the Lord raises this present body of dishonour, he will transform it into a glorious body. He will remove from that resurrected and glorified body every trace of sin and uncleanness. In every respect, the Lord will make it a perfect and glorious body in his sight.

Again, the apostle says that this present body is sown in weakness. Because of sin, and because of the effects of the curse on the earth, this body is subject to illness, disease, accident and general frailty.

However, when the Lord raises this body, it will be raised in power. Not only will he raise it by the power of God, but he will also transform it into a body of power. No longer will our bodies be subject to illness, sickness, accident or frailty. Rather—even if these things existed in heaven (which they do not)—our resurrected and powerful bodies would be immune to them.

Then, in verse 44a, the apostle adds:

1 Corinthians 15:44a

Here is the ultimate contrast in Paul's argument. Our present body is constituted a natural body: i.e., it is fully adapted for life only in this natural realm—the earthly creation. Our present body is not at all suited for life in the presence of the Lord. However, when the Lord raises this body, he will transform it from a natural to a spiritual body. It will then be a body fully constituted and suited for life in God's presence, and for eternal glory.

Paul, however, considers it necessary to expand further on what he means by a 'spiritual body'. He is not speaking of being transformed into spirit beings (similar to the angels). Rather, the Lord will transform our present natural bodies into tangible spiritual bodies.

By way of explanation, the apostle writes in verses 44b and 45:

1 Corinthians 15:44b-45

{Cf. Gen. 2:7}

The natural body is a tangible, physical body. Similarly, the spiritual body is not a 'body' comprised of spirit—which would be a contradiction. Rather, the spiritual body is a tangible, physical body—but with spiritual attributes or properties. Our new body will be akin to the body of our risen, glorified Redeemer, although, of course, still occupying its appropriate place in relation to the Son of God. (Phil. 3:21)

In verse 45, Paul refers to the first and last Adam.

Concerning the first Adam, God created man and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. Man then became a living being: i.e., a perfectly created human being with a natural body: a body that was specially adapted for life on this earth. (Adam, of course, fell from his original state of perfection when he sinned.)

The last Adam, however—i.e., Christ—is a life-giving spirit. The life that Christ imparts is spiritual life, and eternal life. However, in addition to this, Christ will impart to each resurrected child of God a spiritual body; or, rather, he will translate the believer's existing resurrected body to one which is spiritual, incorruptible, immortal and glorious. This spiritual and immortal body will be reunited forever with the believer's immortal soul.

In verse 46, Paul emphasises the order of God's creation:

1 Corinthians 15:46

The spiritual body is a higher level of creation than the natural. God created mankind with a natural body in the first instance. Had Adam and Eve not sinned, it is probable that they would have been transformed from the natural to the spiritual, without passing through death. This is because death has come upon all mankind only because of our original parent's sin. However, had they not sinned, there would have been no death penalty to pay. The consequences of sin—physical death, spiritual death, and eternal death—would not have existed.

However, as the matter now stands, all mankind dies because of sin. However, those whom the Lord Jesus will raise to life eternal in his glorious presence will then receive a spiritual body.

In verse 47, Paul draws some further points of contrast:

1 Corinthians 15:47

The first man, Adam, was created with the same basic chemicals as are found in the dust of the earth, or within the realms of this planet—for so God created him. (Gen. 2:7; 3:19)

By contrast, however, the second man, Christ Jesus, originated from the very presence of God in heaven—for, unlike mankind, the Son of God is uncreated and eternal. (John 3:13,31)

Then, in verse 48, the apostle adds:

1 Corinthians 15:48

The earthly man was Adam; and all mankind bear the characteristics of fallen, sinful Adam. They inherit Adam's sinful nature; and, from that nature, they perpetrate their own sinful thoughts, words, deeds and attitudes. (Rom. 5:12)

On the other hand, however, the man from heaven is the Lord Jesus Christ. All those who belong to Christ are being sanctified and transformed into his likeness. Ultimately, the redeemed of the Lord will bear all of the perfect and holy characteristics that are found in the Lord Jesus, while not attaining to his exalted status or divinity. The resurrected children of God will inherit this complete righteousness (glorification) as a gift from their Father in heaven. Willingly and joyously, they will align their lives to the way of righteousness and truth, for they will know or desire no other way (vv.21-23).

