



FIRST CORINTHIANS

Standing Firm in a Slippery World

an in-depth study/commentary of
the apostle Paul's first letter
to the Corinthian church

Alfred J. Ruyter

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Common Abbreviations

NASB: New American Standard Bible

NKJV: New King James Version

KJV: King James Version

KJVs: Both King James Version and New King James Version

NIV: New International Version

NIVs: Both/Either NIV 1984 and/or NIV 2011

YLT: Young's Literal Translation

ESV: English Standard Version

TLV: Tree of Life Version

OT, NT: Old Testament, New Testament

Commentaries Referenced in this Study

Principal Works

Fee: Gordon D. Fee, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First Epistle to the Corinthians, Revised Edition* (2014), © 1987, 2014 Gordon D. Fee, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

Garland: David E. Garland, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 1 Corinthians*, © 2003 by David E. Garland, Baker Academic.

Mare: W. Harold Mare, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Frank E. Gaebelein, General Editor, *1 Corinthians*, © 1976 by The Zondervan Corporation.

MacArthur: John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, Moody Publishers, Chicago, Copyright © 1984, John MacArthur.

Brown: *Brown's Dictionary of New Testament Theology*; Colin Brown, General Editor; English Language edition copyright © 1975, 1986, The Zondervan Corporation, Grand Rapids, Michigan, and The Paternoster Press, Ltd. Exeter, Devon, U.K.

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Vincent: Marvin R. Vincent, *Vincent's Word Studies*.

Robertson: A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*.

Vine's: W. E. Vine, *The Expanded Vine's: Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*.

Spurgeon: Charles Haddon Spurgeon

Lange: Johann Peter Lange

Maps



Introduction

Permit me a few moments to issue a polite warning about that which resides on the pages of this book. This writer is too old and too set in his ways to bother with trivialities. Thus anyone looking for a brief manual to offer a few questions prompting light discussion in your typical Sunday School class will no doubt run screaming into the night after contemplating a study that spanned more than four years and fills 578 pages. If that is what you desire, may your tribe increase; those guides have their place, and you will discover many of that type of study guide from which to choose. If, on the other hand, you are looking for something to assist in a thorough, detailed, down-to-the-bare-metal examination of an epistle that has much to say to the contemporary church and the modern Christian, then you just might find a use for this volume.

This Bible study—essentially, in content and form, a commentary—consists of my weekly notes for our Sunday morning Adult Bible Fellowship (ABF) class on First Corinthians. The discussions herein are geared for adults or, possibly, older teenagers, but certainly not young children. These notes may be found useful by teachers of similar classes, by leaders of small groups, or even by those in private study. The individual sessions typically required about thirty minutes, which included from five to ten minutes of comments, questions, or discussions.

As one can readily deduce from these notes, I do not subscribe to the “Socratic Method” of teaching a Bible class. From my experience such a method of teaching by posing a series of questions for the class to answer would waste an incredible amount of time in a class in which most participants show up not even aware of the passage that will be studied that day, and certainly will not have done any advance study of their own. No, the teacher is the one who has spent the week in detailed study of the text, so his or her voice should predominate. This does not, of course, preclude healthy discussion, and questions or insights offered by the class members, and I try always to allow time for such.

I approach any study of the Bible from the perspective that not only is it God’s holy word, but that it is an astounding, breathtaking document. Even to say it is “rich” is to damn with faint praise. That the Creator of the universe would entrust to each individual believer such a treasure, from His lips, the human intellect cannot fathom. And to have the privilege of its study, along with the many resources we have in this day and age, is a blessing too great to measure.

As to any credentials I might cite, all I have to offer is experience. As of this writing I have been teaching weekly ABF classes, virtually non-stop, for better than fourteen years; I have been writing devotional publications for more than thirty-one years; and Christian drama since 1983 (I’ll let you do the math on that one). All of these products are available, free of charge, at our web site, DLAMPEL.COM.

It is my desire and my prayer that you will find this resource of use in your daily, ongoing walk with Christ, and that it will be put to use for the edification and equipping of the church (Ephesians 4:12). Let all thanksgiving and praise be offered to our gracious God, who equips each of us in sundry ways to serve Him and His Christ, and His kingdom on earth.



