

Lessons on First Corinthians

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Dedication

To our friends from the Becoming Closer class, for their constant encouragement and support.

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Grace and Peace - 1 Corinthians 1:1-3

It is customary in our time to skip over the salutation in Paul's letters. Indeed, when our church was under "unified curriculum" we started 2 Corinthians at verse 9 of the first chapter. But Paul put thought into his salutations, and they are usually instructive. This we shall see, but first – an introduction to the city of Corinth.

Corinth

It is not possible to understand the city of Corinth at this time without a glance at the map:



It does not take much imagination to see the short cut through the Greek peninsula which touches land at Corinth. The primary east-west sailing route of the Mediterranean traders went through this inlet. One must recall that sailors of this time had only square sails (no ability to tack into the wind) and navigation was best done in sight of land.

What is not so clear from the small map is that the primary north-south trading route went through Corinth as well. By sailing around the edge of the Mediterranean from Alexandria past modern Turkey, you would come to the islands of the Aegean sea. You could pick your way through these to reach Corinth, where your cargo could be transshipped and sent to Rome.

The result was a city of wealth – and wickedness.

Wickedness

If a Greek playwright of these times needed a stereotypical drunk, he inserted a Corinthian. Money was available in plenty there – and in envy the Greeks would say that "not everyone can afford a trip to Corinth." (I've heard the same said about Disneyland.) But if you could, the wine flowed.

Not just the wine – the women too. Overlooking the town was a large temple to Aphrodite – Eros, as the Romans would name her, from which we get our word “erotic.” Over a thousand temple prostitutes lived there; each night they would go through Corinth seeking customers. Abortion was not unknown to the Greeks – interestingly, the Hippocratic oath forbids a physician to give an instrument of abortion to a woman, so they must have known how – and it would have been common in Corinth.

Other sins were as common. Homosexuality enjoyed the same popular favor it does in our day; swindlers loved the place, as did the thieves.

History

The town was established in ancient times, and was always one of the eminent cities in ancient Greece. Athens was noted for philosophy, Sparta for military might – and Corinth for pleasure. Unfortunately, military might was what they needed in 146 BC, when the Romans destroyed the city. It lay dormant for a hundred years until 46 BC, when Julius Caesar rebuilt it. It became a Roman colony.

A Roman colony was a heterogeneous place. It was settled by retired Roman soldiers, who were given land after their service in the army. Add to that Greek merchants seeking to make money; a few Jews dispersed over the world and any number of other traders who settled in the town, and you have a mixture which was ripe for the Gospel.

Paul spent 18 months there, establishing the church. The time is little recorded; Luke gives us only the first 18 verses of Acts, chapter 18 on the subject. But like many churches, it was birthed in oppression and lived in fractious, argumentative times.

With that in mind, let us examine the opening salutation of the letter:

Paul, called *as* an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their *Lord* and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
(1Co 1:1-3 NASB)

FROM:

The theme of the first verse may be summed up in the humility of the Apostle:

“called to be an Apostle”

- ✚ Note the word “called” – this was not something that Paul earned by his own hard work or merit. God chose him, not the other way around.
- ✚ Indeed, we can see that he did not even have the merit of volunteering to a general call – he was specifically chosen.
- ✚ Why is this word here? So that we can see the virtue of humility – for even the highest in the church, an Apostle of God, must have that.

“of Jesus Christ”

- ✚ There is no other name like that one. With all other names there can be a comparison, but with this one, there is only adoration.
- ✚ This name is the source of unity in the church. As there can be none other like it, it is the name in which we are to be united. If there are two strong men in the church, people may be divided and take sides. If there is only Jesus, the people must be united.
- ✚ It is also the source of strength. Paul does not perform his work in his own strength alone, but relies utterly upon Jesus.

“by the will of God”

- ✚ In any other endeavor we can credit ourselves, but in the church we understand that only God’s worthiness can be honored.
- ✚ Also, we must understand that the church is God’s plan, it is his creation. We are the church because He wills it so.

“and Sosthenes”

We have met this man before, if briefly. He was the ruler of the synagogue in Corinth. He became a Christian; like so many, that conversion cost him a beating.¹ He’s the local boy out on a missions trip.

- ✚ This shows us Paul’s concern for those in Corinth, that they might know that Paul and their friend Sosthenes are united in the appeal he is about to make.
- ✚ It also reestablishes the relationship; it says, “You know us!” This is a personal letter.

TO:

The theme of the second verse is simple: the unity of the church.

“the church of God”

- ✚ The word is *ekklesia* – meaning those who are assembled. It is therefore a general description of the people of God.
- ✚ We must therefore remember to whom we belong – God. This is his church; we are his. What a comfort that is!
- ✚ We need to remember whose church this is not – ours. It is not our personal property to manipulate, but his precious bride.

“in Corinth”

- ✚ The New American Standard translates this as “which is at Corinth.” In other words, there is nothing special about being the Corinthian church; it is simply a fact of geography.
- ✚ Subtly implied in that is a central fact: there is only one church. It is composed of all Christians of all times and places. It is his, not ours.

“to those sanctified in Christ Jesus”

- ✚ What does it mean to be “sanctified?” It means to be cleansed by Christ Jesus – you didn’t do it yourself.
- ✚ It also means that you were dirty – i.e., sinful. Always remember that to become a Christian means to admit that you are a sinner first.

¹ Acts 18:17

We should never lose this sense of being a sinner; it is helpful both to us and to those around us:

- ✚ It is helpful to us in that it aids us in humility, in seeking repentance and in being thankful for the grace of God. It puts us in the right perspective to see God.
- ✚ It helps others too. What sinner would dare come into a church composed of those who never were sinners? But if he can see that these people were sinners just like himself, would he not feel right at home? The hospital is not for the doctors; it is for the sick.

“called to be holy”

The New American Standard is a bit more accurate here: “saints by calling”.

- ✚ Again, we are called – not volunteers who made it on our own merit, but as Paul was called to be an Apostle, we are called to be saints.
- ✚ To be holy is to be separate – to be in the world but not of the world. Yes, Virginia, Christians are supposed to be different.
- ✚ We are to be saints – the visible representation of Christ.

“together with”

Note who we are together with: all who call on the name of the Lord. It is not ours to pick and choose those with whom we would prefer to worship. The church is often far too polite about this; we need to remember that our Lord is a rock of offense and a stone of stumbling.

“all who call”

- ✚ It is not ours to pick and choose our brothers and sisters in Christ. God calls; they call on him; that should be good enough for us.
- ✚ See, however, the grand spiritual unity of the church! Not just all in this place and time, but all places and all times – these are the children of God. It shows us our unity – and his mercy.
- ✚ We should learn from this: the church should be the open door to God.

Grace and Peace

Chrysostom commented on this verse as follows: “If peace be of grace, why do you have high thoughts?”

- ✚ Isn't it your pride which destroys your peace? Think about it: why do you fight with others? Is it because you are too proud to humble yourself and be in agreement? You must have your own way? Isn't it the case that your own pride is the destroyer of your own peace?
- ✚ But how can you have pride – if you admit to being one who receives the grace of God? How can you be proud – and still say, “I'm a sinner saved by grace?”

But if you will receive God's grace, will you not also receive the peace of God which passes all understanding? Accept it in humility, and see how it spreads through your life.

“from God”

Remember that this grace and peace flows from God. Is the reason that you have no peace simply that you've been looking for it in the wrong places? Some seek it in drugs and alcohol, or riches, or the right companion – but it can be found only in Christ.

Most of us are content to “go with the flow.” But whose flow are you going with? The world’s, or God’s?

“and the Lord Jesus Christ”

Isn’t our lack of peace, our dissension, our trouble with other people, simply our refusal to accept and acknowledge the lordship of Christ?

- ✦ We want to be “in charge” – telling God that we know the right answer. He tells us to accept his lordship and his leading.
- ✦ We are impatient – we want something and we want it right now. He tells us to wait on him, and he will give to us all we need at the best possible time.
- ✦ We often are quick to point out to God what we see “a better answer.” He is the master craftsman, the one who knows best that doing it right the first time is always the best way.
- ✦ Sometimes we just don’t think – we just run ahead with our own ideas. Does this not come from our refusal to take time with Him alone?

In these few short words Paul is laying the groundwork to speak to the church regarding the unity of the church. We find in this something very obvious to most of us: if you lay the foundation correctly, the building goes up right. The foundation of the church is Jesus Christ her Lord.

- ✦ From his hands let us accept grace, acknowledging ourselves to be sinners.
- ✦ From his hands let us accept peace, which passes all understanding.
- ✦ In his hands let us place our lives, acknowledging him as Lord of All.

One Church - 1 Corinthians 1:4-31

The unity of the church is a constant theme of Paul. Perhaps it is because it was so often threatened by those who heard him. In our day, the fracturing of the church continues; every day, it seems, brings a new denomination. We need to hear the ancient appeal for the “One Church”.

A teacher’s thanks

Paul begins on a positive theme – perhaps to remind his hearers of just how great their blessings in Christ truly are:

I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, that in everything you were enriched in Him, in all speech and all knowledge, even as the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you, so that you are not lacking in any gift, awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

(1Co 1:4-9 NASB)

Paul’s example

Paul begins by setting an example of humility: he gives thanks.

- ✚ He often instructs others to give thanks; it is therefore appropriate that he himself does so here.
- ✚ His example is worth noting. He is thankful on his own behalf – but also on behalf of others. If you love someone, and they receive a favor, are you not thankful to the giver? If someone helps your child, you should feel grateful – right? How often we forget to give thanks on behalf of those we love!
- ✚ He points out one of the key attributes of thankfulness – that it implies the action was a gift. So often with us the words, “Thank you,” are a polite nothing. But they imply that we received a gift, not a payment.

Thankful to

God, of course. But notice the phrase in other translations: “my God.”² Thanks are due not to the impersonal God somewhere in the cosmos, but to the God known to me personally.

These thanks are rendered “always” – meaning that this is a consistent attitude of thankfulness.

What a teacher is thankful for

Surprise! A teacher is thankful for those students who learn from him. A teacher’s greatest joy is to discover his students doing what he taught.

Let me give you an example. Some years ago, on a Sunday morning, I overheard some of the ladies in my class discussing an injury to one of the children. The child was riding his tricycle down the sidewalk when a branch poked him in the eye. They rushed the child to the hospital; you can imagine how frantic the mother was. Several others in the class had descended on the hospital to be with the mother in this crisis.

² There is some manuscript debate about this. Two of the earliest manuscripts do not use this phrasing.

I was a little upset at this, because no one called and told me about it. I do hospital calls, you know. The reaction to this? "It was Thursday night – that's Betty's night out with you. So we took care of it ourselves!" At first I was offended, feeling left out. But then I realized: they had taken my lessons to heart. That is indeed a great joy.

When a student does what the teacher teaches, it is a great joy. It is the real sign of success.

Let's see what Paul is talking about here:

- ✚ In Christ they were enriched. They spoke with the heart of Christ; their knowledge came from Christ.
- ✚ This is a confirmation of Paul's personal testimony to them. He said it would be great; they proved it. They had all the spiritual gifts; they had the right attitude in waiting for Christ's return. Indeed, they had the supreme grace: fellowship with Christ, the Holy One, the Awesome God, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe.

Root cause

Paul then reminds them of the root cause of all this blessing: the faithfulness of God Himself.

- ✚ Because of his faithfulness, they will be *kept* strong until his return.
- ✚ Because of his faithfulness, they will be able to face the Day of Wrath calmly, knowing that they are blameless in Christ.

But they've slipped lately. Paul must deliver a correction to them. That correction is based on two things:

- ✚ The grace of God
- ✚ The nature of Christ.

Appeal for Unity

Just what seems to be the problem?

For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's *people*, that there are quarrels among you. Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ." Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one would say you were baptized in my name. Now I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any other. For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void.

(1Co 1:11-17 NASB)

Paul's appeal is one which befits the servant-leader.

- ✚ He uses the word "appeal" ("beseech" or "exhort" in other translations). The word in the Greek is *parakaleo*, which carries with it the meaning of one who comes along side to encourage you with comfort and good advice. This is the act of one who truly cares.
- ✚ He does so in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Lord, so that we might remember that we owe him our allegiance as lord. Jesus, that we might remember that he is human like us, and understands us. Christ, so that we might remember that he is the atonement for our sins – and we owe him our eternal life itself.

- ✚ He asks for unity. First, in that they will “agree.” The word in the original carries the meaning of speaking with the same words and thoughts. Next, that there be no schisms – no sects, no divisions. The church is one body; a schism is like tearing an arm off. Finally, that they agree in mind (in the original, the meaning is intellect) and thought (meaning in judgment and purpose).

His solution: “In Christ”

We are “in Christ,” therefore we cannot be divided successfully.

- ✚ First, because Christ is not divided. Unity is part of his very nature; just like the laws of nature cannot be separated from each other. He is one with the Father and the Spirit; different persons but one essence – just as we should be. The church is his new creation; therefore, we should be one. The work should reflect the workman.
- ✚ Next, because Christ was crucified for us. It is the basic fact of the faith. It is simply proclaimed, so that the power of that fact will be completely clear to us. We all owe our existence in God to that fact.
- ✚ Finally, because we are baptized “into Christ.” Therefore we are utterly reliant upon him for our cleansing from sin, both at baptism and ever afterward. Think about it: don’t our divisions spring from our sin – especially the sin of pride?

Side note: Paul’s example

Paul makes it clear in his own example. His own accomplishments mean nothing; what counts is Christ.

- ✚ He doesn’t even remember who he baptized! And he’s glad he doesn’t – for that would diminish the importance of Christ in his life.
- ✚ It’s Christ who is important, not Paul. Nor, for that matter, any other teacher or leader.
So many of us come to church to have our ears tickled – the fine music, the strength of the sermon, the quality of the lesson. We need to remember what’s important.

The Foolishness of God

Have you ever been so sick that the doctors have had to feed you intravenously? You needed to eat, but because of your illness you rejected food. Being a sinner is sometimes like that: you’re so sick in sin that you reject the nourishment that would heal you.

For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, “I WILL DESTROY THE WISDOM OF THE WISE, AND THE CLEVERNESS OF THE CLEVER I WILL SET ASIDE.” Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not *come to* know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God. But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to

us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, "LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD."
(1Co 1:18-31 NASB)

How do we see this? The world is full of persuasion and eloquence. Advertisers make this their art. Sometimes we assume that if something is really important, it would come with a great advertising campaign. Have you ever noticed how little advertising there is in Christianity? You just can't advertise a church service the way you would a used car sale. God's methods prevent it.

Confounding the "miracle seekers"

There are some of us who are not interested in a consistent theory of life. We want a spectacular show of evidence. It's interesting how many televangelists are "successful" because of the healings they purport to do. But consider God's methods in this:

- ✚ You want a "sign?" Look at the changed lives around you. Not spectacular, not flashy – but solid evidence. If you're looking for flash and dash, God will not gratify your whim. You will see solid evidence instead.
- ✚ Recall that these people had seen plenty of miracles. But not at their own demand; God is not a circus magician who performs on call. God's miracles are for his purposes, not our amusement and amazement.
- ✚ For such people, God lays out the "clear" side of Christ: the simple story of the death, burial and resurrection. We are to learn from him, for his yoke is light.

Confounding the "scientific"

Others, however, reject all such things. After all, there has to be a logical, intellectual explanation for these things. The events must fit the theory, or we deny the events.

- ✚ But the resurrection fits no theory. No philosophy says "there must be a resurrection." To such a mind, Christianity is opaque – because such a mind holds itself above all things.
- ✚ The problem is with the theory of theories: the idea that my mind can rise above all things and understand all things. We see this even in the church today, where "all things" are understood by "psychology." How does this theory explain the resurrection? It is the power of God.
- ✚ The truth is simple: God doesn't fit in any box we can make. We must accept that there are some things we simply are not going to understand; it's the "thick" side of Christ.

Why does God do it that way?

Why doesn't God do things the way we would?

- ✚ First, so that the merits of the church may be plainly seen by all. We don't come to church because it's popular – remember the village leader in *Keys of the Kingdom?* – but because it's where the truth is to be found.
- ✚ Second, so that we will learn to do things God's way. If God did things our way, then that "way" would be superior to us both. God didn't start with celebrities; rather he started with the unknown – so that we would not have to look past the stars to see Him.
- ✚ Finally, that we would be prevented from being proud. If we know that all things are due to his grace, not our merit, then we have no reason to puff ourselves up.

Summary

Read the passage backwards with me:

- ✚ Before you were in Christ, you had your theories and your evidence backward. Then you found him – and now you understand.
- ✚ Therefore, I appeal to you to be united in the only true source of unity – Him.
- ✚ If you do, you will once again enjoy the blessings you found at first – all those spiritual gifts and his constant strength.

Two thousand years have passed since this was penned. It seems to have lost none of its punch today.

Resolved to Know Nothing -1 Corinthians 2:1-5

One of the enduring principles of Christianity is the foolishness of God. It seems that God hasn't the sense to do things our way – he prefers a different method. We want things to be delivered to us in glowing words and smooth packaging. He delivers the Cross of Christ, rough and ugly. Why?

- ✚ First, so that we might be sure the message is from God. If it comes with dazzling eloquence we might be swept away – for a while. But soon the reaction sets in. If it comes in God's simplicity, it stays.
- ✚ Next, so that its agents might be humble. If you are to carry the word of God, you need to know to whom it really belongs.
- ✚ Finally, so that we might not depend upon the eloquence of any one individual – who will, of course, pass away.

Saying that, here's how Paul expressed it to the Corinthians:

And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.

(1Co 2:1-5 NASB)

Messenger and Message

The personal side

Paul says that he came to them in weakness and fear, with much trembling.

- ✚ *Weakness* – we don't like to think of this as being a characteristic of a preacher. We prefer our preachers to be strong men, bold and vigorous. But consider it this way: who is strong enough to carry the burden of the Gospel with his own strength alone? Wouldn't we really prefer one who is strong in Christ, rather than strong of his own strength? For if he is strong in Christ, there is hope that we may become like that. But if his strength is natural, then most of us can not hope to attain such things.
- ✚ *Fear and trembling* – let's be clear about the nature of courage. Courage is not the absence of fear – that's mental illness. It's not the denial of fear – that's bravado, a teenage failing. Courage is the overcoming of fear. If there is no fear, is there real accomplishment? If the thing were not dangerous, would there be any honor in overcoming it? And again, if it is by natural courage that the preacher prevails, what hope is there for the man in the pew? Perhaps the preacher is there by calling, not by natural talent.
- ✚ *But not discouraged* – As the account in Acts makes clear, Paul needed God's direct encouragement while he was at Corinth. The great test of the Christian worker is not how they perform when things go well – but when they are in weakness, fear and trembling. So we should always give encouragement to our preachers.

The message

The message itself has three key characteristics:

- ✚ It is *not* a message of eloquent thought. It deals with sin; it deals with judgment; it deals with death. It is very “nitty-gritty.”
- ✚ It is a message of power: it has the power to convict the sinner of sin and judgment to come. It is a life changing message.
- ✚ It is a message of grace – for it proclaims the love of God at the price of the Cross.

Just the Facts

Paul makes a curious statement: he has decided to know nothing except Christ among them.

Why?

All the facts I need to know

Just exactly what are these facts?

- ✚ First, who is the person Jesus? Is he not both son of man and Son of God? If you know this, you are on the road to knowing all you really need to know for eternity. If he is not this, then his death on the Cross means nothing. But if he is, it means everything.
- ✚ If Christ had come only to teach, we would have some great wisdom left behind for us. But we would not have salvation. Only by the Cross can the righteous judgment of God upon our sins be satisfied – and satisfied only by the person of Jesus Christ.

The key: who he is, and what he did.

Why just these facts?

To quote a well known passage: “The main thing is to keep the main thing, the main thing.”

It is an important point. Sometimes in life we’re up to our armpits in alligators – so it’s hard to remember we went in to drain the swamp. If you want things to fit together in life, you have to know what’s important and what’s not. This is the important thing.

There’s another reason: without it, all our good works are in vain. God honors the good works of those who love him – but those who try to work their way into heaven are ignored for it.

Perhaps we can see it this way. For many years now we have had an influx of illegal immigrants. Good politically correct people see no problem with this; after all, most of us are descended from immigrants as well. I suspect that those who object might raise the point that we’re talking about *illegal* immigrants. PC people reply, “what difference does it make?” All the difference. The legal immigrant has the rights and protections of the Constitution; the illegal one is prey to every scoundrel around. Those trying to work their way into heaven are the illegal immigrants; it is so tragic. The right to become a citizen of God’s kingdom is freely offered.

“Resolved” to know

The word in the Greek is “*krino*,” meaning to decide or to judge. It is a deliberate word, implying that I have made a decision akin to a judgment in court. In effect, Paul has decided to look no further at these Corinthians than to know that Jesus Christ was crucified for them. It is a noble decision.

The Cross – the love of Christ – these form the basis for our relationship with one another. If I see my brother only through the Cross – a conscious decision – then I see one who is my fellow sinner. I am not entitled to pass judgment on them – but I am obliged to warn them in love and mercy of the

troubles their sins are causing them. It may sound like there is no difference. But consider: if my wife nags me about my drinking, don't I tend to ignore her because she's nagging? But if my doctor warns me, I'm more likely to listen – because I know that I pay him to have my best interests in mind. Who hires a doctor only to ignore his good advice?

How much more, then, when someone whose basic relationship to me is that they are a sinner just like me, coming in the humility that springs from the Cross, approaches me and warns me of my failings?

Alternatives

This sounds so easy; but in practice it is very difficult. So we seek alternatives. We need to see two of them: the way taken by Christians when they want the easy way, and the world's way.

The easy road for Christians

Every preacher knows the temptation: popular preaching. It is to tailor your preaching to what you think will play well to the audience – rather than the Gospel you were called to preach.

- ✚ One way is “scientific” preaching. The most common form in our day is to take the latest and greatest of pop psychology and proclaim it from the pulpit. Your audience nods up and down – after all, they heard the same thing on television just the other day. You are “right” – but you are also irrelevant in eternal things.
- ✚ Another way is to be politically correct – either right wing or left. We most commonly hear it in the right wing vein, but it comes in either flavor. The politics of the moment are the call of God. But the things of God are eternal.
- ✚ Most common of all is to measure your success, week by week, by the crowd you draw. Attendance is easy to count. When you preach to what drives attendance, you will soon be one who is tickling the ears of those who do not want to repent.

Why would a man do such a thing? One reason is that we know the world's reaction to the Gospel – and we fear it.

- ✚ Start with the obvious: they crucified Jesus Christ. They did it because of who he claimed to be.
- ✚ They still do it. The world is afraid he might be right. What if we really are sinners? What if there really is a God who cares about righteousness? We have to prevent that from happening – or at least from appearing.

Dorothy Sayers put it this way:

The people who hanged Christ never, to do them justice, accused Him of being a bore – on the contrary; they thought Him too dynamic to be safe. It has been left for later generations to muffle up that shattering personality and surround Him with an atmosphere of tedium. We have very efficiently pared the claws of the Lion of Judah, certified Him "meek and mild" and recommended Him as a fitting household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies.

To those who knew him, however, He in no way suggested a milk-and-water person; they objected to Him as a dangerous firebrand. True, He was tender to the unfortunate, patient with honest inquirers, and humble before Heaven; but He insulted respectable clergymen by calling them hypocrites; He referred to King Herod as "that fox"; He went to parties in disreputable company and was looked upon as "gluttonous man and winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners"; He assaulted indignant tradesmen and threw them

and their belongings out of the Temple; He drove a coach-and-horses through a number of sacrosanct and hoary regulations; He cured diseases by any means that came handy, with a shocking casualness in the matter of other people's pigs and property; He showed no proper deference for wealth or social position; when confronted with neat dialectical traps, He displayed a paradoxical humor that affronted serious-minded people, and He retorted by asking disagreeably searching questions that could not be answered by rule of thumb.