In verse 49, Paul expresses this by saying:

1 Corinthians 15:49

As certain as we have borne Adam's fallen sinful nature, so certain it is that we will bear Christ's holy, perfect nature (although, of course, not his unique and divine characteristics). For the believer in Christ Jesus, the one is as inevitable as the other. This is the word of the Lord. (2 Cor. 3:18; 1 John 3:2)

This Body Must be Changed**1 Corinthians 15:50-58**

It is essential that our present mortal, corruptible and perishable bodies be changed or translated, as Paul now explains in the next section of our study. Thus, in verse 50, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 15:50

The expression, *'flesh and blood'* does not mean our sinful nature. That expression is often rendered by the term *'flesh'* or *'the flesh'*—not *'flesh and blood'*.

The phrase, *'flesh and blood,'* stands for our bodies, as they are presently organised and adapted. This present mortal and perishable body is completely unsuited for life in God's heavenly kingdom. To enter that glorious heavenly kingdom, our existing bodies must be changed. (Cf. 2 Cor. 5:1-4)

Thus, in verse 51, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 15:51

Here is something not previously revealed, but now made known: Not everyone will have died when Christ returns. Thus, to the church at Thessalonica, Paul writes:

(13) Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. (14) We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. (15) According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. (16) For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. (17) After that, we who

are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord for ever. (1 Thess. 4:13-17 NIV)

Nevertheless—whether dead or alive—everyone will be changed: i.e., his or her body will be translated.

In verse 52, the apostle continues:

1 Corinthians 15:52

At the Lord's coming, everyone will be changed. Their bodies will be changed or transformed in a flash, or in an instant.

When Christ comes, the last trumpet will sound, heralding his imminent arrival or appearing. At that instant, the Lord Jesus will raise the dead, and he will change their bodies from perishable to imperishable; from mortal to immortal. At the very same moment, the bodies of those still alive at Christ's appearing will also be changed from perishable to imperishable; from mortal to immortal. (John 5:28-29; 1Thess. 4:14-18)

In verse 53, the apostle continues:

1 Corinthians 15:53

This present body, which is subject to illness, sickness, disease, weakness, ageing and death, must be changed or translated. Our new spiritual bodies will be completely exempt from all these things—for all these things reflect the ravages of sin on our mortal bodies. In addition, our new spiritual body will be an immortal or eternal body, not subject to any processes of ageing.

In verse 54, Paul continues:

1 Corinthians 15:54

{Cf. Isaiah 25:8}

When, finally, our bodies are translated and glorified to become like Christ's glorious body, then will the Word of God be fulfilled: Christ's victory on the cross over sin, Satan, death, and the grave, will finally be implemented in full.

Death will cease to have any claim over the glorified believer: for death is the wages of sin. In that day, however, the believer will be beyond sin's reach and power. Indeed, sin will not exist in God's new creation. Death too will be swallowed up in victory—but this victory is Christ's. (Isa. 25:8; Luke 20:36; Heb. 2:14-15; Rev. 21:4)

Then, in verse 55, the apostle continues:

1 Corinthians 15:55

{Cf. Hosea 13:14}

Until now, death claimed the life of every human being—for all have sinned. Now, however, death has been robbed of its power. On the cross, Christ defeated death and, by his resurrection, he claimed his rightful victory over death. (Col. 2:13-15)

As far as the redeemed are concerned, the Lord Jesus has removed the sting of death and the fear of death by banishing death forever. For those whom the Lord raises and translates for eternal glory can never face death again.

However, what precisely does the sting of death mean? Paul answers this question in verse 56:

1 Corinthians 15:56

The venomous sting, which causes death, is sin. Sin's poison and all-pervading power afflicts every human being with death: for the wages of sin is death.