Winterset, Iowa
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Session 1: The People and the Place

1 Corinthians

Preface

Few portions of God's word are as pertinent to our own time as Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth.

The epistles in the NT are not form letters. Each letter, like those to whom each was written, has its own personality and purpose. Just as churches have different personalities, the letters written to them have different personalities. Based on those respective personalities and the different situations being addressed, each letter has its own reason for being.

For example, when we studied the letter to the Hebrews—a letter *not* written by the apostle Paul, in my opinion—we discovered that it was less correspondence than the text of a *sermon*, to be read to the congregation *as* a sermon (a position put forward by the respected scholar William L. Lane).

The best way to understand the three letters to the Corinthian church (of which we have only the last two in our canon) are as Paul's side of a *conversation or dialogue*—in fact, repeatedly they have the nature of an *argument*, rather than an affable conversation. The Corinthians quarreled with Paul just as they quarreled with each other:

Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-11.

In a manner of speaking the Corinthians had put Paul on trial—at the very least comparing him to other ministers of the gospel—so he had to defend himself to them:

Read 1 Corinthians 4:1, 4-5.

At times Paul had to speak harshly, even sarcastically to them in an effort to make his point about their behavior, as he does later in Chapter Four:

Read 1 Corinthians 4:8, 10, 14.

Unlike other churches he founded, the Corinthian church did not always like his counsel, but tended to argue with him over details. Thus the tone of much of the letter before us is, as Gordon Fee points out, “especially rhetorical and combative.”

So we must ask the inevitable question: Why? In some letters Paul scolds the parishioners (as he does as early as v6 in his letter to the Galatians), but in those letters we are left with the impression that those being scolded will honor his counsel. Not so the Corinthians. Here we need not rely on our impressions; it is clear from the text that Paul must repeatedly cover the same territory to convince them—or, as in Chapter Five, correct their misinterpretation of what he had written them earlier.

Read 1 Corinthians 5:9-11.

So again, Why must Paul work so hard at it with the Corinthians? To answer that we must look not just at the members of the Corinthian church, but at the city of Corinth itself.

From Thessalonica to Corinth

While it was not the reason for choosing this letter for our next study, it is a moment of pleasant serendipity that with this we continue Paul's second missionary journey after leaving Thessalonica.

Itinerary (See Map 1)

- Paul lands in Macedonia at Neapolis and travels to Philippi where he establishes the first European church.
- Driven from Philippi, he continues on to Amphipolis, then Apollonia, then to Thessalonica.

- Leaving Thessalonica after just a few months Paul travels to Berea and then boards a ship to run down the coastline of Macedonia and Achaia, around the horn to Athens.
- After a rather unpleasant stay in Athens, Paul leaves and travels to Corinth—probably in ad 50—where he is encouraged by the presence of fellow believers, such as Priscilla and Aquila, who were Jews and, probably, already Christians.
- While in Corinth Paul writes the two Thessalonian letters.
- A couple of years later while in Ephesus, during his third missionary journey, Paul writes the first (lost) Corinthian letter.

The City and It's People

Location and City (See Maps 2 & 3)

Corinth was ideally situated on the narrow land bridge (or isthmus) that connected Peloponnesus and mainland Greece. As the apostle could personally attest, it could be a treacherous journey to sail around the cape of the Peloponnese ([Acts 27](#)). As a safer alternative an overland, four-mile rock-cut track had been built around 600 b.c. to connect the two ports, so that cargo and even small ships could be hauled across the isthmus to the opposite gulf. The city of Corinth controlled this traffic, and thus was a natural crossroad for land and sea travel. (Later, as we can see from the satellite image ([Map 4](#)), a canal replaced the rock causeway.)

In the modern photo we see a portion of Corinth as it is today. In the background is the rocky butte called the Acrocorinth, atop which would have been the temple to Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of sexual love and beauty, but also goddess of the sea and of seafaring (*Britannica*).

Licentious Corinth?

We must not make the popular mistake of seeing the city of Corinth as a veritable cesspool of licentious behavior. It is true that it was a cosmopolitan seaport, with a heady mix of religions and cultures as they flowed over and around the isthmus. The city was imbued with Roman cultural values, and those values certainly did not reflect a pious Christian culture. David Garland tells us that “the denizens of Corinth in Paul’s day were known for their wealth and ostentation.” It was indeed, as Fee writes, “at once the New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas of the ancient world.”