He was emphatically not a dull man in his human lifetime, and if He was God, there can be nothing dull about God either. But He had "a daily beauty in His life that made us ugly," and officialdom felt that the established order of things would be more secure without Him. So they did away with God in the name of peace and quietness.

Our Times

"That's all well and good," you say, "but things are different now. I don't see this power of God on display all that much." So we think. So we put this section aside, saying that it applied then, but not now. But consider:

Why isn't this power displayed today?

There are two forms to this question: the cynical and the Christian.

- ✚ The cynic asks with the implied statement that the reason is that this never happened in the first place. But think about it: of all religions, only Christianity burst out on to the stage of the world *in weakness*. Others grew slowly, or came with "Islam, tribute or the sword." But Christianity exploded *despite* its lack of worldly power. How did that happen, if not by the power of God?
- ✚ The Christian has a more serious problem. He knows this did happen – and wonders why it does not today. Our Lord tells us the answer: "blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe." We are not treated to a parade of miracles first so that our reward for faith might be all the greater.

Why, then, isn't there an explosion of faith in America today?

- ✚ Remember, first, that we are the evidence of Christ. We are his witnesses; if the world wishes to see Christ, they must look at us.
- ✚ Perhaps the reason there is no revival in America is that we are such poor witnesses – and the world therefore continues to look elsewhere.

Why are we such poor witnesses?

Because we will not do as our Lord commanded us. Consider your obedience to his words:

And He was saying to *them* all, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it."
(Luk 9:23-24 NASB)

- ✚ Is it not really the case that we believe that our Lord has forgiven us – and now we can kick back and enjoy the good things of life, since all our spiritual needs have been met? We are willing to live the abundant life, but not at the expense of the Cross.
- ✚ Note that the phrase is to take up the Cross *daily* – not just at baptism, or once in our lives.
I can find no better words to say it than these from Thomas à Kempis:

JESUS has always many who love His heavenly kingdom, but few who bear His cross. He has many who desire consolation, but few who care for trial. He finds many to share His table, but few to take part in His fasting. All desire to be happy with Him; few wish to suffer anything for Him. Many follow Him to the breaking of bread, but few to the drinking of the chalice of His passion. Many revere His miracles; few approach the shame of the Cross. Many love Him as long as they encounter no hardship; many praise and bless Him as long as they receive some comfort from Him. But if Jesus hides Himself and leaves them for a while, they fall either into complaints or into deep dejection. Those, on the contrary, who love Him for His own sake and not for any comfort of their own, bless Him in all trial and anguish of heart as well as in the bliss of consolation. Even if He should never give them consolation, yet they would continue to praise Him and wish always to give Him thanks. What power there is in pure love for Jesus – love that is free from all self-interest and self-love!

Do not those who always seek consolation deserve to be called mercenaries? Do not those who always think of their own profit and gain prove that they love themselves rather than Christ? Where can a man be found who desires to serve God for nothing? Rarely indeed is a man so spiritual as to strip himself of all things. And who shall find a man so truly poor in spirit as to be free from every creature? His value is like that of things brought from the most distant lands.

If a man give all his wealth, it is nothing; if he do great penance, it is little; if he gain all knowledge, he is still far afield; if he have great virtue and much ardent devotion, he still lacks a great deal, and especially, the one thing that is most necessary to him. What is this one thing? That leaving all, he forsake himself, completely renounce himself, and give up all private affections. Then, when he has done all that he knows ought to be done, let him consider it as nothing, let him make little of what may be considered great; let him in all honesty call himself an unprofitable servant. For truth itself has said: "When you shall have done all these things that are commanded you, say: 'we are unprofitable servants.'"

Then he will be truly poor and stripped in spirit, and with the prophet may say: "I am alone and poor." No one, however, is more wealthy than such a man; no one is more powerful, no one freer than he who knows how to leave all things and think of himself as the least of all.

The Nature of Wisdom - 1 Corinthians 2:6-16

The passages about wisdom in the Bible always seem a little dark and obscure – but at root the matter is simple. It is also hard.

Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden *wisdom* which God predestined before the ages to our glory; *the wisdom* which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory; but just as it is written, "THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND *which* HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM." For to us God revealed *them* through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. For who among men knows the *thoughts* of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the *thoughts* of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual *thoughts* with spiritual *words*. But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one. For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, THAT HE WILL INSTRUCT HIM? But we have the mind of Christ.

(1Co 2:6-16 NASB)

Revelation

The first and most necessary thing to know about wisdom is that it is, in the Biblical sense, a mystery. Mystery in the Bible does not mean an intellectual puzzle to be solved (as, say, in an English murder mystery). It means something that has been hidden from us.

A matter of revelation

If God hides it from us, then only God can reveal it to us. We cannot discover that which he hides, and it is useless to try.

- ✚ God is so far above us that our own attempts at discovery are much more likely to produce error than truth. Think of the people who try to discover God on their own. Mystic forces; crystal energies; psychic visions – all conflicting, all leading to the conclusion that God must be a god of contradictions – look at all those smart people with different ideas of what he must be like. But God is not the god of contradictions. Paradox, yes. Contradiction, no.
- ✚ His desire is for us to know him, for he is love. Therefore he desires that we know him as he is – for that is the best way to know him. In short, he wants us to “get it right the first time.” How can this be done – if he does not reveal himself to us?
- ✚ That revelation is done in stages, both in our lives (we call it maturing) and in history. Abraham would have been dazzled by Solomon’s Temple; the priests of that Temple would have praised God to see the church; and someday we shall praise him for the new heaven and new earth.

Hiding in plain sight

There are some aspects of God which are hidden in plain sight. It’s interesting to see what happens when we try to interpret those things ourselves, without his help:

- ✦ We can look up at the stars and see his eternal power. They appear to go on forever; their passage through the skies is a certainty to us.
- ✦ We can see his divine nature in the world around us. Is there not love in our world? Are we not cared for, as are all living things?
- ✦ The ancients saw all this too – and created their own gods to explain it. We see it and dispense with the necessity of God, in the name of science.

Without revelation, man cannot know God. Knowledge of him is indeed a mystery.

Destined for our glory

But – praise God – he has decided to reveal himself to us.

- ✦ This is not an afterthought on his part – rather, it has always been his plan.
- ✦ This revelation is not something we earned – it is grace itself. For the last and greatest messenger of this revelation was Christ himself, the bearer of God's grace in the flesh.
- ✦ God now uses “the foolishness of preaching” – not signs of power – to bring us to know him.
- ✦ If the messenger is weak, the message had best be powerful. Sending a weak messenger tells you how powerful the message truly is.

The world doesn't see it that way

If this is so obvious, why isn't everyone a Christian?

Weak eyes prefer the darkness

Have you ever met someone whose eyes were diseased? Did you notice the thick, dark glasses? The preference for some place in the shade, or indoors? Weak eyes naturally prefer the darkness. It's just as true spiritually as physically.

- ✦ If you are one of the rulers of this world – the powerful – you prefer to deal in power. But then the meek Word of God shows himself to be powerful, and therefore you must deny him.
- ✦ If you are one of the educated of this world – especially with a narrow focus – then your ego gets in the way of your humility.
- ✦ If you are one given the ability to manipulate other people, you face the one who cannot be manipulated – who denies you.

In all these, the choice comes down to “me, myself and I” versus Jesus Christ. It does for all of us, really. It's just harder for those with these handicaps.

Wisdom outside its own sphere is folly

Hollywood movie stars do this for us constantly. How often have we heard one star or another declaiming mightily on what's wrong with this country?

- ✦ All wisdom, except God's, is folly outside its own sphere. This applies as much to those who know that science prohibits miracles (when science can only study the repeatable) as to those who make the Bible a science textbook (and miss the word of God).
- ✦ This most often happens with someone who is a recognized expert in the sphere he just left behind. Remember Linus Pauling and Vitamin C? A Nobel prize winning scientist – but outside his field of study.
- ✦ This gives rise to a curious phenomena: a simple man, knowing his limits and placing himself in the hands of those who understand, will achieve more than one who is a genius but outside his sphere. You may be the world's greatest sailor – but I always bring a chart on board with me.

The rulers of this world

Most of us do our learning on the basis of authority. How many of you can really say that the pyramids of Egypt exist? We rely on authority for most of these things. This places a greater responsibility on those in authority – whether in political authority or knowledge authority. It also brings on a greater ego to those who cannot be wrong.

This is the challenge of Christ to the rulers of this world. Those who are supposed to know best are challenged to admit they are sinners. It is often the reaction of the strong and powerful to deny Christ rather than themselves.

Our reaction to the Cross

The Cross is the testing point: how do you react to the Cross?

- ✚ Can you see with spiritual eyes, or do you say, “what a waste!”
- ✚ Are you inside the limits of your own wisdom, and therefore know when to ask for help in seeing? What you really seek, you will really find. If you seek Jesus, he will make himself known to you. If you seek to prove yourself wise instead, he will be hidden from your eyes.

Wisdom must be sought

How can a man understand God? Isn't he so above us that this would be impossible? Paul tells us that this is not impossible. To understand this, he gives us an analogy:

- ✚ I may be difficult to understand (ask my wife). But my spirit (me, personally) understands me.
- ✚ Therefore the spirit of God – the Holy Spirit – understands God, and understands him completely.
- ✚ But we have the Holy Spirit – and therefore we can understand God.

Satan's trap

At this point we must be wary of our enemy, Satan. His trap in this is the first one ever sprung on the human race: that evil is enlightening.

- ✚ Satan tells us to “be experienced.” We should understand the “best of both worlds.” In other words, give evil a try, then you'll understand it better. You'll be so much wiser than those goodie-two-shoes. But remember: who understands drunkenness better – the drunk or the paramedic picking him up?
- ✚ The truth is exactly the opposite. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. If there is only one right path – and there is – then if you wish to arrive you had best stay on it. When God gives you a road map, follow it.

The art of listening to the Spirit

How then do I listen to the Spirit? How do I read this road map of God? Paul tells us here:

- ✚ It requires maturity. This is not something every Christian does the first day. It requires practice and faithfulness.
- ✚ It requires constancy. You have to stick to it, day by day.
- ✚ It requires follow-through. When God gives you a command, obey it.

This is what Paul warns us about when he tells us not to “quench the Spirit.” It's like keeping a flame alive; it must be cared for patiently, constantly and correctly.

The result is glory

Paul tells us that God's wisdom was destined for our glory. It is by his wisdom that we are glorified; it is by his wisdom that we are changed into the saints of his kingdom.

- ✚ It was reserved for this time in history; God had this planned from the beginning.
- ✚ It is a gift of God – one that we must handle rightly.
- ✚ It is a gift that we will return to him, laying down our crowns of glory at his glorious feet on the day of his return.

Reward - 1 Corinthians 3:1-15

In this passage Paul lays out the concept of reward for service to God. There are two misconceptions current in Christianity which concern this:

- ✦ One says that we need do nothing in our Christian lives. After all, grace is God's free gift. But as James says, faith without works is dead. If you have faith, then works will surely follow.
- ✦ The other says that works are a requirement for salvation – you must work your way into heaven. This, surprisingly, makes salvation too cheap. Salvation cost the blood of the perfect Sacrifice; it is not for sale at the price of our works.

All this, however, does not mean that God does not recognize nor reward good works. Indeed, God is just; and being just he does reward.

And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able *to receive it*. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men? For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not *mere* men? What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave *opportunity* to each one. I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth. Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building. According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is *to be* revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire. (1Co 3:1-15 NASB)

The worker is nothing

One of the difficulties that the able Christian finds is that God is not in need of what he can bring. Indeed, God makes it very clear that we should consider ourselves as unimportant in the kingdom – because we are.

“Only servants”

See how Paul is careful to phrase it: “through whom you came to believe.” It is an odd way of putting it; most of us would say, “I converted you to Christ.” But Paul wants to make a point – that he, himself, is not important. Why?

- ✦ First, because humility is the proper attitude of the Christian towards God. Without it, your relationship is on the wrong basis.
- ✦ Next, so that no one will make the mistake of worshiping the human messenger rather than the God who sent him.
- ✦ Finally, so that grace may be seen in action. Paul laid the foundation – by the grace that God had given him. Thus in his words and deeds Paul shows us the grace of God to be primary in his kingdom.

“You are God’s field”

The servant of God must always remember what he’s handling – and that it belongs to God, not to him. But the “field” – those in the church – must remember also that they belong to God:

- ✚ You are God’s by right of *creation*. If I make something, it’s mine. He made the universe and all that is in it; you are his.
- ✚ You are God’s by right of *redemption*. He sent his Son to the cross for you; he bought you from sin with his own blood.
- ✚ You are God’s by right of *lordship* – for you accepted Jesus as both Savior and as Lord.

God “makes it grow”

God is the life giver; from him all life flows. We need to remember that we are not the ones responsible for the result, only for our own efforts toward the result. The results are God’s.

- ✚ They arrive on his *schedule*. He does not normally work miracles, but usually allows these things to proceed like growing things, little by little.
- ✚ They arrive by his *supply*. The church often looks starved and poor in the world’s eyes – but they do not see the purpose, nor the supply for it.
- ✚ The results are his *results*. Those results may not be the ones we dreamed of; they are the results he planned.

Working in God’s Plan

God is the one doing the planning – though we often like to think otherwise. He has his plan, and it will be fulfilled. It’s important for us to remember that.

Each his assigned role

- ✚ We know – as members of the body – that each of us has a different role, as assigned by God. It’s a good thing to know what you’re supposed to be doing.
- ✚ But in so doing we need to remember that we are fellow workers. We are not out there independently, but should be upholding each other.
- ✚ Always – remember that we have the same purpose. The Great Commission was given to all of us.

Fellow workers with God

Note that phrase. We are not just fellow workers with each other, but fellow workers with God! The Greek word used here for “fellow” is the one from which we get our word, “synergy.” We are working in the “same energy” as God, for that is the literal meaning.

- ✚ We need to remember what an honor this is. We don’t deserve it, but this sacred trust has been put in our hands. We should handle it with the gravity it deserves.
- ✚ We also need to remember our place on the team. If God is our leader, where should there be dissension?

We have individual responsibility

Do you see how Paul tells them that they were not mature enough to handle the things he wanted to tell them – as evidenced by their infighting? That’s a key point here. It tells us that each of us has the responsibility to examine our circumstances, in prayer and thought, and then do what we believe to be the best for God. Paul didn’t charge ahead like a robot thinking, “God will change and enlighten them – I can go straight to the meat of the thing.” He evaluated their situation and brought

them along as they could handle things. If we misjudge things and aim too high or too low, God will provide for that as well.

The growth is by his plan. This can lead to results we don't expect. Sometimes those results are discouraging; we think, "I've labored in vain. God threw away what I did; it must be useless." We must remember that God is just. He rewards us according to our labor.

Reward according to labor

It can be confusing. Salvation is free, and equal to all – but reward is according to your labor, not your results. God is responsible for the results. So how shall we approach this problem?

Be careful how you build

If you're working for God, think like a good craftsman. God rewards good work. He's not at all fond of slipshod construction.

- ✚ Build on the *right foundation*. Many people establish a "ministry" based upon good works – feeding the poor, sheltering the homeless and so on. These are good things. But if the ministry is not built on Jesus Christ, it counts for nothing. It is of little use to feed the poor physically if you deny them spiritually.
- ✚ Take care in what you build *with*. If your work is done at leisure, with no thought for the quality of your labors, then what good is it? You would not accept that from a carpenter; why should the Carpenter accept it from you?
- ✚ Remember that *others will build on your work*. Don't force them to tear down your mistakes to correct them. More than that, when they do – and surpass you in the process – rejoice. It means your work is approved in God's plan!

The test is by fire

Suppose you get your car's wheels aligned. You may not know anything about how to align those wheels – but you know whether or not they wobble and vibrate. You take that car out for a drive before you accept the work as being done correctly. Our Lord will follow a similar process – his test is by fire.

- ✚ What survives? *The costly*. If your work for God costs you greatly; if you put your heart and soul and treasure in it, then it is precious to God. Good work often takes more time than shoddy. Was your heart in the job?
- ✚ What doesn't survive? *The cheap and the shabby*. If your work for God came from what you had left over; if your chief contribution to charity is used underwear going to Goodwill; if your service to God is mainly singing during the worship service, then your work will get the reward it deserves. If Christ were to dine at your house, would you serve him leftovers?
- ✚ Don't think you can hide it from God. You can hide it from me. I'll only know about it at the Judgment Day, if then. But then, my opinion doesn't count – His does.

The Foundation remains

All this talks of reward, not of salvation. The foundation – Jesus Christ, our Savior – remains. What we do may be burnt up, or may be valued – what he does is eternal.

- ✚ Grace is his eternal plan. Since we cannot earn it, it is not connected to our reward.

- ✚ Reward is according to our labor – quality and quantity, I suspect – not according to our circumstances (which God arranges anyway).
- ✚ Both reward and grace are based on the eternal character of God. Grace, for he is love; reward, for he is righteous and just.

Summary

- ✚ Keep your pride in check; God doesn't need you. He wants you.
- ✚ Work at your assigned post, considering it an honor to be a fellow worker with Christ.
- ✚ Do your work with craftsmanship, and the Creator will honor and reward you for it.

Temple and Wisdom - 1 Corinthians 3:16-23

On the way out to my mother's house we pass an edifice labeled "Sky Pilot Temple." I presume this is someone's sense of humor; "sky pilot" is military slang for a devout Christian, especially an obnoxious one. Americans seem to view the word "temple" as being something rather snootily pious and pretentious. So I suspect the proprietors of that temple are being cynically hip.

Our ancient forefathers would not have understood that. They took the concept much more seriously. The closest English word today which still carries that meaning of awesome sacredness might be "cathedral." So as you read through this next passage, try substituting "cathedral" for "temple" – and see if the meaning becomes a bit clearer.

Do you not know that you are a temple of God and *that* the Spirit of God dwells in you? If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are. Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age, he must become foolish, so that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God. For it is written, "*He is* THE ONE WHO CATCHES THE WISE IN THEIR CRAFTINESS"; and again, "THE LORD KNOWS THE REASONINGS of the wise, THAT THEY ARE USELESS." So then let no one boast in men. For all things belong to you, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you, and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God.

(1Co 3:16-23 NASB)

The Temple of God

Most Christians have been taught from an early age that the body – the human body – is the temple of God. This has its consequences:

- ✚ The sins *of* the body are grievous. By this we mean adultery and fornication, for they unite the Christian with someone other than his or her spouse – and make for an abomination. God takes this very seriously.
- ✚ The sins *against* the body are likewise grievous. When I inflict bodily pain and suffering on someone else, God is aggrieved and will not forget. For this reason alone we should consider striking another person to be most serious.

Yet how little we think of these things! It's not adultery; it's "an affair." It's not fornication, it's "sexual experience." It's not wife-beating; it's "putting the little woman in her place." Be warned: God does not agree.

But there is another sense in which the body is the temple of God.

The church – the body of Christ – the temple of God

It is not clear to all that the church is also the temple of God. We are accustomed to hearing preaching on the first usage, but not on the second. But it is equally true. Consider:

- ✚ We, the church, each and all have the same spirit – the Holy Spirit.
- ✚ We are described – as a consequence – as one body, the body of Christ.
- ✚ Therefore, that body is also God's temple.

It makes sense. In the days of the Old Testament, if you wanted to find God, you came to his Temple. You still do.

God's care for that temple

God cares for his temple:

- ✚ It is holy, which means it is separated out to Him. Just as we are not to pollute our own bodies we are not to pollute the body of Christ. For example, we are not to bring in strange gods and doctrines any more than we are to have sex with a prostitute. (Have you noticed how often God calls idolatry prostitution or adultery?)
- ✚ If someone destroys it, God will destroy him. The word used here is also translated "defile" in the King James; it is usually translated "corrupt." Paul is not so much talking of physical destruction as moral corruption.
- ✚ How can someone defile it, destroy it or corrupt it? There are two methods, and they are related. First, we can bring in the world's wisdom, doing things the world's way. For example, there are those who proclaim the Bible to be wrong in this or that – and substitute their own brilliance. The second way is to chop up that body – to divide it.

Problems with the world's wisdom

It's usually argued – was then, is today – that man has gained such great wisdom and knowledge that the church is foolish to ignore it. After all, look at all the progress we've made in technology! Consider the truth:

- ✚ Man's wisdom is intrinsically bounded, for we are finite. Not one of us can know everything that man knows, let alone all things that God knows. Therefore, no matter how great, our wisdom has limits.
- ✚ Our wisdom proclaims itself self-sufficient. Modern psychiatry will save your soul, we say; some preachers preach that way too. But the result of this is simple: it causes us to ignore or forget God. You may reason the elephant out of existence – until he steps on you.
- ✚ It causes us to become boastful with pride – after all, we are *so* brilliant! That causes some of us to look down on others of us; we look down on our brothers and sisters in Christ. (After all, a church has to keep the riff-raff out.) You think it doesn't happen? What happens when a biker walks into your church and sits down in the front pew?
- ✚ Ultimately, what good is it? Some seek Nirvana – the problems of the world cause us no pain because we have ceased to care. Others seek goodness for goodness sake – a tree limb without a tree. Many more simply eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die. *And then what?*

Please note: these problems apply to anyone – the leader who proclaims these principles or the poor souls who follow them. Interestingly, the followers have even more problems.

Problems with relying on other's wisdom

Leaders who tear at the church using the world's wisdom would get nowhere if there were no followers willing to follow. This too has its difficulties.

Why do we follow such leaders?

Because we are so small and insecure! We do not realize the riches that are ours; we are sleeping on a bed of gold, complaining of our poverty.

- ✚ In Christ all things are ours! Has not the one with all authority told us so? He desires us to have only the good things; we're just a little confused on what those things are. Sometimes our blessings are quite well disguised. This is a matter of trust.

- ✚ Indeed, one of the “ours” – those very leaders! In the kingdom of God he would lead must be a servant. Rather than tearing God’s temple apart over this man or that, we should regard them as gifts from God, for our profit.
- ✚ Do you see it? In doing things the world’s way, we throw away the things that Christ has given us, and substitute the gleanings that we can gather.

Is not Christ sufficient for you?

The matter is worse than you think. If you follow those who set themselves up as leaders in separation, tearing the church apart, you are telling the world what you *don’t* believe:

- ✚ You tell the world that you don’t believe that Christ’s grace is sufficient for you – you must have this, that or the other leader in addition. Can you imagine the insult this is to God – and how it leads others astray?
- ✚ Worse, you deny his divinity and his authority. If he is not sufficient for you, then you deny that he is God in the flesh, for God is omnipotent. If he is not sufficient for you, you deny his authority, for he tells you that all authority in heaven and earth is his.

Compare: God’s wisdom

Consider, however, how God’s wisdom compares to this.

- ✚ *God’s wisdom cause us to be humble.* If all things are ours, they are ours as a gift. Therefore, none of us has anything to brag about. We can see others in the same light, and therefore none of us should look down on another.
 - ✚ *God’s wisdom quells dissension.* It’s not the teacher or the preacher that counts – it’s the Christ they teach and preach. Thus we are united, not divided.
 - ✚ *God’s wisdom gives us all good things.* As a father has mercy on his children, God blesses us with all good things. But like a good father, he does this when we’re behaving!
 - ✚ *God’s wisdom handles ultimate things.* Material things come and go; God’s wisdom deals with ultimate, eternal things. God’s wisdom deals with people – it’s not Paul, it’s not Peter, it’s not Apollos (or Graydon or John) – it’s Christ. God’s wisdom deals with life and death. Where in the world’s wisdom will you find the Resurrection? God’s wisdom deals with the present and the future – and tell me, where do your worries lie? If God’s wisdom deals with all of these, what are you bothered about?
- God’s wisdom places us in God’s hands, for we are of Christ, and Christ is of God.
- ✚ We are in his hands by the power of the Cross, by which we were liberated from the worst of masters – our own sins.
 - ✚ We are in his hands because we have taken the lordship of Christ – let us therefore not submit to any other in the church.