Sin receives its power from the law: that is, the Law of God identifies sin for what it is—and condemns it. It is the law that pronounces the death penalty on the sinner for breaking any of its precepts or commands. And the law that justifiably pronounces condemnation and death on the sinner cannot—in accordance with divine justice—pronounce acquittal and life for that sinner. The person condemned by the law as a sinner must pay the penalty demanded by the law; and that penalty is death. (Rom. 7:7-13; Gal. 3:10-14)

Nevertheless, the redeemed sinner has been acquitted—but not by the law. He has been acquitted and pronounced righteous by God's grace. Christ fulfilled the law on the sinner's behalf. By his perfect and sinless life, and by his substitutionary and atoning death, the Lord Jesus paid the penalty due to the sinner. By his death and resurrection, the sinless Son of God won the victory over sin, Satan, death, and hell. (Rom. 5:17-21)

To this end, the apostle declares triumphantly in verse 57:

1 Corinthians 15:57

Christ himself is Victor. However, he grants victory to his people over the last enemy, which is death. When the Lord appears to gather his people home, death will be a defeated foe. From then on, we will live and reign with Christ throughout the eternal ages—immune forever from the claims of death and the pangs of death. Victorious indeed will his glorified people be, through Jesus Christ our Lord!

In view of these great assurances, the apostle adds by way of exhortation and encouragement in verse 58:

1 Corinthians 15:58

Paul now appeals to his dearly beloved brothers and sisters at Corinth to remain firm in their faith. The apostle entreats them to hold steadfastly and immovably to that teaching which he (Paul) and the other apostles of the Lord had delivered to them. They must not allow themselves to be deceived and misled by the worldly philosophy or reasoning of false teachers. Rather, they must maintain and defend vigorously the unfailing and inerrant truth of God's Word. (Col. 2:6-9; 2 Pet. 3:17-18)

Again, in view of the glory that awaited them at the coming of the Lord, the Corinthian believers were to give themselves wholeheartedly to the Lord's work. Whether they were serving him at home, in their everyday work, or in some other way, they were to work for the Lord as though he might appear at any moment.

Whatever they (and we) do, our work for the Lord can never be in vain. It will accomplish the purpose God intended, and it will earn a sure reward—if not in this life, then certainly in the life to come. (Gal. 6:9-10; Titus 2:14)

We should perhaps note here that the sense in which Paul is using the word translated '*labour*' (from the common Greek word, *ἐργον*) is a sense that expresses considerable intensity of action or activity. It involves the thought of difficult or arduous labour; possibly accompanied by much hardship, pain or suffering. It is the same sense in which the apostle describes his own intense hardships and afflictions while labouring for the Gospel.

Expository Notes

Nevertheless, we labour joyfully in the Lord, and we engage willingly in these hardships—not because we enjoy suffering, but because suffering is merely a pathway to glory. In addition, we know that we will inherit that glory in our own bodies, when the Lord Jesus appears.

So, then, we press on in the Lord's service. We persevere faithfully for the sake of the one who loved us, who gave himself up to the cross for us, who rose and ascended to God's right hand. For we are assured on the basis of his own unfailing word that he whom we love and serve is coming one day to take us to himself—for ever.

1 Corinthians Chapter 16

The Collection for the Church at Jerusalem

1 Corinthians 16:1-4

We now move on to chapter 16 of Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth. In this chapter, the apostle deals with the collection for the poor believers at Jerusalem. He also adds some final remarks regarding some of his fellow-workers, before closing this chapter and this letter to the Corinthian church.

Thus, concerning the planned collection for the saints at Jerusalem, Paul writes in verses 1 and 2:

1 Corinthians 16:1-2

Apparently, Paul had advised the church at Corinth to prepare a collection for the poor believers of the Jerusalem church. The same instructions had been given to the churches of Galatia and to a number of other churches elsewhere.

It is impossible now to be sure of the reason why the Jewish Christians at Jerusalem became so poor as to require the financial assistance of all those other churches. It is possible that much of their property or wealth had been lost or confiscated as part of the intense persecution that was taking place in and around Jerusalem and Judea at that time.

However, it is also possible that their early experiment in holding all their goods in common had not proved financially viable. Perhaps this experiment resulted ultimately in failure, hardship and poverty—the very thing that it was intended to prevent. At any rate, the practise seems to have been discontinued in the early church—perhaps because it had created more problems than it had solved. (Acts 2:32,44-45)

Another possibility was a severe famine, such as the one prophesied by Agabus. (Acts 11:28-30)

Whatever may have been the real reason for the Jerusalem church's difficult circumstances is of little importance. Paul is concerned only with helping to meet their great need. (Cf. Acts 24:17; Rom. 15:25-26)

To this end, the apostle instructs each of the believers at Corinth (as elsewhere) to set aside a sum of money in proportion to their income. On the first day of every week, when the church assembled, they were to deposit this money in the church treasury, or in an appropriate church fund. Although this much is not expressly stated, Paul implies it when he says that he does not want a collection to be made when he arrives. Clearly, then, the apostle expected the collection to be ready and waiting at the church.