But much of its reputation as a sexual cesspool is based on erroneous ancient scholars, such as Strabo, as well as the difference between the earlier *Old* Corinth, and the New Corinth in place in Paul’s time. Here is what Fee writes about the earlier city.

Old Corinth had gained such a reputation for sexual vice that Aristophanes (ca. 450-385 b.c.) coined the verb *korinthiazō*, to act like a Corinthian, i.e., to commit fornication. The Asclepius room in the present museum in Corinth provides mute evidence of this facet of city life; here on one wall are a large number of clay votives of human genitals that had been offered to the god for the healing of that part of the body, apparently ravaged by venereal disease.

Sexual sin in the New Corinth was no doubt in abundance, but only of the same kind one might expect in any seaport where money flowed freely and women and men were available. This was the city in which this church was founded and struggled with Christ-likeness. To grasp the challenge, contrast the difference in background and philosophies of the members of a young evangelical church in downtown San Francisco to one in the rural Midwest.

Corinth was a religious and cultural melting pot, and, under Roman rule, was “arguably the most dazzling and modern of Greek cities” (Savage). It was a mercantile society; its culture was one of “trade, business, entrepreneurial pragmatism in the pursuit of success” (Thiselton). As Garland points out,

Few Christians could have been unaffected by the dominant culture surrounding them, even if they assimilated its values only subliminally. Most, if not all, of the problems that Paul addresses [in this letter] were hatched from the influence of this setting.

Even so, we must not fall into the easy habit of blaming our environment for the condition of our heart. The problem for the Corinthian church, and for Paul as he ministered to it, “was not that the church was in Corinth, but that too much of Corinth was in the church” (Garland, after Fee).

Understandable Slow Change

Like every one of us sitting here today, the members of the Corinthian church came to Christ carrying baggage—some a little, some quite a lot—that they had picked up along their way to Him. The older they were at the time, the more baggage they carried.

As we launch into this study of First Corinthians let us not be too quick to judge harshly the members of its church.

- Unlike many of us, none of them had benefit of believing parents who had nurtured them with the truth of God’s word—there was no Bible for them; at best, for the Jews in that congregation, they would have heard readings from the ancient Torah at the local synagogue.
- In fact, it would be extraordinary, and pretty much impossible for any in that church to have had Christian parents, for it was earlier in this same trip (Paul’s second missionary journey) that Paul preached for the first time in the European region—in Philippi—and established there the first European church.
- Their daily working environment was a cosmopolitan, seacoast city thoroughly commercialized; business, profit—this was the leading “religion” in the city, and many in the church had benefited from the wealth and affluence this offered.
- As to more traditional religions, the city was a veritable stew. Worshipped there were Apollo, Aphrodite/Venus, Asclepius, Athena, Dionysius, Ephesian Artemis, Hermes/Mercury, Jupiter, Poseidon/Neptune, Fortuna and Zeus—not to mention the pervasive, government mandated imperial cult, the deification and worship of the Roman emperor. (Christians and Jews in that time and place were considered “atheists” for believing in only one God.) For several generations of Corinth’s citizens since its re-founding by Julius Caesar in 44 bc, this was the normal way of things. Imagine having a stranger from a distant land teach that all of what you had grown up with was wrong, and that a Jew named Jesus had died for your sins, and His way was the only way to worship the one true God. This sort of transformation does not take place overnight!

So we can cut the Corinthians some slack when we consider the problems of faith and Christian living they were experiencing.

Session 2: On Being a Church

1 Corinthians

Preface

Last week we placed Paul's journey to Corinth *geographically* and *culturally*, noting the peculiar location of the city on the land bridge (or isthmus) between Peloponnesus and mainland Greece, and the distinctive nature of the Corinthian culture, with its heady mix of religions and its importance of business and trade.

This week we need to place Paul's first visit to Corinth *historically*, by means of the record in The Acts of the Apostles.

Read Acts 18:1-11.