If we are in God’s hands, in his power and in submission to his lordship, why then do we presume to continue to sin? What then should we do?

Therefore...

Don’t be any man’s partisan

No matter how well spoken, no matter how learned – and especially whether he wants it or not.

Be of Christ

- ✚ Be holy, as he is holy. Consider yourself set apart for his purposes, and keep yourself pure.
- ✚ Honor him with your body. Be faithful to your wife, for in her you see a portrait in living flesh of his church. Be faithful to your husband, for in him you see a portrait in living flesh of your Lord.
- ✚ Live in the power of the Resurrection. Remember that you are heirs of the promise: one day he shall return; the dead in Christ shall rise, the living rise to meet him in the air. He has triumphed over death; he holds the keys of hell and death – and your reward is in his hand.

As Christ is of God

- ✚ Jesus and the Father are one. His prayer – and command – are that we should be one in the same way.
 - ✚ We need to work at being one.
How can we do that? How can we “be one?”
-
- ↻ Place no obstacle in the way of your brother; rather, consider his needs as if they were your own.
 - ↻ Do not judge your brother; leave that to Christ.
 - ↻ Follow no leader except as he points you to Christ.

Unintentional Division - 1 Corinthians 4

We are indebted, indirectly, to Hal Lindsay for this lesson.

Some years ago I taught a series of lessons on the Book of Revelation. Having no firm opinion as to which theory is correct, I taught the course using the three main opinions with occasional variations that were of interest. It was a rather academic look at the subject, I'm afraid, and that tended to upset people. There are those of us who are passionate on the subject.

One such person came up to me between sessions, stuck his finger under my nose and announced to me that Hal Lindsay had discovered that Operation Desert Storm was specifically prophesied in the Bible. (I am unable to verify this assertion). It was a point of obvious triumph to him, that "his teacher" (Lindsay) was right and I was wrong.

Whether or not Mr. Lindsay has it right, his teaching in this instance caused division in the church. It is highly likely that this was not his intention, of course, but it was the result. In the passage we examine today, we see Paul dealing with a similar situation, and showing us what to do today.

Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy. But to me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by *any* human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord. Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, *but wait* until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of *men's* hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God. Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, so that in us you may learn not to exceed what is written, so that no one of you will become arrogant in behalf of one against the other. For who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it? You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings without us; and indeed, *I* wish that you had become kings so that we also might reign with you. For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are distinguished, but we are without honor. To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless; and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, *even* until now. I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet *you would* not *have* many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. Therefore I exhort you, be imitators of me. For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church. Now some have become arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I shall find out, not the words of those who are arrogant but their power. For the kingdom of God does not consist in words but in power. What do you desire? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love and a spirit of gentleness?

(1Co 4:1-21 NASB)

Stewardship – the model of Christian leadership

The Christian leader must always remember that he (or she) is the steward of God's most precious possessions – his saints. Therefore, when divisions arise, the steward must take action to remedy these. That's what Paul has done here. So when we read this passage, we need to remember that Paul's comments about "judgment" are in the context of church leadership – that is, stewardship. These are comments not about judgment in general, but about judging those who are in leadership positions in the church. In short, here's his commandment concerning our evaluation of how well people are doing as leaders in the church.

Entrusted

We must first remember the burden they carry. They are entrusted with God's saints; this is no light thing. So many see this as "a task" – but not a trust. But any teacher or preacher is given a trust, and this is not a light thing.

Judged

Stewardship comes with accountability. If you have stewardship, you will be held accountable. But there are some misconceptions about this which Paul corrects:

- ✚ First, it matters very little what others think of your stewardship. They may not have all the facts (very likely). So what they have to say – particularly in the usual grousing method of telling someone else – should be of very little concern.
- ✚ Indeed, our own opinion of our performance means little either. There's a lesson in this: just because we "feel good" about our service doesn't mean that we're doing it right. Just because we "feel rotten" about it doesn't mean we're doing it wrong.
- ✚ What does matter? Christ's judgment of our service. For that reason, we should continually examine ourselves to see if we are meeting his standards – whether we feel good or not.

What shall we do?

How, then, should the Christian in the pews react to leadership and its divisions? What lessons are there for the average Christian?

- ✚ We should not judge others – but wait for sin to be exposed. It will become obvious in due time. Then we should apply church discipline in the spirit of love which Christ intended.
- ✚ Clearly, we should examine ourselves as we do this, so that we do nothing out of divisiveness but everything out of love.
- ✚ If there is one thing most counseled, it is WAIT. Wait for the Lord to expose things, wait for his return. Let him unfold things in his time – he has all of it.

Self-Application

Paul's writing here takes a biting tone. Up until this point he has been using himself and Apollos as examples. Now, having laid the ground work, he bites into them for their arrogance.

Sarcasm

Paul can have a slice and dice tongue at times, and it's shown here. Beneath it, however, he asks those who follow the divisive leaders a few questions which still are worthy of asking today:

- ✚ First, what makes you so different from the rest of the sinners in this church? Is it really the case that following a particular teacher makes you somehow “better” than other Christians? If Hal Lindsay is right and I’m wrong, what credit is that to you?
- ✚ Second, isn’t everything you have in Christ a gift anyway? Or did you really believe that you’re working your way into heaven?
- ✚ Therefore, tell me: just what are you bragging about? Why are you so proud? None of this is to your credit – neither what you brag about, nor the bragging itself.

Comparison

Paul drives the point home with a little comparison. He presumes in this section that everyone knows the greatness of the Apostles, and then sarcastically makes the comparison between himself and them:

- ✚ The first comparison is physical: you’re sitting back in the pews while I’m getting beat up for the cause of Christ. You know what our Lord will honor; but you’ve been given a life of ease. What, then, is the complaint here? Is it just possible you know that my (Paul’s) suffering brings greater reward than your comfort? (There is a difference between admiring Mother Teresa and being like her).
- ✚ The next comparison is in how other people think of you. If you’re one who loves to be in a faction, one reason is that you really care about this. But see again: who do people think highly of – the rich guy in the pew or the scraggly evangelist?
- ✚ But the real clincher is this: look what we (the Apostles) do in response. You grouse and complain, you fall into factions and divisions – and when we are kicked and abused, we return blessing. Do you see anything wrong with this picture?

Purpose

It is entirely in keeping with Paul’s mission that his response to this is simply this: he now proposes to warn them – as a father would – of the consequences of their actions. Having done that, he will then encourage them to imitate him, as he imitates Christ.

Sequence of Correction

Paul does just that. Follow the logic:

- ✚ Since Paul is entrusted with them as a steward from God, and
- ✚ Since they need to imitate him as he imitates Christ, he will
- ✚ Therefore send Timothy to them to accomplish this objective.

It sounds rather simple – but understand that it is very expensive to Paul to do this. He is giving them the best he has.

Character of the messenger

We need look no farther than at Timothy himself to see the price Paul is paying in setting the Corinthians straight:

- ✚ He is Paul’s son – the constant companion in trials, the one whom he loves just like a son.
- ✚ He is the bearer of Paul’s message – if you will, his message in the flesh.

It is very reminiscent of how God sent his Son to us; Paul is imitating that in sending Timothy to the Corinthians. In like manner, it is very costly. But stewardship is never very easy.

What's to be done

Timothy does not come to lecture them. Indeed, Paul uses a very specific phrasing here: Timothy is to remind them.

- ✚ He is to remind them of the example Paul set for them, in his way of life.
- ✚ He is also to remind them of the teaching Paul gave them – and that this is the same teaching he gives to all the church.

Timothy is young; by sending this letter Paul intends to provide him with the proper credentials in the faith. But he will not stop at this. Paul, if the Lord is willing, will return later as well.

This too is an imitation of God, who will return to us on the Day.

God offers a choice

Like Paul to the Corinthians, God offers us a choice. He begins by reminding us that when he comes again, he will find out exactly what's been going on:

- ✚ He will expose how the arrogant talk against him, and how they treat his words with contempt.
- ✚ He will also expose – to them and to us – the real meaning of power, for all power is his.
But until then, he will not leave us without help.

- ✚ He sends messengers – some formal, others not – to guide us in our choices.
- ✚ But he leaves those choices to us. We will be judged on the day by what we did in those choices.

The day is coming. On that day, He will be gentle with the meek who followed his word, kept his church together and followed his commands. But he will be a whip to the arrogant who knew so much better than he what should be done.

The question is still before us – for a while.

Judgment Intended - 1 Corinthians 5

If there is any one sin which has become much more respectable in my lifetime, it is that of adultery. In the era in which I was born, it would have been easy to see why adultery would be viewed as a sin – and not just by Christians. It carried the risk of a wife becoming pregnant by a man other than her husband. The man could see that this woman would be subject not only to disgrace, but also to the likely breakup of her marriage (and thus her means of support, in those days). She would be burdened with raising a child by herself, in a time when women were not well paid, enduring the anger of her ex-husband and the stares of the world. The child would be stigmatized. But the man would suffer only lightly, and that only for a little while. Any man could see that the risk of such a sin was unfairly shared. So the common belief was that such a thing was disgraceful. A man who did such a thing to another man's wife was viewed with very low opinion.

But now – with the advent of birth control and abortion – it no longer appears to be so bad. If she gets pregnant, we argue, it's her fault "for not taking precautions." If she carries the baby, we argue, it's her fault for not getting a (safe, legal and rare, of course) abortion. As a society, we have lost the sense of sin almost entirely. Right and wrong are now situational.

We need to remember that God does not view it that way. In this passage, we see the sense of shock and shame that accompanied a particularly treacherous form of adultery – a man who has sex with his father's wife. Sadly, I am not at all certain that we would react any differently today.

It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife. You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst. For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present. In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, *I have decided* to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump *of dough*? Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are *in fact* unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I *did* not at all *mean* with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler--not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within *the church*? But those who are outside, God judges. REMOVE THE WICKED MAN FROM AMONG YOURSELVES.

(1Co 5:1-13 NASB)

The Sin in Question

It is sad to state, but one must begin by showing that this is indeed a sin.

✦ It is a sin against the man's own body – for sex unites two bodies, and is intended only for husband and wife. Any other use is sin. The matter is treated consistently this way throughout the Scripture. If you consider yourself a Christian, this is the only view you can obtain from God.

✦ It is also a sin against this man's father – which should be fairly obvious. But I suspect that the father was not a particularly well-liked man, and perhaps the son was.

Note that Paul does not explain any of this. He didn't have to. We only think we live in superior times.

Their reaction: pride

How is it that the church reacted by being proud of this situation? I can see the tendency to avoid talking about it, but proud?

✦ "He married some babe young enough to be his daughter, the dirty old man – his kid just gave her what she really wanted."

✦ "What a man that kid is – a great lover. That's how you can tell a real man." (How often we evaluate men by their "conquests!")

✦ Maybe it's just a case of faction. They liked the son; they didn't like the father, and they went with their feelings.

It's also possible – I could see this happening today – that they felt "liberated" by all this. "At last we're free of all those useless rules and regulations." Whatever the reason, their reaction was completely wrong.

What they should have done

There were two things they should have done:

✦ *They should have reacted with grief.* Upon the announcement of Bill Clinton's adultery with Monica Lewinsky, Pat Robertson said, "No Christian should rejoice in this; this is a sad day for America." He had it right: this was a shame to America. Similarly, this adultery was a shame on the Corinthian church. More than that, it was shame cast upon the name of Christ. So I would ask: do we care about the name of Christ?

✦ *They should have ejected this man from their fellowship.* Note that this is the last step of church discipline; Paul evidently knows that the first two steps have been taken and failed. It is not sufficient to think something should be done; it is necessary to do something.

Church Discipline

Church discipline is not a popular subject. But it is a necessary one. So let's get it down to simple stuff:

How

Paul tells us clearly:

✦ It is to be done *in the name of Christ*. It is not to be done with human prejudice, or any care for our likes or dislikes. It is a sacred thing, for we are wielding the authority of Christ himself.

✦ It is to be done *in the power of Christ*. What we bind up on earth is bound up in heaven, and this should be made clear. It may seem somewhat ceremonial – and therefore, in accordance with modern thinking, empty – but it conveys with it the risk of hell itself. There is no salvation outside the church.

When

“The trouble with you gringos,” said one of my Hispanic associates, “is that you think mañana means tomorrow. It doesn’t. It means, ‘not today.’” That’s when most of us want to perform church discipline – “not today.” But Paul clearly shows a sense of urgency here. They are not to wait until he returns; he is with them in spirit, they should proceed.

They should proceed as an assembly – not just a few. It is a matter for the entire church. It is to be done when they are assembled. That way, all will know, publicly, what is being done. Let nothing be done by gossip and hearsay, but all be known publicly.

What

The man is to be “handed over to Satan.” What does that mean?

- ✚ It means that he is to be left to the consequences of his own sins – which Satan will cheerfully and certainly provide.
- ✚ It means that his sins will likely get worse before they get better. The balloon must be fully inflated before it bursts.
- ✚ Ominously, it means that he is now released from the support of the church – and the protection of God. God’s mercy in preventing consequence from coming to him is at an end.

We don’t do this because we no longer believe in God’s providence. If there is no providence of God, why would we fear to lose it?

Why

Why is this required – for the sinner’s sake?

- ✚ First, so that the consequences of his sin might lead him to repentance. In this instance (we know from II Corinthians) it did.
 - ✚ Second, so that – based upon that repentance – he might have eternal life.
- Church discipline is still a matter of love for the sinner. It is the original “tough love.”

Why is this required for the church?

- ✚ Because of their boasting – which is not good. If the church does not do this, the sinner may conclude that there is no problem here. After all, the church doesn’t seem to disapprove! We are our brother’s keeper.
- ✚ Paul brings up here the principle of the leaven – the yeast, in this translation. It is usually a symbol of corruption. His point is that if we tolerate and bless it in one sinner, we shall soon see it spread.

We have curiously reversed that point in our time. We believe that – somehow – by not passing judgment on people in the church that we will persuade them to repent by the sheer brilliance of our example. In the meanwhile, we’ll be so open and loving that the rest of the world will flood in. The truth is the opposite. There should be a difference between the church and the world. Leaven spreads; purity doesn’t.

Perils of judging outside the church

Paul is careful to point out one of our other problems: judging those outside the church. In our time we see much of this. We condemn the society in which we live – and think the condemnation most useful. But hear another opinion on the subject.

It's none of our business

Paul lived in a time when men could see the difference between right and wrong. It was easy for him to see this; a bit harder for us.

- ✚ First, it's a waste of our time! If God tells us it's not our business – read it for yourself – then He will not bless our efforts in it.
- ✚ There is also an aspect of “casting pearls before swine.” If they're not listening, perhaps we should do this God's way.

It's God's business

Worse yet, we are interfering in what God has reserved to himself. What is the function of the Holy Spirit in the world? To convict the world of sin and judgment. One way in which this conviction is brought about is by the comparison of Christian and non-Christian lives. But if we – the light of the world to shine before men – become “leavened”, and no longer a clear example, how is this to work?

Perhaps it's our sense of fairness at work here. Misguided, perhaps, but well intended, we assume that no one should be able to escape judgment for their sins. God assures us that this is his matter – and that no one will. Judgment deferred is not judgment denied; it is a time of grace to allow repentance to blossom.

But do we judge those in the church?

Paul gives us a convenient checklist here. Ask yourself these questions:

- ✚ Have you ever seen church discipline applied to the sexually immoral? The Roman Catholic church still forbids communion to those who are divorced and then remarried – on just this ground.
- ✚ Have you ever seen church discipline applied to the greedy? Or do we just call it entrepreneurial spirit, and praise the man who has it, in hopes of bigger contributions?
- ✚ Have you ever seen church discipline applied to the idolater? That may sound like something that can't happen anymore. But think about it: how often have you seen someone wearing “New Age” symbols as jewelry in the church? How about those who take astrology seriously? Or listen to any prophet's voice?
- ✚ Have you ever seen church discipline applied to those who are slanderers? Those who are willing to believe the worst of a person – and spread that worst – still seem to be with us. To the pure, all things are pure – but it doesn't make as good a story.
- ✚ Have you ever seen church discipline applied to a drunkard? This is one in which – thanks to the legacy of the temperance movement – we might seriously answer “yes.”
- ✚ Have you ever seen church discipline applied to a swindler? Not just to those who violate the law on this, but those whose business practice depends upon being dishonest enough to make money, and honest enough to stay in business.

If the answers to these questions are not satisfactory, consider that they are all cases in which we do not condemn what Chrysostom called “piety by halves.” As long as the man can produce pious

prayer in class, we accept his swindling ways. As long as the greedy man is generous in his offerings, it seems sufficient. As we do this, are we really showing that we care for the eternal soul of our brother?

Interestingly, while we no longer exercise discipline on the church from the inside, we have grown more interested in judgment on our society as a whole. We are often surprised when those outside the church reject our call to return to the righteousness of yesteryear. But look at it from their point of view for a moment: are we not placing on them the burden of righteousness without the blessing of salvation?

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does *anyone* light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.

(Mat 5:14-16 NASB)

Perhaps we need to clean the lamp.

Legal Unemployment - 1 Corinthians 6:1-8

One of the most neglected aspects of our Lord's commandments come in the matter of seeking our rights in court.

Does any one of you, when he has a case against his neighbor, dare to go to law before the unrighteous and not before the saints? Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? If the world is judged by you, are you not competent *to constitute* the smallest law courts? Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more matters of this life? So if you have law courts dealing with matters of this life, do you appoint them as judges who are of no account in the church? I say *this* to your shame. *Is it so, that* there is not among you one wise man who will be able to decide between his brethren, but brother goes to law with brother, and that before unbelievers? Actually, then, it is already a defeat for you, that you have lawsuits with one another. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded? On the contrary, you yourselves wrong and defraud. *You do this even to your* brethren.

(1Co 6:1-8 NASB)

Review

We must begin by recalling where Paul has been taking them.

- ✦ We are not given the task of judging the world. That's the function of the Holy Spirit. As we shall see in this lesson, we have a role to play in that, but not in this present age.
- ✦ Paul now turns to disputes between Christian brothers. It is a different question, but the principles – especially the honor and unity of the church – are the same.

Definitions

If we are to understand this passage correctly, we must understand some of the Greek words used; otherwise we may reach the wrong conclusions.

- ✦ The word used for "dispute" in verse 1 is the Greek *pragma* – from which we get our word "pragmatic." It means a dispute about ordinary matters – not something stemming from a sin, but (for example) a commercial dispute.
- ✦ The word used for "judge" in this passage is the Greek *krino*, which carries the meaning of a formal courtroom judgment. So we can see that Paul is talking about the legal system of his time.
- ✦ The phrase "ungodly" is actually the unrighteous or unjust. It does not mean so much those without God as those without a real sense of justice and righteousness. It is both a description and a comment on the corruption of the time.
- ✦ Interestingly, the word translated "disputes" in verse four is different from the word in verse 1 – it is *kriterion*, from which we get our word "criterion." The subtle meaning is that we are to apply criteria, or standards, to such disputes. So it is that Chrysostom tells us that the world will be judged "in us" – not by us. As the men of Nineveh will rise to condemn those of Christ's generation by their repentance, so our example is to set a criterion for the judgment of the world.

Sense of outrage

Paul uses the word "dare" – to express his outrage that any Christian would do such a thing. Why the outrage?

- ✦ First, because of the authority of the church. The world has no authority over the church, except as God permits. Do recall that all authority in heaven and on earth is given to Christ, and by that

authority he has established the church. To permit the courts to settle such disputes denies that authority, and thus denies the Lord who gave it.

- ✚ Next – as even the ungodly would acknowledge – a judge must come to his task with clean hands. If his decisions are to be respected, then he must be seen as one who is impartial. If his decisions are to be honored, and not put into action by force, he must be seen as one who is worthy of that honor. You may be forced to obey the decisions of the unrighteous, but you cannot be forced to honor them. Who then should judge these matters for Christians?
- ✚ Such actions attack the unity of the church, and this (as Paul has been proclaiming) is a most serious matter. After all, this letter begins by attacking the factions in the church; this is more of that same message. The unity of the church is in God's stated will – Christ thought it so important that he prayed for it on the night of his crucifixion – and it is the Apostle's care.

These are not trivial matters. To have them trivially cast aside for the sake of money or anger is indeed outrageous.

Should a Christian “go to law” at all?

There is a greater matter to be considered here: should a Christian go to law at all? I'm speaking of matters between a Christian and a non-Christian. Do you not recall our Lord's words?

"But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. "If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. "Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two.

(Mat 5:39-41 NASB)

Will you consider the implications of going to court?

- ✚ It implies that we are more concerned with our money, our lifestyle or our pride than we are about another man's soul. For what dispute in court could possibly be worth a man's soul? If you abandon your case and win a brother, are you not greatly enriched?
- ✚ It implies that we place “our rights” first – we, who are sinners. By proclaiming Christ we admit we are sinners, those who have offended. With our dirty hands we sign the court documents seeking to grub money from others.
- ✚ We do this in defiance of our Lord's command. Command?

"Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, so that your opponent may not hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. "Truly I say to you, you will not come out of there until you have paid up the last cent.

(Mat 5:25-26 NASB)

- ✚ We do it in defiance of our Lord's example – we, who proclaim ourselves his imitators. Ray Stedman tells us a story about this in his sermon on this passage:

I will never forget the time when Dr. H. A. Ironside, with whom I have traveled, told me of an incident in his own life as a Christian. When he was only eight years old, or so, his mother took him to a meeting of the Brethren who were discussing some kind of difficulty among themselves. Evidently there was some terrible injustice that one felt others had done. Young Harry Ironside did not know what the trouble was, but it was clear they were deeply disturbed. He said that one man stood up and shook his fist and said, "I don't care what the rest of you do. I want my rights! That's all! I just want my rights!"

There was an old half-deaf Scottish brother sitting in the front row, and he cupped his hand behind his ear and asked this man, "Aye, brother, what's that ye say?" And the fellow said, "Well, all I said was that I want my rights. That's all." The old man said, "Your rights, brother, is that what you want, your rights? Why the Lord Jesus didn't come to get his rights. He came to get his wrongs, and he got them." Harry Ironside said, "I'll always remember how that fellow stood transfixed for a little while. Then he dropped his head and said, 'You're right, brother, you're right. Settle it any way you like.'" And in a few moments the whole thing was settled.

What should we do?

What, then, is a Christian to do?

Endurance

If nothing else can be done – and we are greatly negligent in this matter in the church today – endure the wrong. Why?

- ✦ So that the church may not be exposed to shame and disgrace. Rosemary Nixon tells of her secretary. Whenever a Christian woman would call her – Rosemary is a divorce attorney – the secretary would rail against the church, proclaiming that submission was the problem. Should we give the enemies of Christ a chance to rave?
- ✦ So that we might seek our recompense from God the just, rather than from men. Who would you rather have handle your case, anyway?
- ✦ So that we might not be defeated by Satan. Defeated? How?

There are several ways in which Satan uses disputes in the church to attack both us as individuals and as a church:

- ✦ When we get taken up in such a dispute, is it not the case that we are usually setting our hearts on the things of this world, not on the things of God? We don't sue people over theology. Set your hearts on things above!
- ✦ Should we not accept adversity at the hands of our Lord? Perhaps he is using this incident to train us for greater things; should we then reject his training and discipline in favor of "our rights?"
- ✦ We preach forgiveness. We preach it as being without limit or condition. Should we not practice what we preach?
- ✦ Isn't often the case that our real motive in court is vengeance? But to whom does vengeance belong – us, or God? How will He react to our stealing what is rightfully his?
- ✦ Finally, should we not show mercy upon others, as God has shown mercy to us? He causes his rain to fall on the just and the unjust – and that was said when rain was a blessing to farmers, not something to muddy your Cadillac. We have received his mercy; we cannot repay it; we can at least pass it on.