In verse 3, Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 16:3

When Paul arrived at Corinth, he would supply covering letters for each of the delegates who would be travelling to Jerusalem with the gift from the Corinthian church. These delegates were to be selected in advance by the Corinthian church themselves. Paul's letters would introduce the delegates to the leadership of the Jerusalem church. The covering letters would also authenticate the gift as coming to Jerusalem from the church at Corinth.

In verse 4, the apostle adds:

1 Corinthians 16:4

If the gift from the Corinthian church should turn out to be particularly generous, then it might prove advisable for Paul to accompany the Corinthian delegates to Jerusalem. Larger sums of money needed greater protection on the journey. In addition, the presence of the apostle with the delegates would help ensure that no one made malicious accusations against the integrity or trustworthiness of the bearers. (2 Cor. 8:17-21)

Personal Requests

1 Corinthians 16:5-18

Regarding his planned personal visit to the church at Corinth, the apostle writes in verse 5:

1 Corinthians 16:5

Paul intended to pay a short visit to the churches of Macedonia before travelling on to Corinth. Depending on the circumstances at Corinth when he arrived, he might decide to prolong his visit there. Thus, in verses 6 and 7, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 16:6-7

If the situation required it, Paul would be fully prepared to remain at Corinth in order to assist the church in resolving its problems and conflicts. If necessary, the apostle would spend at least some of the winter months there.

Paul, however, does not see himself as going to Corinth only to correct that church's faults and failings. Rather, the apostle is intent on sharing fellowship with the believers there. He needs their help, as much as they need his. Thus, in verse 6 above, the apostle makes it plain to these believers that he is looking forward to their assistance when the time comes for him to separate from them again.

At the time of writing this letter, however, Paul was not yet ready to travel to Corinth. Thus, in verses 8 and 9, he says:

1 Corinthians 16:8-9

Paul had been writing to the Corinthian church from the city of Ephesus (not Philippi, as stated in the postscript to the KJV). Ephesus, of course, lies just across the Aegean Sea from Corinth.

It was Paul's immediate intention to remain at Ephesus—at least until after Pentecost. Paul was in the middle of a great work for the Lord, and he did not wish to leave that area until he had firmly established the new believers and new churches in the faith.

As with every true work of God, the apostle Paul faced considerable opposition and hostility for preaching the Gospel in that area. Part of this intense opposition would have arisen from the priests and devotees of the various pagan religions.

Again, we must remember that Ephesus was the centre of worship for the goddess Artemis. Considerable trade and profit accrued to the many craftsmen and merchants of this city for making and selling silver shrines of Artemis and many other religious artefacts. Among other citizens of Ephesus, these tradesmen and merchants objected vehemently to Paul's preaching, because it resulted in many of the people turning away from their idols and artefacts to the true God. This, of course, resulted in a considerable loss of trade and profit among these craftsmen and merchants. Hence, one reason for the bitter

opposition and hostility directed against Paul and other servants of the Lord. (Acts 19:24-41; cf. 2 Cor. 1:8-11)

In verse 10, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 16:10

Timothy was to travel to Macedonia before going on to the church at Corinth. It is safe to assume, therefore, that Paul's letter to the Corinthian church would arrive there ahead of Timothy. (Acts 19:22; 1 Cor. 4:17)

Paul instructs the Corinthian believers to receive Timothy as the Lord's servant, and to treat him accordingly. Paul may have been concerned that certain elements in the Corinthian church might have refused to recognise Timothy, since he was an associate of the apostle Paul. We must remember that some of the members of this church had formed cliques or parties within the fellowship: one group following Peter; another, Apollos; another, Paul; and yet another Christ himself. (1 Cor. 1:12)

In verse 11, the apostle adds concerning Timothy:

1 Corinthians 16:11

No one in the church at Corinth should refuse to accept Timothy, nor the instructions that he would be bringing from the apostle Paul. Rather, the entire fellowship should welcome him; show him every kindness and hospitality, and then send him back to Paul with the blessing of the church.