As was pointed out last week, Paul's first visit to Corinth took place around ad 50. He probably wrote this letter—properly, dictated to his amanuensis—between ad 55 and 57, from Ephesus during his third missionary journey. After writing the letter in Ephesus, he would continue on, cross the Aegean Sea and retrace his route from the second missionary journey, revisiting in turn Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens and Corinth. Then from Corinth he would turn around and go back the way he came, stopping once again at the same churches until he returned to Asia.

The Letter's Organization

Sandwiched between Paul's salutation and concluding thoughts, our first letter to the Corinthian church is divided into two large sections.

The first—from 1:10 to 6:20—contains his response to reports he has been receiving from third parties, as well as Paul's recollections from his time in their midst. He begins this section, in v1:10, almost with the abrupt sharpness that he employed in his Galatian letter, immediately after his greeting and expression of thanksgiving.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-11.

For several chapters—until the end of Chapter Four—Paul addresses the divisions in the church, as well as the church's quarrels with him personally. This will include a defense of the gospel itself, an explanation of the work of the Holy Spirit, and an explanation of how the church is to function in God's economy. He concludes with an eloquent statement on the centrality of Christ Jesus.

Divisions in the Church

Read 1 Corinthians 1:12-13.

Right off the bat we have something as relevant to us today as the (fake) headlines we will read tomorrow. How many churches have split apart, and more often than not eventually died, because of different factions following different personalities. The roots of this come from the first century.

In the next section, which begins with v18, Paul says the answer to all this division in the church is for everyone to unite behind Christ and His gospel. And what, in just two words, *is* the gospel?

Read 1 Corinthians 1:22-23. ("Christ crucified")

Who cares who it was that taught you—focus on that which is important. As he continues into the next chapter, he says the same thing in defense of the message he brought to them.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:2.

Sidebar: It is my habit, as I am reading and rereading the text, to make note of any repetition I find, for that very often reveals the emphasis being made. And I note that from 1:18 to 2:14, Paul refers to “wisdom” and “foolishness” 27 times. Clearly that is Paul’s under-girding theme, which we will be examining when we get there.

In most of Chapter Two Paul explains that it is the Holy Spirit who supplies true wisdom—which to a natural man seems to be foolishness.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:14.

Then he begins Chapter Three by pointing out—in fact, one can almost hear him *crying* out—why teaching the Corinthians was (and remains) so challenging.

And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. (1 Corinthians 3:1)

For the rest of Chapter Three Paul is still making his case against following men instead of Christ. His immediate context is the church—how its leaders are merely servants (vv5-9), how it is built with the proper materials (vv10-15), and how it must be protected (vv16-17)—but all this has application for the individual as well.

He closes this by circling back to his opening premise: *You do not belong to men; you belong to Christ.*

Read 1 Corinthians 3:21-23.

Sidebar: Most of us are familiar with Winston Churchill’s famous description of the national interests of Russia in 1939: “I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma...” I am reminded of this when trying to organize the content of this letter into a practical outline. An outline—*any* outline—of a Bible book is just a starting point, for God’s word invariably wraps one thing inside another, inside another. The determined student of God’s word can ferret out personal counsel and truth wrapped inside doctrine, wrapped inside a parable. So even as we try to organize an overview of this letter, be assured that there is much more in every section, every verse, than what I am describing here.

In Chapter Four the apostle addresses head-on his relationship with the church—a response to their criticism of him. After detailing the practical condition and methods of his team—...“and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure...” (v12)—Paul points out his special position in their spiritual upbringing.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:15-16.

Immorality and Litigation

Still basing his remarks on what he has heard or read, Paul opens Chapter Five with a frontal attack on a serious sin being countenanced in the church: an incestuous affair between a man and the wife of his father. His rebuke is unbridled, and he closes Chapter Five by quoting the law in Deuteronomy: “Remove the wicked man from among yourselves.”

In Chapter Six Paul addresses another problem in the church—members taking other members to civil court when they have been wronged, instead of keeping it within the church family—and then closes with another form of sexual immorality: visiting prostitutes.