If possible, seek resolution and reconciliation in the church

Is it possible that the church has no person capable of rendering good judgment in our trivial, worldly affairs? If that is so, it is a terrible disgrace, for we are commanded to seek wisdom. If we have run from it, we are indeed in great distress as a church.

So the church is capable of doing this; but why would we prefer the church to the courts? I submit there are three reasons:

The power of the church is greater than the power of the courts. All power and authority is given to Christ, and the church is his body on earth. With the courts you risk the anger of the judge; within the church you risk the wrath of God.

So why, then, do we not routinely turn to the church in these matters? Perhaps it is because the church has relinquished the authority, and no longer speaks as being the body of Christ, given the authority of binding and loosing. This is a very sad thing.

The church brings more to the problem than the courts. The courts are limited. The church has techniques a court cannot imitate:

- ✚ The church can get to the root of the matter. If the problem is pride, then the church can deal with it. I know of no court which can deal effectively with this.
- ✚ The church can provoke generosity by love, where the courts can only provoke anger and bitterness.
- ✚ The courts can settle only the evil at hand; the church can bring a greater good out of it.

The unity of the church is strengthened by this. When we submit matters to the church, we actually strengthen the unity of the church.

What we shouldn't do

One obvious thing: we shouldn't go to court. It embitters us; it embitters our brothers.

Perhaps more subtle is this: we should not disgrace the church.

- ✚ We should not disgrace the church by going to court – that is clear.
- ✚ But should it not be equally clear that we need to keep control of our tongues in a dispute – for exactly the same reason?

What does the world think, hearing two Christians scream at each other?

We have a choice: we must decide what we truly are. Are we ambassadors of reconciliation – or attorneys-at-law?

Great Bodily Injury - 1 Corinthians 6:9-20

The second least popular teaching of the church concerns sex. The teaching is at once simple and profound, and we should deal with it directly:

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor *the* covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God. All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything. Food is for the stomach and the stomach is for food, but God will do away with both of them. Yet the body is not for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body. Now God has not only raised the Lord, but will also raise us up through His power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? May it never be! Or do you not know that the one who joins himself to a prostitute is one body *with her*? For He says, "THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH." But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit *with Him*. Flee immorality. Every *other* sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.

(1Co 6:9-20 NASB)

Before and After

It is instructive to see just exactly what Paul lists as being wicked – for we shall see that our own sense of wickedness has declined even from this time.

- ✚ *Sexually immoral* – the root word is the one from which we take our word “pornography” – it means those whose attitude and actions toward sex is just like ours – leering lust.
- ✚ *Idolaters* – a common thing in Paul’s day; one who worshiped at the shrine of another God. Today it is fashionable again – we call it New Age thinking.
- ✚ *Adulterers* – the word means exactly what it says: those who have sex outside of their marriage.
- ✚ *Male prostitutes* – perhaps the reason Paul mentions these explicitly is that Corinth had over a thousand female prostitutes as priestesses in the Temple of Aphrodite. This may just be equal opportunity.
- ✚ *Homosexual offenders* – just in case you’ve been told that the Bible never says anything about homosexuality, here it is.
- ✚ *Thieves* – even we have our limits. Theft is still considered a sin – unless you do it from poverty, revenge or the theft is small enough.
- ✚ *Greedy* – this is no longer a sin for us; it is now called being an entrepreneur. It is now considered a Republican virtue.
- ✚ *Drunkards* – even this has lost its sense of sin, and is now an illness.
- ✚ *Slanders* – we now refer to these as political commentators.
- ✚ *Swindlers* – still a sin in our time, if you do it on a petty scale. If you swindle billions, however, you can still be admired.

A pretty collection, that. But remember that the only qualification for becoming a Christian is this: you have to be a sinner first.

We've lost the sense of that. We ask people to "join the church." To do that, you must be, in some sense, "good enough." You should be able to fit in with our crowd – and we go to great lengths to see that you will have a smooth fit. Our worship services are remodeled; no longer based on the rock, but rock and roll. If people will not join, perhaps it is because they no longer see any point in it.

Paul would have had a different appeal: good news. His call would have been based upon Christ and the good news of the Gospel. But is it good news? Only to those who know themselves to be sinners. It is the purpose of the Holy Spirit to convict the world of sin and judgment to come. We do the world no service – and, I think, deny our Lord – when we tell the world, "There, there – it's all right. It's just your hormones acting up." That's why this list of sins is here: to remind you there is a right and a wrong – and that we all are sinners.

But look at us now – washed!

The word in the Greek means "to wash completely." It carries with it a sense of complete cleansing. There is no sense of "good enough to get by;" it is a thorough cleansing. It is the process of getting rid of the filth. But do remember: if you do this, you must have needed it.

But look at us now – sanctified!

The word is also the root of the Greek word for "holy." It means consecrated, purified, set apart for the service of God. This brings two challenges to the typical Christian:

- ✚ Do you feel that you really are "different" from the rest of the people in this world? That you really don't belong here; the world is not my home, I'm just passing through? Or do you desperately want to fit in with this world?
- ✚ Do you know that God has a purpose for you? The word means "set apart" – but why? God sets things apart not to sit on the shelf, but to be used for his purposes. One reason our youth spends its time being "against" this and that (mostly their parents) is that we have never given them anything to be "for."

But look at us now – justified!

The word means to be regarded as innocent, to be regarded as pure.

I once sat in a courtroom, waiting for a friend's trial. As we sat, the judge went through a stack of folders, each one representing a drunk driving arrest. He would review the record, and if the person had finished the required measures he would announce to him, "Mr. Smith, you may now say that you have never been convicted for drunk driving."

At first I thought this absurd. Then I remembered how difficult it would be to get a job if you had been arrested for drunk driving – something no respectable firm would want. But the real impact came when I remembered: my Lord did the same thing for me, at the Cross. I am justified, by His blood.

Legalism and License

Truth is always stuck between two lies. Christian liberty lies between legalism on the right and license on the left. It's interesting to compare the view of the Corinthians with our own:

- ✚ Their view was this: God's grace has set us free from the Law. Therefore, we might as well go ahead and have sex with whomever, wherever. God's grace will abound even more; we're covered. The Law no longer applies.
- ✚ Our view is this: what sin? How could anything so beautiful as sex be a sin?
Both of these are moral stupidity; theirs does seem a bit more sophisticated, however.

Paul asks these people freed of the law two simple questions.

Is it beneficial?

The King James uses the word, "expedient." The original Greek word carries the sense of something which "comes together." In other words, just from the point of view of this world, is this a very bright idea?

- ✚ We speak as if adultery were a victimless crime. Perhaps I have been incredibly lucky in this, but I have never seen it so. His adultery shatters her; hers destroys him. Children suffer in either case. Adultery causes years of pain for a few minutes of stolen pleasure.
- ✚ If that were not enough, we have the specter of venereal disease. Hard enough to bring this on yourself; even more so to inflict it upon your wife. And if you and your wife both die of AIDS, what have you done to your children?
- ✚ Even with the greatest of repentance and forgiveness, the sense of trust which rests so innocently in marriage is destroyed. Trust is very difficult to rebuild.

Is it slavery?

Slavery? Anything which masters you makes you its slave. The word used here is one which connotes "authority." Any passion which masters you has authority over you – and that is a denial of Christ.

You think not? Have you ever seen a man addicted to pornography? I have struggled with this myself, and it is not until you admit its mastery – and appeal to your Master to take his right place – that it can be conquered.

The classic example of this is in Alcoholics Anonymous – everything depends upon God, not upon your own efforts. If your own efforts were sufficient, you'd not be in the mess to start with.

Doctrine of the Body

This brings us, then, to the root of the matter: the human body. It often surprises Christians to learn that there is actually a doctrine of the body, and that it is not completely concerned with sex. But, in its rudiments, we need to understand it.

To be human is to have a body

That which distinguishes the angels from man is the body. We are hybrids; we are spirits in an animal body.

- ✚ Which is why our Lord came in the flesh. Any argument – and there have been many – which says that our Lord is not fully human is false. For if He is not fully human, then he is not acceptable as the Atonement. Therefore, our Lord has a body just like ours. Moreover, as He lives forever, the body MUST be resurrected from the grave – as it indeed was.

✚ Therefore, our resurrection from the grave is also required. We are to live forever with Him; we are human, and therefore must have a body. Therefore we must be raised from the dead, just as Christ was. His resurrection is the first; and the promise of ours.

Sex unites one human body with another

Note that it is sex – not marriage. In a very real sense, food is temporary; we will not need it at the resurrection. But sex is permanent. How do we know this? Because Christ describes the church as his Bride. From the earliest days of faith, it is known that “the two become one flesh.” The entire doctrine of how a husband should treat his wife comes from this thought.

But – by the same reasoning – sex with someone not your spouse is a sin against your own body – for the two of you are one flesh. It is worse than that, however.

We are united in Christ

We, the church, are called the Body of Christ. We are united spiritually with Him, just as I am united physically with my wife. How did this happen? It is simple: I was bought with a price, the price of Christ’s blood. Note that this too is from the body.

Chrysostom gives us an example that would have been practical in his time; stretch your mind to accept it, for it is instructive. Suppose, woman, that your father tired of feeding you and (in a fit of madness, says Chrysostom) sells you to the local whorehouse. There you are required to be a prostitute, selling your body to any man who comes along, for the benefit of the pimp who owns the place.

But then suppose that the son of the King comes by. He redeems you; he buys you out of that slavery in the whorehouse. He takes you to his palace and makes you his bride. Can your father now return you to prostitution? No, he has his money.

Then consider, woman, how ungrateful, how horrible it would be if you decided, on your own, to go back to the whorehouse after marriage to the King’s son. What an insult to your husband! What an insult to his Father, the King! Should you not expect the most severe of punishment for such a thing?

You and I are like that woman. We are bought with a price, redeemed from the whorehouse of Satan. He no longer has authority over us; why, then, should we surrender ourselves back into his slavery?

Wearing the World Lightly - 1 Corinthians 7

We come now to one of the more turgidly written passages in the New Testament. It seems to oscillate between two extremes. Perhaps the extremes are not important; the oscillation is.

Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman. But because of immoralities, each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband. The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband *does*; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife *does*. Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. But this I say by way of concession, not of command. Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am. However, each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that. But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I. But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn *with passion*. But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband (but if she does leave, she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife. But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her. And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy. Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such *cases*, but God has called us to peace. For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife? Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk. And so I direct in all the churches. Was any man called *when he was already* circumcised? He is not to become uncircumcised. Has anyone been called in uncircumcision? He is not to be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but *what matters is* the keeping of the commandments of God. Each man must remain in that condition in which he was called. Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that. For he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord's freedman; likewise he who was called while free, is Christ's slave. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. Brethren, each one is to remain with God in that *condition* in which he was called. Now concerning virgins I have no command of the Lord, but I give an opinion as one who by the mercy of the Lord is trustworthy. I think then that this is good in view of the present distress, that it is good for a man to remain as he is. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. Yet such will have trouble in this life, and I am trying to spare you. But this I say, brethren, the time has been shortened, so that from now on those who have wives should be as though they had none; and those who weep, as though they did not weep; and those who rejoice, as though they did not rejoice; and those who buy, as though they did not possess; and those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it; for the form of this world is passing away. But I want you to be free from concern. One who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and *his interests* are divided. The woman who is unmarried, and the virgin, is concerned about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how she may please her husband. This I say for your own benefit; not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is appropriate and *to secure* undistracted devotion to the Lord. But if any man thinks that he is

acting unbecomingly toward his virgin *daughter*, if she is past her youth, and if it must be so, let him do what he wishes, he does not sin; let her marry. But he who stands firm in his heart, being under no constraint, but has authority over his own will, and has decided this in his own heart, to keep his own virgin *daughter*, he will do well. So then both he who gives his own virgin *daughter* in marriage does well, and he who does not give her in marriage will do better. A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. But in my opinion she is happier if she remains as she is; and I think that I also have the Spirit of God.

(1Co 7:1-40 NASB)

The problem of cheap advice

Two thousand or so years after Paul wrote, things have not much changed. As a teacher, the most frequent questions received are still about the same topic: marriage. The difficulty in the answers is still the same: cheap advice.

Here's the temptation. Suppose a woman comes to you, complaining of her husband's evil temper and behavior. She's had enough, she tells you, and wants rid of the man. There is a very strong temptation to answer in one of two ways:

- ✚ One answer is in human sympathy. You feel sorry for her – she usually has a genuine problem – and out of sympathy you tell her to do what she feels like. This usually produces disaster. She goes away vindicated in her feelings, thinking herself righteous, and proceeds to produce more anger, more strife, and eventually a bitter divorce.
- ✚ The other answer is in self-righteous piety. You think of your own marriage; of the sweet submission of your own wife, and decide that the lady must be the problem. You call her to the high, holy road of Christ. She goes away bitter – and feeling very guilty. She will come back some day – to show you that your advice was wrong.

If you want the right answers, you must ask the right questions. The usual question is, "What should I do?" Paul here answers, "what may I do?"

- ✚ As always, he places the cause of Christ first. In each answer given, he encourages the individual to take up the high calling of Christ and to live sacrificially.
- ✚ But – please note – he recognizes that this is a gift from God. Some of us don't have it. If we can live so sacrificially, our Lord will reward it. But if we can't, there are certain things which are permitted.

Here are some of his specific answers. See how the general principles above are applied in them.

"I can't stand the man"

Why? Well, suppose her husband is beating her. It happens, even in Christian homes. Is she called to be a punching bag for his anger? No – she is permitted to separate from him. Note- not divorce, separate. She must remain alone. (Paul doesn't mention it here, but she should also take this matter before the church. Regrettably, the church has not been swift to deal with this.)

"He's an unbeliever"

Often, in Paul's time, this came about because the wife (or husband) became a Christian after marriage. Christians are strongly counseled to marry Christians. But hear Paul's advice here:

- ✦ Is he willing to stay in the marriage? Then you should be too. Marriage is God's institution, it is holy. If the unbeliever will keep to that, you should honor God by doing likewise.
- ✦ Marriage is holy; so is the Christian. By remaining in the marriage you sanctify your children. Should they suffer so that you can be free?
- ✦ Marriage is holy; in so suffering you may bring your spouse to Christ. Is that not a cause worth suffering for?

If, however, the unbeliever leaves – let him. You are not bound. But note that the action must be taken by the unbeliever. The child of God is called to remain in peace in marriage. Only the non-believer should furnish grounds for divorce or separation.

Objectives

In all these, we see the objectives of the Christian:

- ✦ The salvation of the unbeliever.
- ✦ The sanctification of the children
- ✦ That God's grace might be extended to all.

Principles

There are certain principles in this passage which are clearly stated elsewhere.

Put the things of God first – but other things are permissible

We see this in the matter of sexual abstinence regarding prayer. This passage has been much used to justify priestly celibacy, but that's not his point at all.

- ✦ Permissible things – like sex – are used to “lead us not into temptation.” We have sexual desire. If we cannot overcome it and devote all our passion to Christ, this is not a sin. But it is foolish to try abstinence to the point of giving Satan an opportunity for temptation.
- ✦ This also stresses that such things are not intrinsically moral evils – as is sometimes claimed by ascetics. The key is to find their proper use. They should not serve as a roadblock to devotion to God, either by being overused or neglected.

As much as possible, live at peace

We are not in charge of circumstances. There will come instances where peace is not possible. But so far as we have control over it, we should live at peace with all. Does your non-believing husband wish to remain in the marriage? Be at peace; remain in the marriage. Does he wish to leave? You cannot control that; you are to let him depart. The decision does not belong to you – now. You gave up that decision when you came to Christ. Just make it clear that – as far as you can – you will live in Christ's commands. Our God is the God of peace.

God does not overburden us

Are you one of those strong-willed, self-disciplined souls who can fast for forty days and nights. Good! I'm not. God has blessed you with a gift he has not given me. But that same wise God therefore will not burden me with a forty day fast – though he will burden you. If you will accept his burdens, in his strength, you will find that “his yoke is easy, and his burden is light.”

An' I spoke to God of our Contract, an' He says to my prayer:

"I never puts on My ministers no more than they can bear.

So back you go to the cattle-boats an' preach My Gospel there.

(Kipling, *Mulholland's Contract*)

Some of us are disappointed that God sends us back to our own cattle boats. We see others who are great in the kingdom, and we ask, "Why not me?" God's answer is that he would not burden you with that which you cannot bear.

Human desire is the enemy of contentment

We seek things of this world which we think will give us pleasure. When we get those things, we seek more. When we examine ourselves, we say we are not content because we do not have. Perhaps we are not content because we desire so much.

Wearing the world lightly

What, then, is the secret of this contentment? It is to wear the world lightly, for the world is passing away. Consider two of the subjects Paul covers here:

- ✚ Marriage is the primary example, for most of us are subject to it. His argument is that marriage is for this life only. For all such things, we should use this life to bring us reward for eternal life. Therefore, we should focus our marriage on Christ. If there are troubles in that marriage, we should use them to bring glory to God. Christ first; then our troubles in marriage.
- ✚ Another example is slavery. Interestingly, the modern translators have (in verse 23) rewritten what Paul was trying to say. The ancients understood it quite well. He's telling the slave that obtaining his freedom is not important – rather, that he is free in Christ *and he should use that freedom to honor God*. Chrysostom interprets the Greek to mean here (as Paul tells us elsewhere) that the slave should serve devotedly – as a free man should.

Even "religion" should be worn lightly

Many of us were raised in Christian homes. That is a great blessing – but it can be pressed too far. How often have you heard the grumbles about the new style of hymns? ("If Old Rugged Cross was good enough for St. Paul...") The matter is not one of hymns, or video screens, or guitars – but of true worship of the Lord. These other matters are things which are permitted, not required. In Paul's time the issue was circumcision (from the Old Testament teachings). But the principle remains the same.

Your place, your ministry

Many of us seek to improve ourselves by changing our position; few of us seek to improve ourselves by remaining. Hear the words of an older generation:

Some persons have the foolish notion that the only way in which they can live for God is by becoming ministers, missionaries, or Bible women. Alas! how many would be shut out from any opportunity of magnifying the Most High if this were the case. Beloved, it is not office, it is earnestness; it is not position, it is grace which will enable us to glorify God. God is most surely glorified in that cobbler's stall, where the godly worker, as he plies the awl, sings of the Saviour's love, ay, glorified far more than in many a prebendal stall where official religiousness performs

its scanty duties. The name of Jesus is glorified by the poor unlearned carter as he drives his horse, and blesses his God, or speaks to his fellow labourer by the roadside, as much as by the popular divine who, throughout the country, like Boanerges, is thundering out the gospel. God is glorified by our serving Him in our proper vocations. Take care, dear reader, that you do not forsake the path of duty by leaving your occupation, and take care you do not dishonour your profession while in it. Think little of yourselves, but do not think too little of your callings. Every lawful trade may be sanctified by the gospel to noblest ends. Turn to the Bible, and you will find the most menial forms of labour connected either with most daring deeds of faith, or with persons whose lives have been illustrious for holiness. Therefore be not discontented with your calling. Whatever God has made your position, or your work, abide in that, unless you are quite sure that he calls you to something else. Let your first care be to glorify God to the utmost of your power where you are. Fill your present sphere to His praise, and if He needs you in another He will show it you. This evening lay aside vexatious ambition, and embrace peaceful content.

(C.H. Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening Devotions*, June 27)

Let us learn contentment from our Master – so that we may honor him in the situation in which he has placed us.

Vegetarianism - 1 Corinthians 8

This is a very flexible passage. It is cited to prove that a Christian should never drink; it is cited to prove it's OK for a Christian to drink. It's cited for a lot of things. So perhaps we had best read it for ourselves.

Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies.
(1Co 8:1 NASB)

The nature and nurture of knowledge

Paul deserves a little credit here. It's fairly obvious what's been going on; there is some sort of dispute in the church over a common practice of the time. Here's the situation:

Remember, please, two facts: First, the Corinthians live in a society in which animals are sacrificed to idols. Second, there are no refrigerators at this time. Combine those two and you will find that the best place to buy a good steak is right next to the temple of some idol. So it wouldn't be uncommon for a Christian to sit down to enjoy a good meal at the restaurant next door – which might even be connected with that temple. Two factions grew up:

- ✚ The first faction knew that this was outrageously immoral. It gives the appearance of a Christian somehow approving of idol worship, and therefore (when in doubt, don't) is to be banned.
- ✚ The second faction just can't see the point. They are, after all, intellectually mature Christians; they know there's nothing to this idol worship stuff. What's wrong with a good steak – bless it in God's name and pass the barbeque sauce.

You know, Satan laughs to hear such things. Two groups of pious believers with but a single thought: the other guy is dead wrong. They're both right.

A complaint about a good thing

We must begin with the fact that Paul is dealing with a complaint about a good thing. It is good for the Christian to have knowledge; it's good for him to know that the idol is just so much lifeless stone and wood. How much worse it would be if the Christian still thought that idol had power over him! But you can see that even this good thing can be twisted by Satan. Watch the steps:

- ✚ "Anywhere with Jesus I can safely go." It doesn't matter; as long as I am of pure conscience, I can go anywhere, eat anything. All belongs to the Lord.
- ✚ This is so because I have more perfect knowledge than those bluenose types over there, who are so worried about this.
- ✚ But see – this produces an attitude problem; just because I know more than you, I must be (somehow) better than you.

The problem comes down to pride, but of a very slinky form. In fact, if I know more of Christ than you, I am in some sense better than you – and, as we will see, that carries a certain responsibility. It should not also carry an attitude.

The unbalanced Christian

We don't see too much of idol worship in America today; it's very much out of date. But we do see a similar problem to what shows up here:

- ✦ These people were Greeks. They *loved* philosophy. Philosophical debates were a popular entertainment. But this led to an unbalanced form of Christianity; all mind, no heart.
- ✦ We're American Christians; we have the opposite problem. We can't tolerate "pointy headed liberals from Berkeley" telling us what to do! We know that the Gospel is an affair of the heart! (Does this sound familiar?) We tend to be all heart, no mind.

For that distinct minority in America, the intellectual Christian, this is a very trying circumstance. It explains the enduring popularity of C. S. Lewis' works; no American Christian author would contemplate intellectual Christianity. We have to get our intellectual works from an Englishman.

Our Lord had a different view: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength." Perhaps we ought to try it his way.

The result of imbalance

Paul tells us the result of any such imbalance: we look down on those who don't do as we do. We become "puffed up."

But see how Paul handles this problem: he doesn't separate people into "them" and "us." He starts out by saying, "we all have knowledge." We might say today, "we all have heart." Taking this not as a weakness but as a strength, he appeals as one of the strong to the strong. He admonishes those who have knowledge, not those who don't.

"Knowledge stands in extreme need of love." (Chrysostom)

Paul brings this home to us in three simple points:

- ✦ With knowledge comes freedom; but with freedom comes responsibility. Has your knowledge set you free? Then ask, what is the responsibility that comes with it? As always, in Christ, the obligation of the strong is to the weak.
- ✦ If you have knowledge, you naturally desire to make it perfect. But knowledge cannot be perfected in Christ without love! Therefore, to complete your knowledge, you must practice it in love.
- ✦ If you do, you will be "known by God." It is good to have knowledge; good to have love; how much better to blend the two into perfection – and thus be known personally to God Almighty.

Technique

Will you bear with me for a few lines as we go through Paul's logic? He is speaking to the Greeks, and logic they must have.