Timothy was a young man, and it seems that he was somewhat timid—especially perhaps when dealing with the sort of independent and worldly-minded individuals at Corinth. Paul wanted to ensure that the church at Corinth would acknowledge Timothy's position as the servant of the Lord, and accept him as such. (Cf. 1 Tim. 4:12,14)

Another servant of the Lord—Apollos—was a man whom the Corinthians knew well. Like Paul, Apollos had laboured in that city for some time, proclaiming the Word of God and helping to establish the church. Concerning this man, Paul writes in verse 12:

1 Corinthians 16:12

Apollos had served the Lord faithfully at Corinth, helping to establish the church and to build up the believers in their most holy faith. No doubt, many of these believers would have been delighted to renew their acquaintance with Apollos—to whom they owed so much. (Acts 18:24 - 9:1; 1 Cor. 3:5-6)

Paul thus urged him strongly to make a return visit to Corinth, and to renew his fellowship with the saints there. Apollos, however, felt unable to comply with Paul's wishes at this time. Even so, he assured the apostle that he would most willingly travel to Corinth as soon as the opportunity afforded itself.

Words of Warning and Encouragement

1 Corinthians 16:14-15

At this point—and before continuing with further remarks of a personal nature—the apostle Paul interjects some words of warning and encouragement to the Corinthian believers. Thus, in verse 13, Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 16:13

Perhaps the mention of Apollos' name brought to the forefront of Paul's mind the ongoing disputes at Corinth where certain individuals were attempting to drive a wedge between Paul, Apollos, Peter and Christ. However, Paul will have none of this petty and divisive behaviour. Therefore, he calls for unity and harmony among the members of this church.

- *Be on your guard...* Keep a constant watch over the church. Protect it from the inroads of error and false teaching.
- *...stand firm in the faith...* Do not give way to anyone who distorts or perverts the Gospel of Christ—including those who deny the resurrection. Rather, steadfastly maintain and fearlessly proclaim every truth of God's Word. Let no one—by worldly wisdom or philosophy—presume to sit in judgment upon the revealed Word or will of God.
- *...be men of courage...* Do not be intimidated by those people who try to blind you with so-called scientific or philosophical arguments. These men know nothing of God's power or God's wisdom, for they are devoid of the Spirit of God. Therefore, they cannot comprehend spiritual matters. Do not let them intimidate you with powerful—but vain—arguments. Rather, stand courageously for the truth of God's Word, without compromising that Word to suit the tastes or opinions of ungodly men and women.
- *...be strong...* Stand your ground resolutely for the truth. Stand in the strength that God supplies. Yes, many will oppose you—and oppose you severely. Nevertheless, you must be strong in the faith. You must stand for the one in whom you believe, and witness to the power of his name.

However, lest the Corinthians should place undue emphasis on certain aspects of these most important remarks, the apostle is careful to add in verse 14:

1 Corinthians 16:14

- The Corinthian fellowship, and especially the leadership, was to guard the church from error—but *they were to do so in love*.
- They were to stand firm in the faith—but *they were to do so in love*.
- They were to stand courageously for the truth of God's Word—but *they were to do so in love*.
- They were to remain strong in their faith and were to stand resolutely by what they believed—but *they were to do so in love*. (Eph. 4:1-3)

Love is paramount. Love may temper truth, yet it never compromises truth.

Personal Requests Resumed

1 Corinthians 16:16-18

At this point, the apostle returns to his personal remarks. Thus, in verse 15, Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 16:15-16

Stephanas and his household were among the first people in Achaia (Greece), to be converted and baptised. This was one of the few households that the apostle Paul had baptised personally. (1 Cor. 1:16) Now, this family was serving the Lord by dedicating themselves to helping the saints.

Paul considers this family to be an excellent example of Christian service and devotion to the cause of Christ, and he urges the Corinthian believers to emulate their example. Indeed, the apostle says that the Corinthians ought to submit to such as these. They ought to aid them in any way possible in order to help them minister to the needs of God's people, whether by showing hospitality or by other practical measures. (Cf. Rom. 12:13; Eph. 5:21)

Paul qualifies his remark, however, by saying that they were:

(16) ...to submit to such as these and to everyone who joins in the work, and labours at it. (NIV)

Stephanas and his family laboured intensely in the Lord's service. So must all who engage in the work of the Lord.