Sidebar: I would caution against thinking, *Since I’m not sleeping with my step-parent, I’m not taking another church member to court, and I am certainly not frequenting prostitutes, then I can just skip Chapter Six. Those sins don’t apply to me.* There is far more here to consider besides those particular sins. For example, behind the issue with

frequenting prostitutes may lie the philosophical notion that since we are (in Christ) spiritual beings, what we do with the body is of no consequence. After all, isn't this body to be destroyed in the resurrection? To this Paul has an answer.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:19-20.

So the root of this problem includes far more than sexual sin—and may have direct truths to teach even those not involved with their father's wife or a prostitute. When we encounter passages in God's word that seem not to speak to our situation or condition, we are to seek the Lord and ask, What are You teaching me here?

On Marriage

The second section—from 7:1 to 16:12—contains Paul's response to a letter *from* the Corinthian church that included a number of questions and requests to him for clarification. We need not guess about this; he states it clearly in v1.

Now concerning the things about which you wrote...

Then Paul addresses a number of topics for which the Corinthian believers had sought his counsel—beginning, in Chapter Seven, with marriage, divorce, widows and widowers, and virginity. When I suggested the Thessalonian Letters for a class, Pastor Jeremy approved, but also said, in so many words, “Are you sure you're up to teaching what 2 Thessalonians 2 says about the end times? It's challenging.” Well, this study of 1 Corinthians contains a similar minefield: Chapter Seven. Both of our pastors threw up red flags about it, saying it includes some of the toughest passages to interpret.

But, coming into it, I love how the apostle describes the balanced and reciprocal nature of healthy Christian marriage as he opens this treatise. Anyone who accuses Paul of being a woman hater needs to read this.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:2-4.

- “have” each other: hold, possess
- each to “fulfill (conjugal) duties” to the other
- each has “authority” over the others' body

On Food Sacrificed to Idols

Paul opens an extended discussion about food sacrificed to idols in Chapter Eight, and the discussion continues through Chapter Ten. And once again we discover applicable contemporary counsel inside his answer to an ancient problem. My guess is that not one of us has ever had to struggle with the decision to eat or not eat food that has previously been sacrificed to an idol, but look at some of what is touched on within his discussion:

- liberty

Read 1 Corinthians 8:8-9.

- the issue of the apostles being supported by those they serve

Read 1 Corinthians 9:7, 11.

- but also their freedom not to be supported

Read 1 Corinthians 9:13-15.

- discipline and self-control

Read 1 Corinthians 9:26-27.

- our response to temptation

Read 1 Corinthians 10:13.

- living for the good of others

Read 1 Corinthians 10:23-24.

Propriety in Worship

In Chapter Eleven the apostle addresses, first, the proper roles of men and women in worship—that is, the God-ordained hierarchy—and, second, the proper administering and receiving of the Lord's Supper.

Spiritual Gifts within the Church

Along with Ephesians 4, Chapters Twelve to Fourteen contain some of God's best counsel on life in the church, summed up nicely for us at the beginning (v12:7)—

But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

and at the very end (14:40).

But all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner.

Christ's Death and Resurrection

In Chapter Fifteen Paul offers a detailed and exhilarating defense for the bodily resurrection of every believer.

Travel Hopes and Conclusion

Paul closes this letter in Chapter Sixteen with counsel regarding the collection of funds, and his hopes for a return to Corinth (which the Lord granted). And I love one of his final remarks near the end of Chapter Sixteen (vv13-14), for it captures so much in just a few words what the world does not understand about the church.

**Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong.
Let all that you do be done in love. (1 Corinthians 16:13-14)**

I would like to close this introductory session by quoting what the late Albert Barnes (mid 1800s) wrote about the study of this letter and, for that matter, *any* portion of God's word.

Albert Barnes: In all Paul's epistles, as in all the Bible, a spirit of candor, humility, prayer, and industry is required. The knowledge of God's truth is to be acquired only by toil, and candid investigation. The mind that is filled with prejudice is rarely enlightened. The proud, unhumbled spirit seldom receives benefit from reading the Bible, or any other book. He acquires the most complete, and the most profound knowledge of the doctrines of Paul, and of the Book of God in general, who comes to the work of interpretation with the most humble heart; and the deepest sense of his dependence on the aid of that Spirit by whom originally the Bible was inspired. For "the meek will he guide in judgment, and the meek will he teach his way" (Psalm 25:9).