- ✦ The real truth is simple: these idols are worthless lumps of stone.
- ✦ There is only one God. There is only one Lord. (Note that even the titles are designed to proclaim the "one-ness" of God).
- ✦ This God is the creator of all things.
- ✦ This is the God for whom we live; he is the reason of existence, for he is existence itself.
- ✦ *But all this is knowledge.* Therefore, though this knowledge is great and wonderful (and it is), we must add to it the responsibility of love.

So then, the question resolves itself to, "what is the responsibility of one who has knowledge?" I answer in three steps:

- ✚ I have knowledge; that requires love. Therefore, I must apply love in this knowledge.
- ✚ I have freedom because of this knowledge; therefore, there must be responsibility which comes with it.
- ✚ These two, as always, apply towards my weaker brother.

So then, I am to apply my knowledge, if you will, to assist in the intellectual life of my weaker brother – and do so responsibly, and in love. How can this be done?

Conscience

If I am to understand how to do this, I must know the purpose of the intellectual life for the Christian. That – like all else in the Christian life – is the imitation of Christ. The primary intellectual vehicle is the conscience, for it is the conscience which is the chief intellectual barrier to sin. Sin is that which separates me from God; my intellect must oppose this – and that is conscience.

Now it clears up:

- ✚ The damage I do isn't in the meat but in the conscience. That's the damage I must avoid.
- ✚ I must do so by my actions, but considering my weaker brother's conscience.

Note something clearly: we are talking about someone's conscience – not someone's irritated prejudices. If you are absolutely convinced that no Christian should ever drink alcohol, tell me how I weaken your conscience by doing it? Let us be gracious in Christian liberty towards each other – but always shouldering the responsibility of our knowledge in the light of our brother's weakness.

I must now fire the warning shot. Suppose you think, "This is a lot of blather. How can I be so responsible?" Is it not clear that when you encourage your brother to weaken his conscience, you are tearing down his intellectual barrier to sin? In so doing, are you not sinning against him?

More than that; you are sinning against Christ himself.

- ✚ Christ died for that brother of yours; is that so trivial a thing that you can discount it?
- ✚ Is that brother of yours not a member – as you are – of the body of Christ?

Paul, of all the Apostles, is best qualified to speak to this. Do you remember the road to Damascus, and "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *me*?"

A final note

The problem in Paul's time was a surplus of intellectual Christianity; we now have a dearth. Consider the plight of the new Christian who comes to his faith with an intellectual or academic point of view.

- ✚ Do we encourage him to look beyond the facts and "just believe, brother?"
- ✚ If he has this gift of intellect, do we encourage him to use it – or tell him to forget it?
If you've never heard the intellectual voice in the church, perhaps there's a reason.

If a Man's Principles... - 1 Corinthians 9:1-23

In reading this passage – which appears at first blush to be a defense of Paul's apostleship – we must keep things in context. Paul has been pressing the Corinthians to refrain from doing things which they were permitted to do (in this instance, eating meat) for the sake of others. Paul now uses himself as an example of that. In this lesson we shall see three things, I trust:

- ✚ That Paul, as an apostle, had certain rights and privileges which came with that task.
- ✚ That Paul voluntarily gave up those rights and privileges for the sake of the Corinthian church.
- ✚ That as his example served for them, it should serve for us as well.

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord? If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. My defense to those who examine me is this: Do we not have a right to eat and drink? Do we not have a right to take along a believing wife, even as the rest of the apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? Or do only Barnabas and I not have a right to refrain from working? Who at any time serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat the fruit of it? Or who tends a flock and does not use the milk of the flock? I am not speaking these things according to human judgment, am I? Or does not the Law also say these things? For it is written in the Law of Moses, "YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE THE OX WHILE HE IS THRESHING." God is not concerned about oxen, is He? Or is He speaking altogether for our sake? Yes, for our sake it was written, because the plowman ought to plow in hope, and the thresher *to thresh* in hope of sharing *the crops*. If we sowed spiritual things in you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? If others share the right over you, do we not more? Nevertheless, we did not use this right, but we endure all things so that we will cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ. Do you not know that those who perform sacred services eat the *food* of the temple, *and* those who attend regularly to the altar have their share from the altar? So also the Lord directed those who proclaim the gospel to get their living from the gospel. But I have used none of these things. And I am not writing these things so that it will be done so in my case; for it would be better for me to die than have any man make my boast an empty one. For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion; for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel. For if I do this voluntarily, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have a stewardship entrusted to me. What then is my reward? That, when I preach the gospel, I may offer the gospel without charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel. For though I am free from all *men*, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some. I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.
(1Co 9:1-23 NASB)

I Have a Right!

Paul begins the argument by establishing his rights.

The right to be called an apostle

Evidently there was some challenge to this; otherwise, Paul would not have taken such care in establishing it. He argues as follows:

- ✦ He has seen the risen Lord – who has given him the task. It was recognized in the early church that no man could claim to be an apostle unless he had seen the risen Lord. Not all those who had seen him could make that claim; only those whom the Lord had appointed. Paul argues here both the sight and the appointment.
- ✦ If further proof is needed, he submits to the Corinthians – themselves! If he is an apostle, then there is fruit to his work, and the Corinthians are just such fruit. If he were not an apostle, his work would have failed had he claimed such fraudulently.
- ✦ If this is not adequate for us, it should have been adequate for them, at least. This only shows that the argument is always there. “Why should I listen to you?” – the cry of those who want the appearance of righteousness on their own terms.

Is there a right to such support?

Just because you’re an apostle, are you entitled to support? In verse 14 Paul makes the explicit claim that the Lord has so commanded it. He cites these examples:

- ✦ First, the other apostles. They journey about; Peter takes his wife with him. They are supported by the churches. If Peter, why not Paul?
- ✦ Next, he cites the common example of agriculture of the time. The worker was paid, often, from the harvest directly. If this is so for the harvesting of crops, how much more so the harvesting of souls?
- ✦ Another example is the soldier. The soldier’s pay may not be much – I never thought it overly generous – but at least he gets it. If it is so with the wars of the earth, how much more so the war for the souls of men?
- ✦ Finally, there is the explicit example from the Old Testament. The priests who ministered in the temple were fed by the sacrifices.

Conclusion

I conclude the following (and not I alone):

- ✦ A minister of the Gospel is entitled to be supported by those to whom he ministers. God’s work; God’s charges.
- ✦ Such support is not just for the barest of necessities, but the normal conduct of life (for example, taking your wife along).
- ✦ But note: the work comes first, then the support. We are not called to support every person who thinks it might be a good idea to ask.

Giving up those rights

The next step in Paul’s argument is that he gave up those rights. Let us be clear as to what he has given up – and what he cannot give up.

Duty – preaching the Gospel

- ✦ As Paul’s description of the incident on the road to Damascus makes clear, he has no choice but to preach the Gospel. He is commanded to do so.
- ✦ So he claims no credit for preaching the Gospel to them. There is no extra credit on the exam for the mandatory questions.

We, as Christians, sometimes fail to understand this. We often believe that simply doing what we are commanded to do puts God greatly in our debt. This is a grave misunderstanding.

Above and beyond duty – not at their expense

What is above and beyond his duty is this: he did not preach to them and rely on them for support.

- ✚ How was he supported? Sometimes he worked as a tentmaker. Sometimes he was supported by other churches. He tells us that he “robbed other churches” for their sake. No doubt the other churches considered it a sacrifice of love – but see that in either case it was not a matter of commandment, but love exceeding the commandment.
- ✚ Why would they do such a thing? Is it not a sacrifice in imitation of their Lord? Consider the reward God gives to those who make sacrifices in his cause!

The extent of his sacrifice

Paul did not just sacrifice his right to be supported. He also adds these other sacrifices:

- ✚ His freedom to be “out from under” the Mosaic Law. When it was needed, he stayed under that law – for the sake of Christ.
- ✚ His comfort in being in the Law! Consider how it must have felt to have been raised in the Law, knowing its rules to be sufficient – and then to behave like a Gentile, for the sake of Christ.
- ✚ His strength – so that the weak would have someone like them.

All things to all men – for the sake of the Gospel. It is a challenge and inspiration to us yet today.

If a man’s principles don’t cost him anything – they aren’t worth very much.

That’s what my father taught me. Anyone can be high-principled as long as it’s cheap. So let me ask a few questions:

What does our Christianity cost us?

- ✚ Do we meet the minimum? Do we sacrifice those things we should just to obey the commands of Christ?
- ✚ Do we exceed that, for the love of our Lord? Do we sacrifice above and beyond what is commanded?

I have become all things

This too is a sacrifice. Consider, if you will, what it takes to become “all things to all men so that by all means I might win some..”

Sacrifice of who we are

- ✚ Are we willing to sacrifice our comfort level to bring the Gospel to others? Some go to the mission field; for some, it’s just associating with those they find undesirable.
- ✚ Are we willing to sacrifice our dreams and ambitions? Does the next career move come ahead of staying home for our children? Are our spare hours dedicated to God, or to moving up the corporate ladder?
- ✚ Are we willing to sacrifice our position? If you are in some sense a ruler over men – a manager, for example – are you willing to be the servant of all? Or does that sacrifice your “dignity?”

Sacrifice of what we have

- ✚ Some of us find it hard to part with money – and even harder to part with possessions. Will you sacrifice them for the sake of your brothers and sisters in Christ? Will you sacrifice them for your own sake?
- ✚ More than money and possessions, will you sacrifice your time? Or do you see God’s needs taken care of on Sunday morning only?

Sacrifice of what is ours by right

This may be the hardest of all, for we tell ourselves that we have earned it, it is ours by right, it is righteous that we should have it – and all this can be true. But are we willing to sacrifice even these things?

- ✚ Are we willing to sacrifice justice for ourselves for the sake of the unity of the church – as we saw a few weeks ago?
- ✚ Are we willing to sacrifice justice for ourselves so that we might be merciful?
- ✚ Are we willing to sacrifice what we know to be the treatment which is our due – as husband or wife, for example – so that the cause of Christ might triumph?
- ✚ Perhaps the greatest of all: when we know we have the “right answer” – to whatever the question – are we willing to let someone else’s wrong answer prevail – for the sake of Christ?

Be Careful - 1 Corinthians 9:24 – 10:14

Paul, in this passage, continues his warnings to the experienced Christian. So often this passage is taken as a warning to the new Christian; it is not so. Listen, and learn.

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but *only* one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then *do it* to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified. For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea; and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; and all ate the same spiritual food; and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness. Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we would not crave evil things as they also craved. Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written, "THE PEOPLE SAT DOWN TO EAT AND DRINK, AND STOOD UP TO PLAY." Nor let us act immorally, as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in one day. Nor let us try the Lord, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the serpents. Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall. No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it. Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.

(1Co 9:24-10:14 NASB)

The need for bodily discipline

It is clear that Paul is speaking of bodily discipline for the mature Christian. We often like to "spiritualize" this passage, for bodily discipline is not a popular subject these days. But Paul tells us that it is necessary, and necessary for the mature Christian.

A sense of purpose

This is not the discipline of some ascetic sect in which the discipline is an end in and of itself. This discipline has a purpose.

- ✚ The discipline itself is bodily. That means, it deals with those things arising from the fact that we have a human body – such things as sexual desire, the longing for party and pleasure, our aches and pains and even our desire for rest.
- ✚ The purpose, however, is spiritual. The effect of this discipline is to help in keeping us from sin.
- ✚ There's a reason for this, and we have touched on it before. We're amphibians. Humans must have a body, unlike the angels. Christ's body was just like ours – and therefore he understands our bodily temptations. He too disciplined his body.

But what purpose?

The purpose is to keep us from those sins which arise from the fact that we have a body – and that fact allows Satan an entry point for temptation. For example:

- ✦ We would all recognize as sins of the body such things as adultery, fornication, drunkenness and gluttony.
- ✦ There are also those worldly sins which come from the flesh – particularly those which involve the love of pleasure and ease; sloth, for example.
- ✦ Beyond that are sins which seem spiritual but may arise from the body. Are we presumptuous in testing the Lord with regard to our aches and pains? Do we grumble against him in our infirmities?

If it could happen to Paul...

It can happen to us. We know that temptation afflicts the weak, but Satan hasn't given up on the rest of us yet. If this discipline is good for the weak, it is good for the strong as well – indeed, it just may be one of the ways in which you become strong.

If you consider yourself a mature Christian, remember that this makes your responsibilities – and danger – all the greater. The destroyer is not sent to do the battleship's job; but when the battleship arrives, the shells are always the big ones.

Our Example: Israel

Paul knows something about our human nature. We just don't want to believe in hell. Have you ever noticed that most of the references to hell for human beings come from our Lord himself? Paul knows you can't really picture yourself in hell. So he gives you an example you can picture.

In so doing, he makes use of what is often called a "type." A type is an event in the Old Testament which foreshadows – and gives insight upon – things in the New Testament. This sounds very "theological" – and it can certainly be stretched a great deal in that direction. But there is a very practical use for us: the Old Testament is there for our warning and admonition.

Think of it this way: you're probably sitting content right now, thinking, "I wonder who he's talking about – certainly not me!" Your faith is strong; you know you're on solid ground. But consider those ancient Israelites Paul mentions here. Think about how many miracles they saw! "If I ever saw even one miracle, my faith would be so strong..."

How many of those people – there were about two million, by some estimates – ever saw the promised land? Two. Just two. Joshua and Caleb – one in a million. It can happen to you; it can happen to me; it can happen to Paul.

All the right spiritual moves

Many in the church place their reliance on the external signs that God has given us. Those signs are good – if they are completed in the actions of our lives.

- ✦ Baptism - they were "baptized" in the Red Sea, Paul tells us. They had the same kind of initiation we have; it wasn't enough.
- ✦ Communion – they too ate "the bread of heaven." Our Lord draws this type out for us explicitly, so we know we can make this parallel. They had their form of "Lord's Supper" – and it wasn't enough.

You can have all the right spiritual moves, but if you do not follow up – "work out your salvation in fear and trembling" – it is not enough.

Fulfilling God's requirements

How is it that Christians can deceive themselves like this?

- ✚ Some reduce the faith to a set of rules. Paul's talked about such, and told us to be gentle with them. But if you rely entirely on "the rules" you substitute the part for the whole. It is not enough.
- ✚ Some think that God is in their debt! "I've been a very good person, much better than I would have been otherwise. God, you owe me." To state it is to see the fallacy, but it's a common one.

Things to avoid

However we construct this bodily discipline – and note that Paul gives us no formula for this, he leaves it to us to figure out – there are certain things he does mention as being specific problems:

Idolatry

It's interesting to see the passage Paul is talking about here. It's from Exodus 32:6-8. What's interesting about it is that the idolatry starts with a party. These people evidently felt that it was no great sin to worship an idol; after all, the party was on, who wouldn't join in? But it shows us the connection between idolatry – the worship of anything other than God – and our love of pleasure.

- ✚ Have you ever seen a true football fan – one for whom the team comes first on Sundays?
- ✚ How about the person whose recreation – the boat, the cabin, the trip to Mazatlan – comes before Christ?
- ✚ Or – to come to a simpler point – you're too drunk on Saturday night to get up early for church on Sunday. (Of course, if your tee time is early, that's different.)

Sexual immorality

This is so clearly condemned that it seems amazing to hear the excuses – from Christians:

- ✚ You can be blatant about it: "I want to sleep with my girlfriend, therefore there is no God." (Granoff's law).
- ✚ We're usually more subtle: "How can anything so beautiful be wrong?" (I have my standards, God has his, hey ... we just happen to disagree.)
- ✚ Or, if we let pride have our way: "I'm not 17 any more; I'm an adult; I can handle this."

Testing the Lord

We might have a problem understanding just what it means to "test" the Lord. So let me give you some examples:

- ✚ The trained bear syndrome. We treat God as if he were a trained bear. Whenever we have a problem, we get out our trained bear, give him careful instructions on exactly how to handle the problem, and expect him to perform on command. (Does this sound presumptuous?)
- ✚ I don't have to ask. Whenever I have a problem, I don't have to take it to God in prayer – certainly not in penitent, pleading prayer. He knows what I'm going through, and I'm certain he doesn't need to hear from me about it.
- ✚ Giving good advice. Sometimes it's not our problem; it's someone else's. We give them our wonderful advice, telling them we know exactly what God will do. Isn't that a little presumptuous too?

Grumbling

Most Christians don't consider this a sin (but see the book of Exodus on the subject); they consider it their right.

- ✚ But consider: when things are going well, are we mystified as to why? Don't we have a ready explanation in our own efforts? So when they're going poorly, why do we grumble against God?
- ✚ Of course, we're not going to do this amongst those pious souls at church. We're going to do it under our breath – that way, God and those other Christians won't hear us. (Yeah, right.)
- ✚ The real problem: we're willing to stand up to God – but not willing to go to our knees before the Sovereign of the Universe.

To all these, God provides a way out. If you are tempted, God will provide a way of evading the temptation. It may be as simple as, "if my people, who are called by name, will humble themselves and pray..."

Does all this seem academic to you? Remember to whom this passage is addressed:

Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall.
(1Co 10:12 NASB)

As mother used to say, "Boy-san, this means **you!**"

For the Unbeliever's Sake - 1 Corinthians 10:15-33

Paul now continues his argument regarding our intellectual responsibilities towards others – by extending it to the unbeliever.

I speak as to wise men; you judge what I say. Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ? Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread. Look at the nation Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices sharers in the altar? What do I mean then? That a thing sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? *No*, but *I say* that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers in demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? We are not stronger than He, are we? All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify. Let no one seek his own *good*, but that of his neighbor. Eat anything that is sold in the meat market without asking questions for conscience' sake; FOR THE EARTH IS THE LORD'S, AND ALL IT CONTAINS. If one of the unbelievers invites you and you want to go, eat anything that is set before you without asking questions for conscience' sake. But if anyone says to you, "This is meat sacrificed to idols," do not eat *it*, for the sake of the one who informed *you*, and for conscience' sake; I mean not your own conscience, but the other *man's*; for why is my freedom judged by another's conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why am I slandered concerning that for which I give thanks? Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the *profit* of the many, so that they may be saved.

(1Co 10:15-33 NASB)

Paul's argument here is roughly the same as before, but with differing circumstance. In particular, this passage concerns our obligations to the unbeliever, rather than our weaker brother. He appeals to us to be the guardians of the faith as seen by the unbeliever:

- ✚ First, so that his conscience will not be defiled – for it is the work of the Holy Spirit to convict the world of sin and judgment.
- ✚ Further, so that his understanding of the true faith will not be darkened by our poor example.

As before, this must be set against our own liberty in Christ. Having just made the argument regarding the weak brother, Paul now appeals to us in the same vein – as sensible people. Perhaps we have grown less sensible since his time; the argument seems to be in need of explanation these days.

What's an unbeliever to think?

Paul is concerned – at least to begin with – with the logical conclusions the unbeliever might reach while observing our conduct. Because of the decline in intellectual Christianity in America, the matter needs some of the more obvious points to be stated.

Symbolic Communication

I once heard a worship leader explain of communion, "this is not a ritual." If it isn't, I'd like to know what is a ritual. Ritual is nothing more than acted out symbolic communication – and symbolic communication is the highest form of communication known to human beings.

You think not?

- ✚ What does that wedding ring on your finger symbolize? Or is it meaningless, just something people do?
- ✚ You consider yourself a patriot? How does someone burning the flag affect you? Or is it just a piece of cloth? Is it not a symbol of the highest worth to you?
- ✚ If these are not sufficient, consider that God, throughout the Old Testament, used the symbols of sacrifice and offering to explain his purpose and love for us.

So then, what does this ritual say – to us, and to the non-believer?

- ✚ Paul calls it the cup of blessing – thanksgiving, in the New International – even though it represents the shed blood of our Lord. In what higher, more powerful way could our Lord proclaim his love for us? Paul’s readers would have seen this.
- ✚ The bread is said to be sharing (participation in the New International). Is there a better symbol of fellowship than this? We still “break bread – together.” So in this we see the strong unity of the church, and our care for each other.
- ✚ Taken together, the act of eating what is clearly called the body and blood of Christ *must* say – at least to an alert mind – that we are become the body of Christ. For – symbolically, at least – you are what you eat.

These are the logical conclusions of our ritual; believer and unbeliever alike may easily discover them.

Union with demons

But – if this is so, then surely participation in idol worship carries with it the same meaning with regard to the demons those idols represent. Now consider this: if an unbeliever of this time saw such a thing, what would he conclude?

- ✚ He might conclude that you hold both beliefs. Or, as we would say it today, “all religions are equally true.” Which is to say, they are equally false. Which then points him to the perfectly logical conclusion that you think the faith you proclaim in communion to be false.
- ✚ He might conclude that you don’t really believe anything. You might be one of those folks who say, “it doesn’t matter what you believe, as long as you’re sincere.” It is just possible that this unbeliever might be smart enough to recognize just how dumb that statement is – and just how dumb you are.
- ✚ He might otherwise conclude that you are more afraid of what other people will think – let’s not offend those idol worshipers, now – than you are of God. This doesn’t seem to accord well with the image of the Almighty, now does it?
- ✚ He might just reach the logical conclusion that you’re a fraud, a hypocrite. It’s also logical to assume that you think this a perfectly reasonable thing to be.

So, then, our conduct as observed by the non-believer can indeed have serious consequences. Think of it today: what would one of your unbelieving friend think?

- ✚ What would they think about you, as a Christian, from the way you behave?
- ✚ What would they think about the church, seeing you as their best known example of same?
- ✚ What would they think about God – seeing you as the person who knows him best?

There is a more serious consequence. You must be concerned not only with what the unbeliever thinks – but also what God thinks. Suppose you are one of those church members who really doesn’t see a problem with being a sophisticated drunkard on Saturday night (after all, your naïve Christian friends could never understand the sneering sophistication of your intellectual life) and a pious

believer on Sunday morning (the spiritual side your night life friends would never be able to come up to).

- ✚ Look at it this way: if you brought some sweet young thing home to your wife, with the explanation that “It’s not that I don’t love you honey, I just needed a little variety. I can love you both.” – just how do you think she would react?
- ✚ Have you not read that the Lord your God is a jealous God? How then – given the example above – do you think He will react?
- ✚ It is faintly possible your wife might just take action. My wife is often quoted as saying, “Divorce? No. Murder, yes, but divorce, no.” Have you no fear of the Living God?

Christian Liberty

The balance point of all this is Christian liberty. It is possible – tough these days, but possible – to get hung up on all possible implications of all possible actions. So what does God expect?

Not the rules

Rules and regulations in the faith have their place:

- ✚ First, they are useful in strengthening those who are weak. Are you an alcoholic? Make it a rule never to touch the stuff.
- ✚ They are also useful for the beginner. As a child, I was forbidden to play in the street. Later, as a driver and a father, I understood why.

Mastery of the self

We are expected, however, to master ourselves.

- ✚ The objectives of self-mastery are the same as those of the rules: proper conduct of the Christian life, pleasing to God. We need to see that losing the rules did not mean losing the purpose of the rules.
- ✚ The method is different. When the rules become a burden, we leave them behind – so as to do greater things, not lesser ones.

What would Jesus do?

It’s a useful principle. Older generations of Christians would have spoken of “the imitation of Christ.” I would suggest these principles to you:

- ✚ In all your ways, explicitly acknowledge God. It reminds you of your duties and others of your Lord.
- ✚ Be wary for the souls of others, especially the non-believer – Christ died for such, and you are his imitator.
- ✚ Indeed be wary for the non-believer – for such were you, once. Remember what your Lord has done for you.