In verse 17, the apostle adds:

1 Corinthians 16:17

Paul was delighted by the arrival of these three brothers from the Corinthian church. He had heard so much about the problems at Corinth, but he was greatly encouraged to meet three of their representatives face to face.

The church at Corinth, of course, should have been helping to meet Paul's needs, since he was instrumental in founding that church. However, it seems that the Corinthian believers were so pre-occupied with their internal disputes and divisions—including the denial by some of Paul's apostolic authority over the church—that they had neglected their duties and responsibilities concerning Paul. Happily, however, the apostle is able to say that Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus supplied what the Corinthian church as a whole had failed to provide. (2 Cor. 11:9)

In verse 18, the apostle continues:

1 Corinthians 16:18

Paul had been much encouraged by meeting these delegates from Corinth. They had come, presumably, to seek the apostle's advice and guidance concerning the very serious situation in their home church. However, by doing so, they were showing the willingness to listen to Paul's advice and instructions, and to carry these instructions back to the church—presumably with the letter that Paul was writing to the Corinthians.

Perhaps, then, through these men—and through those who had sent them to Paul—the apostle could begin to repair the damage that had been done to the Corinthian church by its false teachers.

Closing Remarks

1 Corinthians 16:19-24

Paul now comes to the closing paragraphs of his first (?) letter to this church. In verse 19, the apostle writes:

1 Corinthians 16:19

In addition to the church at Ephesus from which Paul was writing, other local churches within the Roman province of Asia (now, western Turkey) joined in sending greetings to Corinth. So, too, did Aquila and Priscilla (or Prisca)—formerly of Italy, then Corinth, before moving to Ephesus. So also did the believers who met as a church at the home of Aquila and Priscilla. (Acts 18:1-3; Rom. 16:3-4)

In verse 20, Paul adds:

1 Corinthians 16:20

The entire church at Ephesus—brothers and sisters in the Lord—send greetings to our brothers and sisters in Christ at Corinth.

The holy kiss mentioned by Paul was a very common form of oriental greeting—still practised today in many eastern countries. As used among the churches, it was a form of greeting, respect, warmth and fellowship among true believers. Paul enjoins the church at Corinth, therefore, to reaffirm their love for one another in Christ Jesus by greeting one another with this holy and revered sign of affection.

In verse 21, the apostle adds:

1 Corinthians 16:21

As a rule, Paul dictated his letters to an amanuensis or secretary who wrote down everything that the apostle said. However, in order to authenticate his letters as genuine, Paul would add his signature in his own handwriting—perhaps adding some final remarks, also written with his own hand. (2 Thess. 3:17)

In verse 22, Paul declares:

1 Corinthians 16:22

If—in spite of everything that Paul has said in this letter—anyone in the church at Corinth should continue to cause disputes and divisions, then clearly that person has no real love for the Lord or for his people and church. In such a case, he brings upon himself the solemn curse of God: i.e., he is devoted or given over entirely to God's severe discipline or judgment.

Paul then adds the words, *μαράνα θά* i.e., *Marana tha!*—Come, O Lord! (Or, the Lord has come). This was Paul's closing prayer, and perhaps a closing prayer of the early church.

In verses 23 and 24, the apostle closes this letter with these words:

1 Corinthians 16:23-24

The everlasting favour and blessing of the Lord Jesus be upon you and with you at all times.

Paul then expresses his own deep Christian love for his fellow believers at Corinth. In spite of all that he had said to this church, he still loves them very deeply in Christ Jesus.

Indeed, it is because of his deep love for them that he is so intent in correcting their errors and setting them once more on the right paths—the pathway of righteousness, truth, love, mercy and compassion. (1 Cor. 4:14-16)

Epilogue

Thus, from this letter, we may be encouraged to see that God loves his church in spite of all its faults and failings; although, of course the Lord never condones sin or error, but calls upon his people to repent.

We see, too, that the Lord exhorts his church to hold faithfully to the teachings of his Word, to guard his church from error and false teaching, to pursue holiness of life, to bear with and pray for one another, and—above all—to love one another as Christ has loved us.

Let us, then, take heed to the Word of the Lord, as the inspired apostle Paul has recorded it for us in this epistle.