**He leads the humble in justice,
And He teaches the humble His way.
(Psalm 25:9)**

Session 3: A Revealing Greeting

1 Corinthians 1:1-3

Preface

We have spent the last two sessions looking at the physical, geographical setting for the Corinth church and this letter, as well as a brief survey of the letter's content—what was going on in the church to require the counsel Paul writes in the letter. Now we get down to it, examining the content of the letter itself. And we begin by reading Paul's salutation to the church in Corinth.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:1-3.

As usual, Paul includes far more in his brief salutation than a polite replacement for our "Dear So-and-so..."

Salutation

v1

Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God,

Paul begins his letter with the standard greeting of the time, but here, as in some of his other letters (cf., [Galatians](#), [Ephesians](#), [Timothy epistles](#)), he emphasizes not just his *calling* to the office, but the fact that the call came "by the will of God." Paul was not "called" by a local assembly, as today, but by the Lord God Himself, to be a universal apostle (i.e., [sent out as a messenger, but more than just that, "as an emissary of the Lord" \[MacArthur\]](#)), preacher, pastor, teacher to *all* believers. Nor did he seek the office; indeed, the Damascus road experience with its aftereffects makes clear that his conversion and calling were not his idea—nor his choice.

Out of all the reasons Paul could and probably did have for reminding the church of his authentic apostleship, foremost would be to put to rest dissension regarding his authority. Some were asking: Was he *qualified* to be speaking and teaching as he did? Later in this letter he will expand on this at length in Chapter Nine.

Read 1 Corinthians 9:1-2.

His greeting continues by telling them who is with him.

Who is Sosthenes?

...and Sosthenes our brother

We must never underestimate the power of the gospel to change the hearts of men—as Paul succinctly defines it in v23, "Christ crucified." The Lord Jesus had encouraged the apostle in a night vision to continue preaching in Corinth, "for I have many people in this city"—meaning, there are many souls in Corinth that will soon be mine (Acts 18:10). One of those was Crispus, the leader of the local synagogue (Acts 18:8), who was converted and baptized by Paul (v14). Another of those converts may have been the *next* synagogue leader, whose name was Sosthenes, and who was attacked by a mob in the presence of the Roman proconsul Gallio.

Read Acts 18:17.

No one can say with certitude that this was the same person referenced in v1, for Sosthenes was a fairly common Greek name. But one clue that he probably was is that Paul refers to him as "our brother" (lit., the brother, but regular Greek idiom for "our brother"), suggesting the this individual would be familiar to the readers of this letter. If true, this would mean that after the first leader of the synagogue, Crispus, became a Christian, his replacement was converted as well!

Sosthenes may have been Paul's amanuensis, or he may have just been a member of his team present while the letter was being written. No one can say.

v2

To the church of God which is at Corinth

In v2 of Paul's salutation he does more than just announce the intended recipients of the letter; he reminds them who they are, and the community of which they are a part.

Prepositions are important in interpreting Paul's mind, and interpreting God's word in general. Pay close attention to them. For example, look at how Paul addresses the church in Thessalonica.

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:1.

Note that: "the church *of* the **Thessalonians in God**." Now compare that to the Corinthian letter:

To the church of God which is at Corinth,

Note that: "the church *of* **God in Corinth**."

So what? Well, here we have a window into Paul's mind and intentions—and a window onto the root problem in Corinth. I have been part of a church whose members—in particular, its older members—considered it *their* church, *their* building, *their* club. And it wasn't pretty; in fact, it was downright ugly.

Right off the bat, in the opening lines of this missive, Paul is hinting at one of the more important reasons he is writing. It wasn't necessary for him to say this to the Thessalonians, but to the church in Corinth he is saying, *The church does not belong to you, Corinthians. Nor does it belong to me, or Apollos, or Cephas. It belongs to God. Stop thinking so much of yourselves. Stop subdividing the church into factions based on who is your favorite teacher.* Paul will bring this up again; for example, in Chapter Three he will write,

**For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.
(1 Corinthians 3:9)**

Moreover, in a letter to a church riven with factions Paul will not take sides, nor does he even mention individual leaders in the church. The entire letter is addressed to the entire church.

to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus

If the church does not belong to them, they also had no hand in their sanctification—here probably referring to their salvation. They didn't do it; Jesus did (remember, gospel = "Christ crucified").