For the sake of the non-believer

What then should we do? Let’s put it into the terms that Paul might have used:

For the sake of the non-believer, **EAT**

- ✚ The faith is superior to all other beliefs – act like it. Take that thought seriously. Some things are good; others are better; you have the best of all. Don't be ashamed to say so; don't be ashamed to act like it.
- ✚ Have no fear of those other "gods" – even the little tin ones who sit in the high places of our world.
- ✚ Act like you know the TRUTH – personally. Because you do. Don't be ashamed to do what is right. Even if all around you laugh, you will be bearing witness to your Lord.
- ✚ Don't be afraid of "what people will think." Especially the politically correct people, who consider their understanding that there is no truth to be so superior to your old-fashioned view. If gravity ever goes out of fashion, you may count on it: it will still work. Same with the truth.

For the sake of the non-believer, **DON'T EAT**

- ✚ Ask yourself, "Is this something Christians 'don't do?'" If your friend is convinced of this, are you not attacking his conscience by doing it?
- ✚ Are you omitting something Christians should do? Even the non-believer may have reasonable expectations of your charity. A gift to a man with a cardboard sign feeds the man – but may also enlighten the soul of your friend.
- ✚ Beware the conscience of the non-believer. If you help sear that conscience into nothingness, how then does the Holy Spirit do his work of convicting the world of sin and judgment?

Cause no stumbling – but do all for the glory of God

- ✚ Make it a point: in prayer and in words, give thanks to God in all things, so that others may know from whom you get all things.
- ✚ In wisdom restrain yourself, so that wisdom may be seen in you.
- ✚ In doubt? No idea what Jesus would do? Ask, "Is this something I can do for the glory of God?" Remember his words: "If I be lifted up, I will draw all men unto me." Lift him up – and see.

Husband – Tyrant, or Prince? - 1 Corinthians 11:1-16

There is a recurring phenomenon in the church. Some doctrine will swiftly become abominable to the world; the church will produce “explainers” who tell all that the Bible didn’t really mean what it said there; and – after a generation or two – someone “rediscovers” the truth in the Bible. In the meanwhile many are led astray. In our time, one such “error” is the submission of women to their husbands. Here we encounter it in Paul’s words:

Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ. Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you. But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ. Every man who has *something* on his head while praying or prophesying disgraces his head. But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying disgraces her head, for she is one and the same as the woman whose head is shaved. For if a woman does not cover her head, let her also have her hair cut off; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, let her cover her head. For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake. Therefore the woman ought to have *a symbol of* authority on her head, because of the angels. However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as the woman originates from the man, so also the man *has his birth* through the woman; and all things originate from God. Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God *with her head* uncovered? Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her hair is given to her for a covering. But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God.

(1Co 11:1-16 NASB)

The key to understanding this passage is found in verse one: the imitation of Christ. If we will keep his example before our minds, the entire question will become much easier to deal with. First, a review of the concept of submission.

Submission

In general

Consistent readers will recall the general principles of Christian submission:

- ✚ All of us, as Christians, are in submission – at least to Jesus Christ. That is the very nature of being a Christian. Most of us are in submission to many other authorities as well – governments, church leadership, teachers – the list is very long.
- ✚ True submission is to true (legitimate) authority – and that authority flows from Christ, to whom all authority is given.
- ✚ The nature of authority – and hence the nature of submission – is determined by the task assigned. Submission as a student is different from submission as a wife.
- ✚ With that task and authority comes responsibility.
- ✚ The one in authority must always remember that such submission is voluntary; you chose to become a Christian. As my mother tells my wife, “you volunteered for this chicken outfit.”
- ✚ The reason for submission is sin. Policemen have authority because of it, for example. Interestingly, the same rationale is given for husbands having authority over their wives.

The human side of authority

All well and good, teacher – but how should this work out in actual, day to day living?

- ✚ Our model is that of Christ – see verse one! – and his model is that of the servant-leader. Therefore, any Christian leader (including husband) should be a servant-leader.
- ✚ The beneficiary of the submission relationship – is the person in submission. (That’s one difference between a prince and a tyrant).
- ✚ The motivation of any Christian leader – we cannot expect this from our government – must be that of Christ: love.
- ✚ And as Christ was exalted for his obedience as a servant-leader, so God will reward those servant-leaders who obey his commands. He will also punish those who don’t.

Parallel essence

So what really rankles us about this submission? Is it not that submission makes us feel inferior? This may simply be a question of sinful pride, but for the sake of those in authority we will assume not. (It’s a lot harder to abuse submission than it is authority). In particular, does this mean that woman is inferior to man?

- ✚ Let’s look at the example we are given: Jesus Christ. Is He inferior to the one to whom He is in submission, God the Father? As touching his manhood, yes; as touching his divinity, no – that was the ancient formula. Even though He is equal to God the Father, He made himself nothing and became like us – and was obedient even to death on the cross. With such an example of submission before us, can we really conclude that submission means inferiority?
- ✚ Paul makes much the same point here. In one verse it sounds like woman is completely inferior; in the next point he says that man comes from woman (which makes them equal) and then he gives the whole thing up and says that all is from God. Like Christ and the Father, man and woman have the same essence, as Aquinas would put it.

Remember that submission and authority exist because of sin. We often hear repeated the verse “that all are one in Christ Jesus.” In Christ Jesus we are without sin, and therefore we are indeed equal. But because sin exists, God has created marriage – a submission relationship – to deal with it. Interestingly, in all the references I can find, the sinful nature for which this is prescribed is that of the husband.

The conclusion of the matter: the wife is not inferior to the husband. She is in submission to him.

Why, then, do we have so much trouble with this?

Our World’s View

If you were to ask this question of most Christians, you’d get a variety of answers.

- ✚ Most would point to the radical feminists of our day, claiming this to be the problem. There is no doubt that the public school system proclaims the feminist agenda in strident terms, beginning at the earliest age. But can we not dig deeper?
- ✚ Perhaps the underlying problem is our sinful nature – though feminists deny the existence of sin (it’s old fashioned, you know). It is just barely possible that feminism is the second wrong desperately

attempting to make a right. If Christian husbands modeled Christ to their wives, would we see such things in their children?

- ✚ Remember: Satan cannot create anything – he can only twist what God has created. Therefore, let us examine his twistings.

Twistings

Some of the twistings that we see:

- ✚ We are much enamored of the legal fiction that all are equal – as the Declaration of Independence puts it, “that all men are created equal.” It is a very useful legal fiction; but in the church we must put aside fiction and deal with reality. We are all equal in Christ – but we are not all interchangeable parts. Male is not interchangeable with female.
- ✚ As Americans, we hold as a matter of principle that it is our duty to rebel against tyranny. But we have now twisted that – making rebellion against authority to be a positive good. You don’t think so? Visit any nearby public high school. Rudeness and rebellion against authority are now considered a normal part of growing up.
- ✚ We even twist the words we use so that their meanings will end up as opposites. A rose by any other name would smell as sweet? Consider a few examples. Does marriage really mean two lesbians? Does family mean any conglomeration of people under one roof? Does love really mean nothing but sexual passion excuses all?

Why is the sexual distinction so important?

Paul here seems to be complaining of some rather trivial things. The length of hair, after all, is something subject to fashion. I submit for your consideration the following thoughts:

Design Principle

- ✚ You can use a hammer to drive a screw into wood. Does that make a hammer a screwdriver? No. It makes it a tool misused. Just because it works doesn’t mean it was designed to work that way.
- ✚ Men and women are designed differently – and therefore we need to recognize that difference and deal with it *in the manner intended by the Designer*. Just because we can make a woman do a man’s job doesn’t mean that we should make her do it.

Right use of authority

This is not a matter of whether or not women can teach math, or fly airplanes, or other such things. This is a matter of spiritual authority – which has eternal consequences. The man was given this authority, I submit, for at least these reasons:

- ✚ First, for the sake of the children. If children know that their parents are “equal” they will play one off against the other. They will quickly learn that authority is to be manipulated, not obeyed. I leave the results of this to your imagination.
- ✚ Next, this authority is given as a corrective to the man’s physical strength and arrogance. Does this surprise you? Remember the nature of authority: it is to be exercised in servant leadership. The example set before the man is that of Christ himself.
- ✚ This authority is also given to correct a woman’s protectiveness of her children.

Submission in symbolism

The submission shown here is largely symbolic. In verse six Paul talks of shaving a woman’s head. You might ask why; but remember – men go bald. The point is simply that if the woman is going

to act like a man, then disgrace her by making her look like a man. It is a measure of the depravity of our society that many think this a good thing.

Our forebears would have understood this much more clearly. They understood the difference, and the importance of the difference. That's because they understood the difference between the Bride, the church, and Christ. God has painted on the living canvas of our bodies a picture of his love for the church; let us not mar the painting.

Tyrant – or prince

I cannot leave this subject without a word for the men. I frame it in terms of a quiz for the women, but it really applies to men. Ladies, do you know the difference between being married to a tyrant – or a prince?

- ✚ The tyrant does not have legitimate authority; the prince does. If you have legitimate authority, it comes from Christ. Therefore, if you are married to a prince, your husband recognizes Christ's authority over him and is obedient to Christ – especially in the things of marriage. Does your husband have the authority of Christ? Then he is a prince.
- ✚ The tyrant's motive is his own self-interest. The prince cares for his own. His motive is his love for his people. Does your husband place his love for you above his own self-interest? Then he is a prince.
- ✚ Finally, the tyrant considers himself his own best example. The prince knows that Christ is his example. Does your husband imitate his Lord and Savior in servant leadership? Does he say to you, follow me, as I follow Christ? Then he is a prince.

So I leave it to you: is your husband a tyrant, or a prince?

The Bridge - 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

To this day there are those who think that matters of divine ritual are of trivial importance. It is sad enough to see this at a wedding; how much more so at the Lord's Supper.

But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part I believe it. For there must also be factions among you, so that those who are approved may become evident among you. Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you. For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; 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.**" In the same way *He took* the cup also after supper, saying, "**This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.**" For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world. So then, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, so that you will not come together for judgment. The remaining matters I will arrange when I come.

(1Co 11:17-34 NASB)

The Original Problem

We are some distance from the original customs of the church. Therefore, we must review what was going on in their culture so that we may translate the message into our own.

This is a corruption of a good thing

You will remember that the early church, in its days in Jerusalem, took its meals in common. Indeed, they shared all things in common. This – especially as it relates to the Lord's Supper – has some enormous advantages. In so doing, the rich could feed the poor without embarrassment. It was, if you will, the early version of the church pot luck supper.

Some might think this a strange way to take Communion. But consider: the Passover was a full meal – not just a ceremonial one. You ate a complete lamb, with bread, herbs, and other prescribed items. We have since made it into a completely ceremonial meal – largely to correct the abuses seen here, as well as to make it easier to complete in a time when a one hour church service seems a long thing. But (just to use a local example) we still have communion at our "prayer and share" suppers. It is not required; but it is not forbidden either.

Differences

Paul is careful not to condemn differences in the members of the church:

- ✚ There will always be the difference between the mature and the immature in the faith, for example.
- ✚ Indeed, he will shortly begin to talk about the difference in spiritual gifts.

His point is, however, that some differences – rich and poor, for example – should be of no consequence, lest factions develop. This is particularly true at the Lord’s Supper, which is a source of unity in the church.

“To some extent I believe it.”

Paul wants to correct a most serious difficulty. He also wants to make it clear that not everyone is part of the problem – but that everyone must be part of the solution. Some of these Corinthians were trying to do it right. Others were sinners as they participated:

- ✚ Some were sinners in the sense of greed and drunkenness.
- ✚ Others made things worse: by their actions, they humiliated the poor.
- ✚ Worst of all, some disgraced the very body and blood of Christ.

It is this last which brings Paul’s most serious rebuke.

An Utterly Serious Rebuke

The serious nature of the offense can be seen in the rebuke. Paul does not give this rebuke on his authority as an Apostle – as great as that is. Indeed, he takes the matter back to first principles; the rebuke is made by referring to the specific instruction of Christ himself. The teaching given concerns the ritual which is at the center of the faith. If we are to understand the gravity of the offense, we must understand the grandeur of the offended.

For that purpose, I offer to you a picture, an analogy. It is often said that Jesus is the bridge between God and man. Picture, then, a bridge – a suspension bridge over a “great gulf fixed.” It has two towers, and a span between.

The near tower: “my body”

“This is for you” – it represents the body of Christ. The body, his human nature, is sacrificed for us. The church has always insisted on the full humanity of Christ, for without a physical, bodily sacrifice the atonement is of no effect. In Communion, we can see the body (represented by the bread) in two ways:

- ✚ We still use the phrase “break bread together” to mean a common meal. What more plain, more common symbol could be used for the unity of the church?
- ✚ Moreover, his body is that which we have in common; he is like us. That’s why it’s the “near tower” – we can understand that.

The far tower: “my blood”

Christ tells us that this is the “new covenant” which is “in his blood.” What does that mean?

- ✚ A covenant is an agreement offered by God – and unchangeable by man. It is the relationship between man and God – starting with God’s side of the bridge.
- ✚ The Old Testament tells us that “the life is in the blood” – which was why the Israelites were required to drain the blood from their sacrifices before presenting them. But who gives life?

So here we have the picture of God's side of the bridge – the side with an unchangeable, eternal covenant – the one which gives eternal life.

The path between: Jesus

"I am the way, the truth, the life – no one comes to the Father except by me." If you wish to pass over the gulf from this side to God's side, you must cross the bridge; no other way exists. That way is Jesus Christ.

It is not just a matter of being exclusive. It is a matter of holiness. Only the holy can approach the holy God; he will tolerate none other. But how can we be completely holy? Only in Christ.

Therefore...

Now you see it: in Communion, you proclaim the path between man and God – you proclaim the atonement of Christ. Without his atonement, there is no path.

Note also that you proclaim it "until he comes." Communion looks back to the atonement; it looks forward to his return, too.

The Approach Reveals the Man

We so often think that we need not prepare in the small things because "I'll rise to the occasion when the occasion arises." I used to caution my Little Leaguers against such thinking: "you play like you practice." So let's see how we practice.

If unworthy –

If you are one who takes the Lord's Supper lightly, in an unworthy manner, you are indeed a sinner:

- ✚ You sin against the body of Christ. That means you offend against the unity of the church, for the church is the body of Christ. That's what happened here as the rich humiliated the poor. But at the same time you dishonor the suffering in the body which your Lord endured – you treat it as if it were nothing.
- ✚ You sin against the blood of Christ. You sin against the very life of the church, for the life is in the blood. You sin against the atonement of Christ, for the new covenant is in his blood. This is indeed very grave.

But – you might ask – how can a man prevent such a thing from happening? Surely there are some precautions which might be taken?

Prevention

Indeed there are such precautions. The first is to examine yourself.

- ✚ Know what sins you have committed – and ask for forgiveness. Remember, if you would cross that bridge, only the holy make it to the other side.
- ✚ Know what sins you must forgive – so that you may be at peace when you approach the throne of grace. Only those who forgive are forgiven.

The matter is one of judgment. One way or another, we are all going to be judged. But as Christians, we get to select the method:

- ✦ The easiest method is to judge ourselves. If we will examine ourselves; discern our sins, confess them and repent of them, then our Lord has no need to judge further.
- ✦ If we will not, our Lord will judge us – in love, disciplining us for our transgressions. Isn't this what a loving father does for his children?
- ✦ But if we will not heed his discipline, if we reject it, then – as Paul clearly tells us – we will be condemned with the rest of the world.

Paul asks the Corinthians here to take such simple precautions. They were to wait for each other in Communion; they were to prevent problems of greed and gluttony by eating at home, first. This does not seem so difficult, does it?

My doctor is of the same opinion. He tells me to take my blood pressure at regular intervals and examine myself. A little correction now is worth much surgery later. If this is true with the body – how much more so with the Body?

Spiritual Gifts - 1 Corinthians 12

In modern times one of the great divisions of the church has been over spiritual gifts. Lines in the sand tend to harden over time; there are church groups today who claim that you *must* be able to speak in tongues, or you're not a real Christian. This is a gross misinterpretation of the Scripture.

Likewise, there are those who hold that no spiritual gifts exist today, as they could only be given by the Apostles. This too is incorrect; they are gifts – of the Spirit.

Which, by the way, explains why they are so inconsistent in church history. God gives them as He pleases, not as we demand them.

The situation in the early church was somewhat different, which accounts for Paul's introduction to the subject.

The unity of the church

Now concerning spiritual *gifts*, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware. You know that when you were pagans, *you were* led astray to the mute idols, however you were led. Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus is accursed"; and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit. Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all *persons*. But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another *various* kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills.

(1Co 12:1-11 NASB)

You need to place yourself in their time. In those days people were very familiar with those who were demon possessed. (Speak to a third world missionary about this subject; it can be very enlightening). Their common experience was that someone who was demon possessed would give off oracular advice – which people paid for, quite liberally. This was the technique used to keep the idol worshippers coming back to the temples.

Paul, like Christ, rebukes these demons and tells them to be quiet.³ He would not have the word of God rely on the testimony of demons. This tells us something about them: they lie a lot. So how do we tell the difference between a true Christian, speaking with the gift of the Spirit, and someone who is demon possessed? After all, the demons testified to Christ – in terror.

The answer Paul gives is found in the formula above. In short, you're either with Christ or against him, and the difference will soon be plain.

³ Acts 16:17

Different, but equal

Paul is still discoursing on his prime theme, the unity of the church. He shows us this in three ways:

- ✚ He says they are different *gifts* – not something we earned, gifts. If you get a different gift from God, why are you jealous?
- ✚ Perhaps you think it's because God loves the other fellow more than he loves you. So Paul tells us there are different kinds of service. The implication is clear: it's not just a gift, it's a service – which implies hard work. Are you jealous of the other man's workload?
- ✚ He then tells us there are different kinds of working. The word used is the one from which we get our word "energy." In short, different gifts, different service because we each have our own differing capacity to work.

But all three are from the same source: the Holy Spirit.

Classification

In this section he lists both miraculous and non-miraculous gifts, without distinguishing importance. The non-miraculous gifts – see if these were what you had in mind when you heard the phrase "spiritual gifts":

- ✚ The "message of wisdom" – the ability to proclaim wisdom to the people.
- ✚ The "message of knowledge" – the ability to proclaim knowledge to the people.
- ✚ Faith – which most of us think is worked at and earned, is here described as a gift.

The miraculous gifts are here too:

- ✚ Healing – for the body
- ✚ Prophecy – for the soul
- ✚ Distinguishing between spirits – somebody has to tell the true from the false.
- ✚ Tongues – not the exclusive meaning of "spiritual gifts."
- ✚ "Miraculous powers" – just in case we forgot anything.

Again, all of these are from the Spirit. Why does Paul point this out to us?

- ✚ First, that the church should be united
- ✚ Second, that no one should be jealous of the gifts of another.

Do you not see it? To be jealous of the gifts of another – that is to challenge the decision God made in giving those gifts. Perhaps this is why he does not choose to give them so freely in our time.

The Great Analogy – the body

We now come to Paul's superb illustration: the body as the model of the church.

For even as the body is one and *yet* has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot says, "Because I am not a hand, I am not *a part* of the body," it is not for this reason any the less *a part* of the body. And if the ear says, "Because I am not an eye, I am not *a part* of the body," it is not for this reason any the less *a part* of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. If they were all one member, where would the body be?

But now there are many members, but one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; or again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; and those *members* of the body which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our less presentable members become much more presentable, whereas our more presentable members have no need *of it*. But God has *so* composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that *member* which lacked, so that there may be no division in the body, but *that* the members may have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if *one* member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.

(1Co 12:12-26 NASB)

Fundamental equality

Nothing so confuses American Christians as the phrase, "equality." It does not mean "interchangeable." See how Paul justifies it here:

- ✚ We all have the same Spirit – therefore we are equal before God.
- ✚ We all went through the same baptism - the same entrance ritual – so therefore we must all have been admitted to the same status.
- ✚ We all have one Spirit "to drink" – a clear reference to the streams of living water our Lord said would flow out of him. We are of the same Lord.

Mutually dependent

Not only are we equal, we are mutually dependent. We are not a gaggle of interchangeable parts; we need each other.

- ✚ If we did not have each other, the church could not survive. None of us can do all the things the church is tasked to do.
- ✚ In the process, we cover each others failings. If I'm not good at one task, someone else will be appointed to take care of it.
- ✚ We not only cover each others failings, we depend upon each others strengths. As you cover my weakness you can profit from my strength.

The absurdity of disharmony

To make the point absolutely clear, Paul now shows the absurdity of doing the opposite. It's a great word picture; it also shows us some of our failings.

- ✚ First, you cannot be all things in the church – and you will look foolish if you try.
- ✚ If you step outside your assigned task, you make things worse. (Stick to your work).
- ✚ If you want it to go well, then work together.
- ✚ Depend upon the Spirit for your proper reward, for God will reward all according to their opportunity.

Get the point?

Paul has been at pains in this section to be both clear – and inoffensive.

- ✚ He has tried his best to exalt "the feet" – the humble – so that they will know they're on the team too, rewarded for their tasks as well.
- ✚ He has also tried to humble "the eye" – the proud – so that pride will not interfere with the work of the church.

The objective of all this: as ever, the unity of the church.

The body of Christ

Paul now makes it explicit: the church is not just “a body” – it’s the body of Christ.

Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, *various* kinds of tongues. All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not *workers of* miracles, are they? All do not have gifts of healings, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they? But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And I show you a still more excellent way.

(1Co 12:27-31 NASB)

Paul explicitly tells them: you are the body of Christ. Why?

- ✚ First, to bring home the power of the analogy he has just drawn – to complete the application. (The teacher appreciates technique).
- ✚ Second, so you will understand that you are members in the old sense of the word – functioning parts, equal but different.
- ✚ Finally, so that you will understand that the church is not a hierarchy or building, but the people of God.

The order of the gifts

God has appointed these gifts. Paul has enumerated them; the order is therefore significant.

First, there are the spiritual gifts – those that deal with spiritual leadership.

- ✚ At the top, as is proper, is the office of the Apostle. This is the one to whom is entrusted the writing of much of the Scripture.
- ✚ Next we find the prophet – either the one who foretells the future or the one who “forthtells” righteousness.
- ✚ Last – in the first group – are the teachers. These are with us yet today.

Next are the gifts which assist others. You will see the same pattern here; the miraculous, transient gifts come first, as they bring glory to God.

- ✚ Miracle workers are first – it is a generic category.
- ✚ Specifically, those who heal are next
- ✚ But – for those who don’t have miraculous gifts – there is the gift of helping others.

Interesting, isn’t it? Not an Apostle or a prophet? The gift of teaching stands. Not one who can work miracles, or heal miraculously? The gift of helping still stands.

Finally – almost as an afterthought – Paul lists two more gifts.

- ✚ Administration – the gift of running the church.
- ✚ Tongues.

It seems almost curious that of all the gifts listed, in a list in which the order is specified by number, tongues comes last – though many today would make it first.

What shall we do?

It seems that no lesson should go by without answering that question. Just what's the point of all this? The point has to do with your desires.

That which you desire is a measure of who you are. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. So what, then, should you desire? What should you treasure?

Paul tells you: the "greater gifts." What are these?

- ✚ First among them are the gifts which lift the body of Christ spiritually – the gift of Apostle, of prophet (we might say today preacher) and of teacher.
- ✚ Next – if those are not within your desires – are the gifts which aid others – working miracles, healing and the simple gift of helping others.
- ✚ Finally, tongues and administration – tongues, which tempt one so much to showing off, and administration, which tends to self-importance.

But beyond all these is a greater gift: love. And that we must take up in the next lesson.

The Core of Christianity - 1 Corinthians 13

One of the disadvantages of going through the Scripture is that you must take each passage in turn. Some are sufficiently dull that it takes some scratching (I, too, avoid genealogies). But others, like this one, are so high and golden that one fears to bring a lesson. It is a small shadow in a land of giants. So with apologies to practically every great Christian writer, we begin the golden love chapter of First Corinthians.

If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have *the gift of* prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed *the poor*, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing. Love is patient, love is kind *and* is not jealous; love does not brag *and* is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong *suffered*, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails; but if *there are gifts of* prophecy, they will be done away; if *there are* tongues, they will cease; if *there is* knowledge, it will be done away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known. But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love.

(1Co 13:1-13 NASB)

Context

While often quoted at weddings – it is a superbly beautiful writing – the context of the message is quite clear. Paul is still speaking about the unity of the church. One of the causes of jealousy in the church has been the distribution of spiritual gifts. Why should you get divine healing when I speak in tongues? Which is the greater gift? (And, therefore, which of us is greater in the church?)

Such division is contrary to the very nature of God, who is One. His image in us must be likewise – one essence in many persons. But what essence is this? Is it not expressed in the thought, “God is love?” Therefore Jesus tells us that this is the method by which all will know we are his disciples – that we love one another.

This love – the word is one which applies to the will, not to the emotions – is the core of Christianity, as Paul shows us here.

Supremacy of love

Paul brings this thought to us with a series of superlative comparisons which bring up echoes of our Lord’s own words. It’s interesting to see these comparisons, for in each there is a subtlety which is at once hyperbole – and delicacy:

Tongues

First, note that it's not just the "tongues of men" (the languages of earth) but also the tongues of angels! Even if I spoke like an angel of God, it would mean nothing without love. But – in contrast to the others – here he does not use the phrase "I am nothing." He rather uses a word picture – the clanging symbol, the gong.

You want to drive parents of a small child absolutely crazy? Give the kid a drum for Christmas (works with teenagers, too). My mother tells me that when I was young someone gave me a metal drum – practically unbreakable – and that she was soon forced to hide it. I was the original Energizer bunny, evidently. That's the kind of speaking Paul is talking about; eloquence without love at its heart is brazen annoyance.

Prophecy

Here again we get a magnificent hyperbole: not only could I understand all knowledge (things that man is allowed to discover) but also all mysteries (things deliberately hidden by God). Suppose I knew all that; what would the benefit be? Take even a small example: suppose I have the cure for cancer. If I will not act on it, it will sit in my file cabinet, benefiting neither me nor anyone else.

Faith

It's our Lord's own illustration, turned on its head. Christ told us that if we had a little faith, even like a mustard seed, we could move mountains. Paul takes that for the hyperbole it is, and says – even if you did, what good is it? If you don't have love, it does no good.

Giving

Remember the rich young ruler? In his case, his possessions stood between him and God. So, suppose I give away all my possessions. I benefit the poor who receive them; I remove all worldly barriers between me and God – but if I do not have love, the Spirit of my Master, I cannot be one with him.

It's worse than that. "No greater love has any man – " remember that? If you give your life for someone, that's the greatest sign of love. But if you don't have that love, and give your life out of misguided legalism (for example) it does you no good.

The spiritual gifts are great gifts. But remember that Saul prophesied; Balaam spoke the oracle of God; Judas worked miracles with the other disciples. All these were evil men who had an evil end. What did their spiritual gifts produce? The Christians at Corinth had spiritual gifts too; but they produced jealousy and faction. Without love, it is always so.

The character of love

Here it is: the checklist of Christian love. Compare this: the character of love shown here, and the character of that church. Paul is pointing them to the "more excellent way."

Positive

Paul gives us two positive aspects to love:

- ✦ *Patience* – this is the root of all self-denial. Do you not remember that our Lord told us we must “take up the Cross” and follow him? That’s self-denial, and this is its root. Patience with all others is our starting point.
- ✦ *Kindness* – some of us are patient, but only so that we can provoke others with our often-expressed longsuffering. “You’re lucky to have me, Harold. No other woman would put up with so much.” That’s patience – but it’s not kindness. The two must be alloyed in love.

Defects in love

So that there will be no misunderstanding, Paul now lists what love must not be – that is to say, the defects in love which we must strive to eliminate.

- ✦ *Envy* – you can be patient but envious, and it is not loving. For if you envy someone, how can you rejoice at their success? Is that not a characteristic of true love?
- ✦ *Boasting* – If envy is a blemish in your love, surely it is a sin to provoke others to envy you. Isn’t that the objective of boasting?
- ✦ *Pride* – even if you don’t boast about it, pride is hard to conceal. Does it not provoke others to envy and pride as well? How could this be a loving thing to do? Surely love cares first for others.
- ✦ *Rudeness* – see how the small things count! Even when others around us are rude, the Christian must, in love, be polite. For in politeness we encourage others to love; in rudeness, we encourage them to hate. (I didn’t say this was easy.)
- ✦ *Self-seeking* – have you ever noticed how much you despise this in others? People who are obviously self-seeking really annoy those who are team players. Love is the ultimate source of team play.
- ✦ *Easily angered* – this can mean two things: one is those whose temper is always at the flash point. But it can also mean those who are “easily hurt.” Be neither.
- ✦ *Recording wrongs* – some of us bury the hatchet – handle up for convenient future use. Here’s some advice I’d like to give to many a wife: keep no record of your husband’s wrongs. He’ll last longer and be much easier to live with.

Relationship of love and righteousness

Paul ends with his statement on love and righteousness. Here he shows us the solution to the fundamental dilemma which led Christ to the Cross:

- ✦ God is righteous, perfectly righteous. Therefore he can tolerate no sin.
- ✦ But we are sinners and He is love – therefore he loves us. What then is He to do?
The answer is found at the Cross, where love makes the sacrifice which brings us to righteousness. It is a model for us. We are not to strike at evil with evil; rather, we are to reach out to those who are evil, in love.

The good news here is this: love is so much the attribute of God that when we become his children he enables us – if we are willing – to act as he would act, in the imitation of his love.

Endurance of love

The good stuff tends to stick around. Many books were written in the 19th century; how many are read today? Only two kinds: the good ones and the ones on some English teacher’s list. Sherlock Holmes is still in print; not on the list, but good reading. How much more, then, shall the supreme and best thing, love, endure?

Why do the others cease?

After all, many of us today would love to have the gift of healing. Some of us would be happy with just the gift of tongues (assuming the eldership voted to allow it). But Paul tells us these will cease. Why?

- ✚ One reason is that there is no further need for them. These gifts were not ends in themselves; rather, they were used for spreading the Gospel. They are for God's purposes only, not ours.
- ✚ These gifts were the cause of dissension in the church. They may have been necessary to credential the Apostles, but as they cause disunity in the church, they are eliminated. We are to be one, as Christ and the Father are one.
- ✚ These gifts lead up to the supreme gift, the gift of love. When you have the best thing, do you need a good thing?

What about knowledge?

It's interesting to see Paul tell us that knowledge will disappear. But read the whole passage and it's a little more clear. The problem is that we have partial knowledge. That partial knowledge will be replaced by complete knowledge. When the perfect comes, we put aside the imperfect. (How many of your teenage kids will ride a bike after they get a driver's license?)

But – suppose we did know everything. That would certainly eliminate any need for prophecy (what would be left to prophesy?) and for speaking in tongues (which served as a method of convincing all of the Gospel). But we would still need love.

As long as this world lasts

Paul tells us there are three things that will endure: faith, hope and love. As long as this world endures, and our Lord has not yet returned, they will last. But at his return things will change.

- ✚ Faith? No longer will we need faith, for our faith will have become sight.
- ✚ Hope? No longer will we hope – for what we hoped for will have come.
- ✚ Love? That will remain, for that is the character of God, and we, his children, will be like him on that day.

So I encourage you to hold on to the thing that lasts forever: love. Practice it now; enjoy it forever.

Right Ordering of the Church - 1 Corinthians 14

Several themes from prior passages merge in this section:

- ✦ First, just because we have the liberty to do something doesn't make it profitable.
 - ✦ Next, that all that we do should be done to benefit the church, not just ourselves.
 - ✦ Finally, that the things of God must be used in God's way – the "right use" principle.
- If you will keep these three ideas in mind, this passage will become much less difficult.

Edification of the Church

Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual *gifts*, but especially that you may prophesy. For one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God; for no one understands, but in *his* spirit he speaks mysteries. But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation. One who speaks in a tongue edifies himself; but one who prophesies edifies the church. Now I wish that you all spoke in tongues, but *even* more that you would prophesy; and greater is one who prophesies than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may receive edifying. But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking in tongues, what will I profit you unless I speak to you either by way of revelation or of knowledge or of prophecy or of teaching? Yet *even* lifeless things, either flute or harp, in producing a sound, if they do not produce a distinction in the tones, how will it be known what is played on the flute or on the harp? For if the bugle produces an indistinct sound, who will prepare himself for battle? So also you, unless you utter by the tongue speech that is clear, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air. There are, perhaps, a great many kinds of languages in the world, and no *kind* is without meaning. If then I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be to the one who speaks a barbarian, and the one who speaks will be a barbarian to me. So also you, since you are zealous of spiritual *gifts*, seek to abound for the edification of the church. Therefore let one who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. What is *the outcome* then? I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also; I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also. Otherwise if you bless in the spirit *only*, how will the one who fills the place of the ungifted say the "Amen" at your giving of thanks, since he does not know what you are saying? For you are giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not edified. I thank God, I speak in tongues more than you all; however, in the church I desire to speak five words with my mind so that I may instruct others also, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue.

(1Co 14:1-19 NASB)

This passage is one of the more hotly contested ones. Pentecostals frequently use this to justify the idea that "real Christians speak in tongues." It is more instructive to see, rather, just what Paul was talking about. For that, we need a little background.

The problem of pride

Paul does not explicitly refer to it here, for it is not something that everyone who was speaking in tongues needed to deal with – but we should see it as a first problem. If you speak in tongues, as Paul makes clear, you are speaking with God. That point can be verified by having someone with a different gift – interpretation – translate your words.

Imagine, for a moment, that you talked with God on a regular basis. Would you not be viewed as one who was very influential indeed? So you might be. But you might also become inflated with

pride – “I talk to God – and you don’t.” Now, we know this is a sad perversion of the truth, for tongues are a gift of the Spirit. But you can see the problem.

Paul’s answer to this, in this passage, is to point out that he speaks in tongues much more than any of them. So if you accept that as a sign of your closeness to God, then he is much closer still. And therefore you had best listen to what he has to say.

The value of the gift

The principle is simple: if you have a spiritual gift, the value of that gift can be determined by its benefit to the church. Note, please, not its value to you personally, but its value to the church.

Are tongues beneficial to the church? Certainly!

- ✚ A man who speaks in tongues utters mysteries in his spirit – in other words, he understands that which is hidden (the meaning of “mystery” in this context.)
- ✚ Such a man edifies (teaches, instructs, builds up) himself. As he is a part of the body, this strengthens the body to that degree. This can be particularly important to those whose needs are unusual or unique. If you are the only one with leprosy, it helps to hear from God directly.

But prophecy is more beneficial to the church. Prophecy means either foretelling the future or a form of exhortation. Paul tells us three ways it benefits the church:

- ✚ It strengthens the church – the word means to “build up,” as we would build a brick wall. It adds to the strength bit by bit.
- ✚ There is also encouragement there – the word is *paraklesis*, which will be familiar as one who comes alongside.
- ✚ There is also comfort – the word implies consolation – for times of grief.

So we see that, should we get the choice, we are to prefer prophecy to tongues – for prophecy builds the whole church.

The necessity of order

Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be infants, but in your thinking be mature. In the Law it is written, "BY MEN OF STRANGE TONGUES AND BY THE LIPS OF STRANGERS I WILL SPEAK TO THIS PEOPLE, AND EVEN SO THEY WILL NOT LISTEN TO ME," says the Lord. So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophecy *is for a sign*, not to unbelievers but to those who believe. Therefore if the whole church assembles together and all speak in tongues, and ungifted men or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad? But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all; the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you. What is *the outcome* then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. If anyone speaks in a tongue, *it should be* by two or at the most three, and *each* in turn, and one must interpret; but if there is no interpreter, he must keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God. Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment. But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, the first one must keep silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted; and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets; for God is not *a God* of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.

(1Co 14:20-33 NASB)

Tongues, however, can be abused. Even the gifts of God can be twisted by sinful men.

- ✚ Suppose someone comes in to the worship service who is not a believer. What does he hear, if all of us are speaking in tongues? The babble of idiots, as far as he's concerned. Have we helped, or hindered, this unbeliever for whom Christ died?
- ✚ We have already mentioned the problem of pride, and the resultant jealousy that can be caused by comparisons.
- ✚ In our own time, we have added a new problem. What if my "interpreter" has something in mind which is completely different? His own private agenda? Who checks on the interpreter?

If these things are to be kept from tearing the church apart, there must be order – there must be rules. But to obtain the right rules, we must understand the right use.

Right use of tongues

What should tongues be used for?

- ✚ For the unbeliever, they may be used as a miraculous sign – as at Pentecost. If I know you don't speak Greek (but I do), and I hear you speaking Greek, then I'm bound to be impressed and want to know more. But note: the aspect of the sign implies that the tongue is known – and to me. If you're talking in an unknown tongue, how is that a sign to the unbeliever? It's the unbeliever who needs to know.
- ✚ Tongues are used to strengthen the individual believer. First, in that they are a miraculous sign, they can be used to strengthen a weak faith. Next, they can be used to deliver a lesson to the individual believer. Finally, they can also deliver consolation and comfort to the individual believer. One reason tongues have declined since Paul's time is that these tasks are now allotted to the church.
- ✚ *When interpreted*, tongues can likewise strengthen the church. But clearly, the better way is through prophecy.

Right use of prophecy

Prophecy has two uses:

- ✚ For the unbeliever, prophecy carries out the Holy Spirit's task of convicting the world of sin and judgment.
- ✚ For the believer, prophecy is used for strength, encouragement and instruction.

God the author of peace and order

The character of God should be displayed in the manner in which his people worship him. Our God is the god of peace and order, and therefore the worship service should reflect peace and order.

But some would argue, "my gift of tongues (or prophecy) just came upon me." That's why Paul makes it clear that these gifts are under your control – you don't just have to blurt out your babble. And if you do, that's just what it is: babble.

The matter is kindergarten simple: take turns, share, don't hog the time (if someone else comes up with a revelation, let them take a turn).

This appeal for order in the church now gives rise to another controversial passage – about women.

Women keep silent in the church

As Oliver Hardy might have put it, "Here's another fine mess you've gotten us into, Paul."

... as in all the churches of the saints. The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says. If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church. Was it from you that the word of God *first* went forth? Or has it come to you only? If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment. But if anyone does not recognize *this*, he is not recognized. Therefore, my brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak in tongues. But all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner.

(1Co 14:33-40 NASB)

A woman's life

It's helpful to understand the context in which this is written. First, remember that Paul is talking about keeping order in the church – not necessarily the possibilities for women two millennia later. Women at this time have a very different life:

- ✚ This is a hierarchical society in which people "know their place." A decent woman stayed within her father's home until she married; then she stayed within her husband's home.
- ✚ This "male domination" (as our liberated women would put it) was the commonly accepted way of running an orderly society. We're the odd ones, not only in historical terms, but even today – most non-Western societies still place the man as head of household. It seems that everyone's out of step but us.
- ✚ Some women didn't conform to this. These women were either prostitutes – or those whose lives were so wicked that they might as well have been such. So we see again the balance point between the liberty women have in the church and the reputation of the church in the world.
- ✚ One other thing: when women went to church, they were usually segregated into a different area. I will leave it to your own experience to determine what happens when you put all the women of the church in the same room.

Evidently the women liked to talk. But see how that would have impressed the world around them:

- ✚ Since this was an occasion of worship, it would signify to anyone who walked in that these women were not under the control of their husbands. He would see this as a gathering of prostitutes, in effect.
- ✚ It also would mean the service would be in chaos. This effect has not yet disappeared.

What does God say about this?

Do women have the liberty in Christ to speak? Or are they forever condemned to absolute silence in the church? The modern church is rather eloquent on the subject, by its actions. There are still some denominations and congregations that forbid a woman to teach – but I know of none which insist that she be absolutely silent in church. Why? Because the times have changed; what would have disgraced the church then is no longer a problem.

But God is still the god of peace and order; that's why Paul issued this edict in the first place. The women were talking and the problem was out of hand.

There is, however, a clear example given here. Women were to inquire of their husbands if they had any questions about the doctrine preached. From that one may draw some conclusions:

- ✚ There is no sense here that women are not capable of learning what is to be taught; the context is one of order in the church, not the place of women in the world.
- ✚ There is also the definite sense that men are to be the spiritual leaders of their families.

I put it to you simply: of all the households you know in which there is trouble with the children, what fraction are headed by a man who is truly the spiritual head of house?

Perhaps the “fitting and orderly way” is not so obsolete after all. In a society which is disintegrating before our eyes we look for reasons. We might do very well to look at the role to which we have consigned husbands and fathers. Consider the movies and television: husbands are simpletons to be cuckolded; fathers are hopeless dorks to be rescued by their cool teenagers. Despite this, we wonder why the decline of western civilization.

Of First Importance - 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

In life it is important to know – and pay attention to – things of first importance. Is there anything that typifies futility and stupidity more than being the person who rearranged the deck chairs on the Titanic? So it is in our Christian lives.

Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also. For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me. Whether then *it was* I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

(1Co 15:1-11 NASB)

First Importance

Paul lays out clearly just what is of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day. We can at least pay some attention to this.

Received and passed on

First please note that this is not something of Paul's invention. He specifically disclaims any originality in this; He did not make it up. He did not embellish it. He received it; he passed it on.

This carries with it a problem for the ego. If it's my own brilliant guesswork as to what God really wants, then perhaps I should feel proud of my accomplishment. But if I received it, then it is no credit to me. If I inherit money from a rich uncle I can hardly call myself a self-made millionaire. Perhaps this is what drives our modern critics.

The modern view is simply this: miracles can't happen. The Resurrection is clearly a miracle; therefore it didn't happen. Therefore all evidence of it must be explained as myth, no matter how much it stretches absurdity to see it that way. As we shall see, absurdity is indeed stretched in our time.

Paul has the cure for such absurdity. He is an eyewitness, and he cites hundreds of others. The "it must have been" school of thought has great difficulty with that.

Christ died for our sins

In that statement alone there is magnificent power.

- ✚ He died according to the Scripture. First, that tells us that this is indeed God's doing, for no society could construct so elaborate a fraud as the Old Testament merely to lead up to the Crucifixion. It took 1500 years. If this is conspiracy, it is without peer.

- ✚ He died according to the Scripture. That also tells us that he was the sinless man – the only acceptable sacrifice.
- ✚ The purpose of his death: our sins. It is by his death that we, the unholy, are reconciled to a holy God.
- ✚ He was buried. You don't bury a ghost. Thus he had a body like ours; he was man, just as we are.

The Resurrection

Paul simply cites the facts. Jesus rose from the grave. He was seen, in bodily form. Not just once; not just by one group of people; not just in one place. He was seen many times, by many people in differing places.

This is what we preach

There it is. Simple and pure, this is the preaching of the church. For those who belong to the church – the true, inner church composed of all God's people no matter what the sign on the door – there is no difference. It is the test of the true Christian. All heresies revolve around the person of Christ or the death, burial and resurrection. Everything else is commentary.

This is what you believed

This, Paul reminds them, is what we believed. It's the solid rock on which we took our stand. "Just the facts," as Joe Friday used to say. We need to take the same approach today.

Evidence today

The letter in question is about 1900 years old. What evidence do we have today? In this lesson I can but briefly review the evidence; volumes have been written on it.

The problem resolves itself into the authenticity of the Scriptures, in particular the New Testament. That problem can be broken down into three smaller problems:

- ✚ How do I know that I have an accurate translation? This is one I will not consider in this lesson.
- ✚ How do I know that this translation was made from an accurate copy? Call it the "Xerox problem."
- ✚ How do I know the accurate copy was made from an original which is authentic, and not something written hundreds of years after the fact?

The original manuscripts

No other ancient document has anything like the documentary evidence of the New Testament. I can but cite a few major areas:

- ✚ First, there is the evidence of the physical documents themselves. The myth is that nothing was written down until "four or five hundred years later." The facts? One complete copy of the Gospel of John is carbon dated to AD 120 – from a monastery in Egypt. Paul's death, remember is AD 64. Currently under debate is the "Jesus Papyrus" – which has been dated at AD 47. It's a fragment of the Gospel of Matthew.
- ✚ There is the internal evidence as well. Paul died in AD 64. Acts ends with him still alive; Luke was written before that. The archeological evidence confirms Acts at every point. How, then, was it written so much later?

- ✚ The documents of the period itself confirm the New Testament – for many Roman writers derided the Christian faith from a very early time. To do so, they quoted from the Gospels quite liberally. There’s plenty of this from the second century.
- ✚ There are several other translations of the Gospels which date from the second through fifth centuries. How did they translate what had not been written down? Scholars can clearly tell in many places that these are translations, not originals.
- ✚ Other ancient works of Christianity are a testimony too. Irenaeus wrote in AD 170; the date is unchallenged. He expounds quite exactly the doctrines we use today.

The Xerox problem

We also hear that there are “thousands of copying errors in the Bible.” How would you know – unless you had an accurate original?

The reason for such a large number is this: if one man makes a mistake, and a hundred others copy it, that becomes a hundred errors. But in fact these errors can be traced, often to the name of the monk who made the error. When you have that good a trail on the mistakes, you should have good confidence in the original.

Indeed, we even know how the mistakes were made. The Scriptorium – the ancient equivalent of a copy shop – checked its work as one would check a handwritten spreadsheet. They counted the letters across; they counted the letters down; if they didn’t match, the page was discarded. Note, please, this is not a case of monks committing pious fraud – but commercial copiers of the Roman Empire. They got paid to do it right.

Why the confusion today?

For 1800 years people understood this quite well. They trusted ancient records because they were the same kind of records they used. Today, however, we are much more sophisticated – and untrusting. Why is it that we can’t see the same thing today?

- ✚ *Circular reasoning.* Miracles can’t happen; therefore any document that says they did must be a myth. This document, the New Testament, says that miracles happened – it must be a myth. There are therefore no documents, other than myths, that say miracles happened. Therefore we can be confident miracles never happen.
- ✚ *Ignorance.* Most of us have no clue what happened in history before 1776. It therefore seems unreasonable to us that anything did.

There is more evidence for the death, burial and resurrection of Christ than there is for the existence of Bigfoot. And we’re more willing to believe in Bigfoot.

Effect on our lives

“On which you have taken your stand.” That’s Paul’s point. This is all a nice historical discussion if the resurrection means nothing in your life. What, then, is the impact of this resurrection in your life? May I suggest (among many others) three things which deserve your attention:

The death of sin

Paul mystically puts it that the life of Christ in us is the death of sin in us. Look at it this way:

- ✦ Since we know of his resurrection, we know of his return to judge the world. We will face the judge some day; best to be prepared now.
- ✦ By his grace, he will give us all the aid we need in defeating sin in our lives. Indeed, it is his good pleasure to do so.
- ✦ But the decision is ours. “Lead me not into temptation – but don’t start just yet” is the prayer of many a sinner.

Forgiven and forgiving

By the sacrifice he made we are forgiven.

- ✦ First, let us accept that. Let us no longer go on carrying the burden of guilt and fear for our past sins.
- ✦ Instead, let us praise God for what he has done! He indeed is worthy, because of what he has done for us.
- ✦ While we’re at it, let us remember that he is worthy – not us. To be forgiven means we had something that needed forgiveness. In our dealings with all others, let us remember that we are indeed sinners.

We must also be forgiving. Remember the parable of the unjust servant? Will our Lord forgive us on that day if we will not forgive now? His sacrifice made our forgiveness possible; would we deny it by failing to forgive others?