This distinction is made all the more clear when we are privy to the lifestyle and behavior of the members of the Corinthian church (as we are from our first two sessions).

sanctified = *hagiazō* = from <G40> (*hagios*); **to make holy**, i.e. (ceremony) **purify or consecrate**; (mentally) to venerate :- hallow, be holy, sanctify; **set apart**.

Nothing—absolutely *nothing* in their past or present could do this. Only Christ Jesus. And, once again, don't miss the preposition. Paul could have said that they had been sanctified *by* Christ Jesus; perfectly true. But he says "in" Christ Jesus. There again is that wonderful, fascinating description of the supernatural relationship we have with our Lord.

The antidote to the creeping disease of arrogance and pride and self-importance that infects so many churches today is to keep reminding ourselves what Paul writes in this first chapter. Not only are we *in* Christ (and He in us), but God—not us, but God—is responsible for it all. This is the point he drives home near the end of this chapter, expanding on what he says in v2.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:26-31.

saints by calling [called to be holy]

We are sanctified (i.e., set apart as holy) in Christ Jesus; our righteousness, our redemption, our wisdom, our holiness have nothing to do with us, but are all because of our being in Christ Jesus. And we are in Christ only because God chose us to be in Him—as Paul says in v2, we are “saints by calling,” or “called to be holy.”

Because of this, he says in v31, all we can do is “boast in the Lord.” We have no grounds to boast in ourselves. Just as Paul did not achieve his apostleship (v1), so they do not achieve holiness, but receive it (Garland).

Sidebar: We should point out, however, that while *positionally* the Corinthians are holy, called “to reflect God’s character,” “this is not their strong suit; in too many ways they look far more like Corinth than they do God’s holy people in Corinth” (Fee).

with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours

Paul is not yet prepared to let loose of his theme; he has more to say. His purpose in these opening lines of the letter is to build the case for context. When I was but a boy, and had said or done something stupid—or at least ill-advised—my dad would say that I needed to “get my head screwed on straight.” Perhaps more than in any letter (excepting Galatians) we have of Paul’s to the churches, that is his purpose in writing to the Corinthians: for them to get their head screwed on straight.

As part of this goal, Paul has just made the point that their church belongs not to them, but to God; that God is responsible for it all—including their sanctification in Jesus Christ. His point? *It’s not about you, guys!*

Now he extends this by reminding the church that they are not alone—that they are not the only “saints by calling”; many others, “in every place” have been called as well. They may be living in a city that is the Roman jewel of Achaia, it may be a crossroad that draws throngs to marvel and wonder, but in God’s economy they are but one among many. Corinth—and, more specifically, this church in Corinth—is not the navel of the world, the center of the universe. There are many others “who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

This is the warning. But his remark is also a note of reassurance, of strength and confidence in unity.

- Yahweh encouraged the dejected prophet Elijah, who thought he was the only righteous man left, with the news that there remained at least 7,000 in Israel that had not bowed to Baal (1 Kings 19:18).
- The servant of Elijah’s successor, the prophet Elisha, thought all was lost when he arose one morning to discover that Dothan was encircled by horses and chariots of their enemy, the king of Aram. He ran back to Elisha and cried, “Alas, my master! What shall we do?” Here was Elisha’s reply:

Read 2 Kings 6:16-17.

- While he was in Corinth the apostle had been encouraged by Jesus Himself when He informed Paul to find strength in the fact that “I have many people in this city” (Acts 18:10).

When we are “in Christ” we are never alone. There are individuals and communities “in every place” who “call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ”—who pray to Him, who worship Him, who publicly proclaim His name. Jesus Christ is, as Paul emphasizes, “their Lord and ours.”

This is no small thing; this is not just Paul’s boilerplate. In the first ten verses of this letter Paul declares the title “Christ”—Messiah, the anointed one—ten times to emphasize His kingship, His lordship over the Corinthians. Remember, what is the root cause of the church’s problems, its error? Not that the church is in Corinth, but that there is too much Corinth in the church (Fee). By emphasizing the Lordship of Christ over their lives, and by pointing out to them that their church is not standing alone, but is surrounded by many of those who call

upon the same Lord, Paul is (among other reasons) using this as a lever to pry them free from the influence of their city.