Our attitude towards death

If I could make one change in the attitudes of most Christians I know, this would be it. He is Risen – and we shall rise too at the last day. We need to encourage each other in that.

Older generations understood this clearly. Listen to the prince of preachers:

Let us not imagine that the soul sleeps in insensibility. “Today shalt thou be with me in paradise,” is the whisper of Christ to every dying saint. They “sleep in Jesus,” but their souls are before the throne of God, praising him day and night in his temple, singing hallelujahs to him who washed them from their sins in his blood. The body sleeps in its lonely bed of earth, beneath the coverlet of grass. But what is this sleep? The idea connected with sleep is “rest,” and that is the thought which the Spirit of God would convey to us. Sleep makes each night a Sabbath for the day. Sleep shuts fast the door of the soul, and bids all intruders tarry for a while, that the life within may enter its summer garden of ease. The toil-worn believer quietly sleeps, as does the weary child when it slumbers on its mother’s breast. Oh! happy they who die in the Lord; they rest from their labours, and their works do follow them. Their quiet repose shall never be broken until God shall rouse them to give them their full reward. Guarded by angel watchers, curtained by eternal mysteries, they sleep on, the inheritors of glory, till the fulness of time shall bring the fulness of redemption. What an awaking shall be theirs! They were laid in their last resting place, weary and worn, but such they shall not rise. They went to their rest with the furrowed brow, and the wasted features, but they wake up in beauty and glory. The shrivelled seed, so destitute of form and comeliness, rises from the dust a beautiful flower. The winter of the grave gives way to the spring of redemption and the summer of glory. Blessed is death, since it, through the divine power, disrobes us of this work-day garment, to clothe us with the wedding garment of incorruption. Blessed are those who “sleep in Jesus.”

Such encouragement! But there is more. We can face the perils of life much more confidently because we know the answer – we know what life is about. It is the preparation for the return of our Lord.

Indeed, we can face our own deaths with calm and courage for this. I know that my Redeemer lives! May our own deaths be an example to those around us – we know the author of life itself, and rest upon his word.

Resurrection: Argument - 1 Corinthians 15:12-34

Paul now deals with those who say there is no resurrection. We need first to hear his words, then his argument.

Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. Moreover we are even found *to be* false witnesses of God, because we testified against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied. But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep. For since by a man *came* death, by a man also *came* the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at His coming, then *comes* the end, when He hands over the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death. For HE HAS PUT ALL THINGS IN SUBJECTION UNDER HIS FEET. But when He says, "All things are put in subjection," it is evident that He is excepted who put all things in subjection to Him. When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all. Otherwise, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why then are they baptized for them? Why are we also in danger every hour? I affirm, brethren, by the boasting in you which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily. If from human motives I fought with wild beasts at Ephesus, what does it profit me? If the dead are not raised, LET US EAT AND DRINK, FOR TOMORROW WE DIE. Do not be deceived: "Bad company corrupts good morals." Become sober-minded as you ought, and stop sinning; for some have no knowledge of God. I speak *this* to your shame.
(1Co 15:12-34 NASB)

Argument

Paul has left out something here: the argument he's facing. It's a pretty simple one, but we need to see it to understand this passage. "Does the resurrection of Christ really imply the resurrection of the dead?" Just because Christ was raised from the dead, does that mean that I will be?

The popular answer to this is , "no." We see this in cartoons every day; how often has a cartoonist used the metaphor of clouds and harps to picture heaven? The image is that the soul goes to heaven – by which we mean clouds and harps – passing through a gate manned by St. Peter. The logical conclusion of this: if you're "good enough" and "sincere", you get in.

There is only one real problem with this image. It's false. It is nowhere to be found in the Scripture. The Bible talks only of the resurrection of the dead – then the new heaven and new earth. Let us see, then, how Paul deals with the problem.

Argument: if man does not rise, Christ did not

We forget how important it is: Jesus is fully human, like us. If it is impossible for a human being to rise from the grave, it is impossible for Jesus to rise from the grave – for he is human. If this were so, says Paul:

- ✚ Why are you bothering with our preaching? Isn't this the core of the matter? No matter what else we may have in the way of fine words and comfort, the core of our thought would be false.
- ✚ If that were so, your faith would be useless. You may believe the earth is flat, but that's not why you don't fall off the edge.
- ✚ Worse: you had a problem with sin when you came to Christ. If he did not rise from the dead, you still have a problem with your sin. And you're in denial.
- ✚ And still worse: you have some hope – you can see your therapist, or guru, or whatever. The dead in Christ have none.

But – Christ is risen. Therefore these are not problems to you – rather (the process is *reductio ad absurdum*) they are arguments for your faith.

Argument: Hope only in this life?

If there is no resurrection, then how can God be just? How can he be honest? For he has promised you reward in the next life for your good works in this. If only the soul survives, how does he provide “houses or brethren...”⁴ as a reward? And if the soul does not survive, then how does he provide any reward at all?

Argument: death and life

Paul also uses a very Jewish argument here: death came by one man, life comes by one man. The “one man” is Adam, of course. Taken however you like, the story of Genesis clearly indicates the connection of sin and death. You sin; you die. It's a fallen world. God pins that on Adam – and in so doing, makes it clear that each of us is just like him.

But if we are “just like Adam” – natural born sinners - we can become “just like Christ” – natural *reborn* saints. If we have Adam's nature, we can take on Christ's nature. But that implies that Jesus must reverse Adam's work – he must reverse death. Which is the resurrection of the dead.

Argument: our actions

“Put your money where your mouth is,” we say. Very well, says Paul – look and see that I've done just that. Here are two ways:

- ✚ Remember when you were baptized? You were “baptized for the dead” – or as we would say it today, “you were buried with Christ.” For you were dead in your sins, but in baptism you were raised. You went through the ceremony; you understood it – so you yourself are witness to the resurrection.
- ✚ If that's not enough, says Paul, why do I go through all these hardships? Would a man do that for a fraud – even a nice one?

⁴ Matthew 19:29

But Christ is Risen

Paul's argument: how could all these things be so, if Christ were not risen? But since Christ is, he proceeds, you should know how things are going to work out. So he informs us of the order of resurrection.

Please note: many theorists on the book of Revelation will tell you that there are some particular number of resurrections. Hal Lindsey, for example, posits six. That number, however, depends upon his particular interpretation. The Scripture as interpreted by most Christians of most times recognizes only these three.

The Resurrection of Christ

Christ must come first. Why?

- ✚ First, because it is fitting with his preeminence in all things. He is Lord of all; he should come first.
- ✚ Because death came through one man, life must come through one man. That man must be first – and could only be Christ, for only he could pay for our sins.
- ✚ Perhaps most important for us – he is a guarantee for our resurrection. He's "been there and done that."

The resurrection of the faithful

Please release from your mind all question of the millennium. When Christ returns, the faithful will arise. We shall amplify this quite a bit in the next lesson.

The end

Everybody else waits – until the time of the end. What do we know about this time? If we do not adhere to a particular theory of the book of Revelation, the answer is, "not much – but enough."

- ✚ We know that Christ will destroy all dominion, power and authority – for all authority is his – which certainly means the destruction of all in rebellion against him. In short, Satan, his allies and all who follow him.
- ✚ He will then hand the kingdom (that's us) over to the Father.
- ✚ Finally, there will come the destruction of death. Which, by the way, implies the resurrection itself.

Do not be misled

OK – all this is nice, but what do I do about it? The Corinthians might have asked that question too – because they had been misled into thinking there would be no resurrection, or that it would not really matter. It is of the first importance. How is it then that the Corinthians – and us – got sidetracked in this?

Bad company

Let me ask you some simple questions:

- ✦ Are you suave, sophisticated and sinning on Saturday night – and then pious and holy Sunday morning? Then you're keeping the wrong company, and it shows. Your mind cannot resolve the fear of judgment and the pleasures of this world – so you reject the judgment without thinking.
- ✦ Of which speaking: who do you think with? Are your Christian friends just too much of the mental midget? When you do your serious thinking, who is your counselor and sounding board? Or do you ever have a serious thought? Did you really want to leave this to chance in the hospital corridors?
- ✦ How close are you, really, to other Christian friends? In whose company can you be found? Maybe you really are a sheep – and astray!

Sinful habits

Most of us are creatures of habit. We find some of them difficult to break. Consider some of the difficulties with our sinful habits:

- ✦ Most of us are quite well aware that only those who believe, obey. But did you know that God permits faith only to the obedient? If you cannot break the habit, perhaps you need to look to your obedience first.
- ✦ Some of us talk to God regularly – but not about certain subjects. Did you think he does not know? Did you think he does not care? Will he really let sleeping worms lie?
- ✦ Worst of all: some of us are too proud to admit that our habit controls us – not the other way around. Pride is a terrible barrier to God.

Ignorance of God

Ignorance is not bliss; nor is it an excuse. How is it that we could be ignorant of God? It is by our “not doing”:

- ✦ First, if we will not study his word, we will be ignorant of him. Are you engaged in a regular Bible study?
- ✦ Next, if we will not speak with him in prayer, we will be ignorant of him. Have you a set time of prayer every day?
- ✦ Finally, if you know God, you know how awesome and great he is. Therefore you will worship him. Do you, on a regular basis?

We often come to God with our excuses. “It’s the other guy’s fault – I was following him.” “It wasn’t a habit – it’s genetic.” “I didn’t know.” You wouldn’t offer those to the judge or the policeman; how well do you think they will serve you when you face God Almighty?

We Shall All Be Changed - 1 Corinthians 15:35-58

It is a most serious matter. The teaching of the church, from the earliest days, is that the dead in Christ shall rise on the last day. We hear little of this these days; but this should not be. The resurrection of the dead is one of the central doctrines of the faith.

But someone will say, "How are the dead raised? And with what kind of body do they come?" You fool! That which you sow does not come to life unless it dies; and that which you sow, you do not sow the body which is to be, but a bare grain, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body just as He wished, and to each of the seeds a body of its own. All flesh is not the same flesh, but there is one *flesh* of men, and another flesh of beasts, and another flesh of birds, and another of fish. There are also heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one, and the *glory* of the earthly is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory. So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable *body*, it is raised an imperishable *body*; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual *body*. So also it is written, "The first MAN, Adam, BECAME A LIVING SOUL." The last Adam *became* a life-giving spirit. However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual. The first man is from the earth, earthy; the second man is from heaven. (1Co 15:35-47 NASB)

Everything by analogy

St. Augustine pointed out the central difficulty. He was speaking of the Trinity, but the point applies elsewhere. God, and the things of God, are so far above us that we cannot speak of them with great precision. Often we can speak of them only by analogy. So it is here. Paul introduces the subject to the Corinthians by analogy, so that they might more clearly understand.

When you sow, it dies

This was a society that was quite familiar with agriculture; the analogy would have been a homely one to them. But it has two points:

- ✚ If there is to be a bodily resurrection, there must be bodily death. At least in potential – and for most of us, in actuality – the body must die. Otherwise, the discussion makes no sense.
- ✚ More importantly, the process is according to the plan and wisdom of God. He arranges nature in this way; he arranges our resurrection in this way. So the matter is under his control, just as nature is under his control.

When it rises, it is different

It is an agricultural fact that seeds tend not to look too much like the plants they produce – something these folks would have known. (I am no gardener; we'll have to take that one on faith). But again we can learn from this:

- ✚ First, this difference is clearly as God designed it. We see this variation in the universe, which is his creation. We shall see a difference between the mortal bodies in which we now reside and the eternal bodies then.
- ✚ Indeed, the difference is according to the purpose of God. We plant particular seeds to obtain particular plants. "Mystery seeds" are weeds. So we know that God has a particular purpose in these bodies.

What will it be like?

Paul in this section gives us some of the characteristics of the resurrected body.

- ✚ It will be imperishable. That is to say, it will last “forever.” Presuming that time continues (I have no information on the subject) it will not change. We will be like God in that we will be eternal – but human, in that we will have bodies.
- ✚ It will be glorious. What that means precisely is yet hidden from us, but as someone put it, “If you walked into the room in your resurrected body, the rest of us would be tempted to fall down and worship you.” (Remember how the angels usually began their conversations with “fear not?”)
- ✚ It will be powerful. We do not know much in the way of details (our Lord seemed to walk through walls when he felt like it; walking on water is another item) but it will seem to us as if we were indeed powerful.
- ✚ It will be a body of an utterly different type: spiritual, not physical. Not a ghost; not a transparency, but completely different. Which makes it very difficult to describe, I would think.

The example and the power: Christ

As is the earthy, so also are those who are earthy; and as is the heavenly, so also are those who are heavenly. Just as we have borne the image of the earthy, we will also bear the image of the heavenly. Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality. But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, "DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP in victory. O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY? O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not *in vain* in the Lord.

(1Co 15:48-58 NASB)

One of the most powerful yet simple doctrines of the New Testament is this: Jesus Christ was a man such as we are. He is also God, completely. But because he had a body like ours, we shall have a body like his. From his words and example, what do we know about this body?

- ✚ We are told we will be “like the angels.” In one sense, this means that sexuality (and the submission of women to men) ceases. Angels, like God, are always referred to as “he.” But should this also not imply a great power?
- ✚ The body is distinctly tangible. This is one of the difficulties with art work; angels seem to be transparent to some artists. They are not; their bodies are always shown as “solid” in both Old Testament and New Testament. Indeed, they are frequently mistaken for men – at first.
- ✚ These bodies are clearly recognizable. Christ tells Thomas to put his hands in the nail prints. So evidently we will be able to know one another by sight – or whatever the equivalent might be.
- ✚ But these bodies are also given great power. Christ simply prevents the disciples on the road to Emmaus from recognizing him.

The victory is his

All of this takes place because of the Cross. The paradigm Paul gives us here is worth noting:

- ✦ The power of the law is sin. That is to say, if there were no law, there would be no sin. We do not consider an eagle guilty of murder when it pounces upon and kills a rabbit. No law, no sin. But the law came; therefore there is sin. Whether that law is from Mount Sinai or on our consciences, we have it.
- ✦ The punishment of the law is death. God, the Holy One, cannot remain with sin. His is eternal life; therefore, sin merits death.
- ✦ But Christ triumphed over both. By bearing our punishment – as only one who is sinless could – he broke the power of law over us. Therefore the punishment is no more – and the resurrection *must* happen.

Therefore...

All this is well and good, you might think, but of no practical use. It is to counter that thought that Paul concludes this section with one little verse which tells you what to do about it.

Stand firm

What does he mean by that? I submit at least three meanings for your consideration:

- ✦ You know the difference between right and wrong – do not fall into the trap of assuming that “God will forgive – it’s his hobby.” Rather, flee from sin in your life.
- ✦ Take your stand for righteousness. When all others about you are in the “get along, go along” mode, throw the anchor into the stream and hold your position.
- ✦ Finally, do not be deflected from right doctrine. It does matter what you believe. Therefore, study the Scriptures so that your firm stand will be an informed one.

Give yourselves fully to the work

There are three things to note in that sentence: the adverb, the noun and the verb:

- ✦ The adverb is “fully.” So many of us are half-hearted in our service for Christ. You would not accept half-hearted service in those who supply you with their services; what makes you think Christ will accept it from you?
- ✦ The noun is “work.” God is not fond of slackers (physical or intellectual). Remember that it is work, and not just whatever spare moment you just happen to be able to put into it. Plan for it; make it part of your daily life.
- ✦ The verb is “give.” Do not participate as if you had been extorted into it. Rather, look at your work for Christ as a gift you are able to bring to God.

Reward

Your “labor is not in vain.” God will reward those who sacrifice for him. He rewards:

- ✦ Steadfastness. Those who remain strong for him will be rewarded.
- ✦ Work. Those who work for him will be rewarded.

It is an awesome thing, the resurrection to come. No doubt our knowledge is incomplete. No doubt that, on the day, this lesson will seem pale and puny in comparison to the real thing. But let us remain steadfast, work hard as our gift to the Lord – until the real thing arrives.

Theme Song: Unity - 1 Corinthians 16

There is a temptation in this chapter. The first two verses are often quoted in offering messages. So it seems reasonable to spend a lesson on the first two verses – and skip the rest as being miscellaneous greetings of no current importance. This misses a great point. Paul has spent the bulk of this letter dealing with the unity of the church. Now he has a few minor details to settle – and all of them relate to that unity of the church. See if you can perceive them as Paul finishes this letter:

Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also. On the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save, as he may prosper, so that no collections be made when I come. When I arrive, whomever you may approve, I will send them with letters to carry your gift to Jerusalem; and if it is fitting for me to go also, they will go with me. But I will come to you after I go through Macedonia, for I am going through Macedonia; and perhaps I will stay with you, or even spend the winter, so that you may send me on my way wherever I may go. For I do not wish to see you now *just* in passing; for I hope to remain with you for some time, if the Lord permits. But I will remain in Ephesus until Pentecost; for a wide door for effective *service* has opened to me, and there are many adversaries. Now if Timothy comes, see that he is with you without cause to be afraid, for he is doing the Lord's work, as I also am. So let no one despise him. But send him on his way in peace, so that he may come to me; for I expect him with the brethren. But concerning Apollos our brother, I encouraged him greatly to come to you with the brethren; and it was not at all *his* desire to come now, but he will come when he has opportunity. Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love. Now I urge you, brethren (you know the household of Stephanas, that they were the first fruits of Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves for ministry to the saints), that you also be in subjection to such men and to everyone who helps in the work and labors. I rejoice over the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus, because they have supplied what was lacking on your part. For they have refreshed my spirit and yours. Therefore acknowledge such men. The churches of Asia greet you. Aquila and Prisca greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house. All the brethren greet you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. The greeting is in my own hand-- Paul. If anyone does not love the Lord, he is to be accursed. Maranatha. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen.

(1Co 16:1-24 NASB)

Giving

At first reading – the verses are so familiar – it does seem we are talking about tithing in the first two verses. But consider the following:

Who's the recipient?

It's clear from the context that the offering requested is not for the ordinary expenses of running a church building. Rather, it is to relieve the poverty and suffering of their fellow Christians in Jerusalem and Judea. A parallel in our time would be an offering taken to support a church community in another country, for example. Even in this you will see the unity of the church:

- ✚ These people didn't know the saints in Jerusalem personally; they are giving to them only because they are saints in need. So we see the unity of the church as a whole.
- ✚ But even in the manner of giving, we see the unity of the church. It is the same method that Paul has prescribed for the other churches. We do the same thing, in the same way; we are one.

Set aside

One difference which those of subtle mind will note is that we are to “set aside” the money – not bring it to the church each Sunday. Why would Paul command that?

- ✦ If we brought it to the church each Sunday, the poor might be embarrassed if we saw how little they had to bring. Offerings were very public in those times. By setting it aside and bringing it in all at once, even the poor will have an offering with which to be satisfied.
- ✦ As a practical point, it decreases the workload of those administering the church – but it also spreads the responsibility. Think of a building fund drive: if it doesn’t reach its goals, do we not tend to hold the committee in charge to be responsible? Yet who does the giving? So Paul puts the burden where it belongs, and in so doing unites the church.
- ✦ The financial methods of the time make this important. Unlike today, when most people are salaried, in those days income might be sporadic. You could have many weeks of nothing (and embarrassment) and one week of plenty. Both would be scrutinized to your embarrassment.
- ✦ This method also makes each of us a steward over the things of God. Instead of a committee to handle the money, we become stewards in small things. If faithful in little, faithful in much – and the faithful build the church.
- ✦ Finally, so that it would be “no big deal” when Paul finally came – no publicity campaign, nothing. So it would not be seen as “Paul squeezed a gift out of them” but rather that they gave generously – which unites both gift and giver.

The men you approve

See also that Paul does *not* pick out the messengers – though he could likely enough nominate some worthy men. But instead:

- ✦ Paul tells them to pick and choose – thus refusing to impose himself upon them in such matters. They therefore feel strong in their own congregation.
- ✦ But he does tell them he will write letters of introduction – thus guaranteeing that he will ratify their decision and smooth their path. This unites him again with them, and with the church in Jerusalem.
- ✦ If that were not enough, he even proposes to accompany them to Jerusalem, as if to add honor to their gift. In this courtesy he makes it clear that he is their Apostle who corrects them, not their dictator.

Sharing Plans

When people are united in a great work, they share their plans. Have you ever worked on a team where the boss only handed out little hints as to what the plan might be? And then held you responsible if the plan failed? No such tactic is used here; Paul openly tells them what he is planning to do, and why.

Staying at Ephesus

The folks in Corinth would probably like to see him again – so why isn’t he coming? He explains it in terms of their common goals:

- ✦ There is a great work in Ephesus – great opportunity. They would see this as reason enough.
- ✦ There is also great opposition! Most of us would see that as God telling us to move on; not Paul. He sees it as a sign that Satan has recognized the danger. Duty calls; the Corinthians would see this as his work in the one church.

If Timothy comes

Paul uses a curious phrase here: “see that he has nothing to fear.” Why would he put it that way?

- ✚ First, because Paul is an old, experienced warrior – and Timothy is not. He’s a young man, and likely to be intimidated by some of those in Corinth. But Timothy carries Paul’s message. So Paul asks his friends for the intimate favor: take care of my little buddy.
- ✚ Paul is deliberately sending Timothy to them – with the same message in person that Paul has put in this letter.⁵ Timothy is likely enough to face opposition in this. As stern as Paul has been in the letter, he wants to smooth the road for Timothy. So the chastisement can then be followed by soothing words, which Timothy can deliver in person.
- ✚ Mostly, however, it is so that God’s work will go unhindered. The laborer is worthy of his hire, or, as Napoleon said, “Respect the burden.” If your preacher is one who abhors conflict, it is for the unity of the church that you resolve conflict without stressing him.

Apollos

You might remember him. He was – unwittingly – one of the faction leaders Paul chastised these people for. Most scholars suspect that rather than be the leader of a faction, Apollos sacrificed himself for the unity of the church and left town. That way, his “faction” would fall apart – and the unity of the church be increased. But now Paul – having spotlighted the problem and set it on its way to correction – urges his brother in the faith to return. His return would be a public sign that the factionalism was gone. So – in due course, the man has other duties – he will return.

Stephanus and company

These guys are likely the finks who told Paul about the trouble in Corinth in the first place. So they’re the ones who got the Corinthians chewed out about this business of unity in the church. What kind of reception do you think they’ll get when they return home? Paul is taking no chances – he doesn’t want “ins and outs” any more than any other kind of faction.

- ✚ He shows the Corinthians that they are, indirectly, obligated to them because they came to Paul with practical help. They brought the help from Corinth that Paul needed.
- ✚ He shows them also that – despite the fact that no one likes getting chewed out – they needed the reprimand, or things would have gotten worse. So they have actually performed a service for the Corinthians as well.
- ✚ Because they had the guts to do it, Paul tells them that such men should be honored and recognized – because they share in the work too.

In short, they’re not just idle gossips – they’re the guys who started you on the road back to unity.

Personal admonitions

Like a father sending his kid off to school, there are always a few last personal admonitions. These too center around the unity of the church:

⁵ 1 Corinthians 4:17

- ✦ Stand firm in the faith – in other words, use your knowledge of the faith to uphold your church. It is “the faith” – one Lord, one faith, one birth, the central unity for us all.
- ✦ Be men of courage. Knowledge is of no use if not coupled with action, and action requires courage. By being strong, you show others the way to be strong – and again, the church is strengthened in this.
- ✦ Knowledge and action are not sufficient; you can do all these things in a spirit of stern legalism, which divides the church. Rather, do all these things in love, which unites the church.
- ✦ Submit to those in authority over you – or, as we might put it, be a team player. How do we know those in authority? By their work. Not by their title, not by their presumptuousness, not by their learning – by their work.

We are at the end of the first letter to the Corinthians. Its theme is simple: the unity of the church. Judging by the state of the church today, it is just as timely now as when it was written.