Garland: Paul wants to bind the Corinthian Christians to other believers across the world, however remote, and to cut them off from any deleterious allegiances to their unbelieving neighbors closer at hand.

v3

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

All of verse three may be boilerplate in practice (cf., [Romans](#), [Ephesians](#), [Galatians](#), [Philippians](#), [2 Thessalonians](#) and [2 Corinthians](#)) but it is not boilerplate in spirit. He closes all these salutations the same because it makes an important point.

The Christian life begins with God's grace, and the Christian *knows* peace, *has* peace, only because this grace has entered his life. Both have only one source: "God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Fee puts it well, and thus I close.

Fee: In a sense, [this standard greeting] sums up the whole of Paul's theological outlook. The sum total of all of God's activity toward His human creatures is found in the word "grace"; God has given Himself to them mercifully and bountifully in Christ. Nothing is deserved; nothing can be achieved. And the sum total of those benefits as they are experienced by the recipients of God's grace is found in the word "peace," meaning "well-being, wholeness, welfare." The one flows out of the other, and both together flow from "God our Father" and were made effective in human history through our "Lord Jesus Christ."

Session 4: Graces and Gifts

1 Corinthians 1:4-6

Preface

As he does so often, after Paul's formal salutation he includes a slightly more personal expression of thanksgiving for the Corinthians—sort of.

In v3 he expresses his desire for them to have and experience “grace...and peace”; in vv4-7 Paul gives thanks that they indeed *have* grace—and more. Verses 4-9 can and should be interpreted in two ways. First, in a positive, affirming sense Paul is describing who and what the Corinthians are, what they have in Christ, and how regularly they are in his prayers. But second, in a not necessarily negative but artful way of setting them up for the argument that follows, Paul establishes how well equipped they are, in Christ Jesus, for a holy, righteous life. That's the good news. The bad news is: *So why aren't you living that way?*

This section in Paul's letters, typically just after the greeting, is not boilerplate: These words expressed by a politician (or maybe even one of us) might be empty twaddle; expressed by Paul they are another window onto the state of this church. For a comparison, let's read the corresponding section in the First Thessalonians letter.

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3.

Now let's read the next paragraph in our Corinthian passage.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:4-9.

Question: What is missing?

Answer: any mention of their good works, love for each other, generosity toward the saints, etc. The entire section speaks of what God has done and will do for them in Christ Jesus—not about what they are doing with His gifts to them. This reveals, as well, the difference between the two churches.

v4

I thank my God always concerning you

The recipient of Paul's thanksgiving he refers to as “my God” (NIV follows two earlier MSS that do not include “my”). Something he said to his worried shipmates in Acts gives us an idea of what he means by saying “my God.”

“For this very night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood before me...” (Acts 27:23)

The God to whom Paul belongs, and the God he serves, is the One to whom he offers thanksgiving. He does this “always”—i.e., “every when,” at all times, at every opportunity. Regarding the Corinthians, for what does he give thanks?

for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus

With an understanding of the many problems in the Corinthian church, some read sarcasm here. Not at all; there is nothing false or cynical said here. Paul *will* employ sarcasm elsewhere in this letter (e.g., 4:8-10), but here he is honestly giving thanks to God for what He has given them: grace, Christ Jesus, knowledge, multiple and varied gifts, and, not least, fellowship with “Jesus Christ our Lord.” His approach is, *I thank God for all He has given you. Now why aren't you doing more with it?*

Note: Paul's emphasis is not contingent on the church's laxity. Even if its members were a laudable, supreme example of service, love, generosity, piety, Paul *must* (and would) give thanks to God *first*, for the Lord is the source and giver of it all. For example, even to his beloved Philippians he begins, “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you...”

The word “grace” ([Greek *charis*, khar'-ece](#)) is a flexible word that can refer to all sorts of things, so we must do our best to understand what Paul means by its use here. Is he saying that the members of the church deport themselves with grace? Are they a gracious bunch? Is he thanking God for *saving them* by His grace?

A strong case can be made by the context of this paragraph ([vv4-9](#)) that what Paul has in mind here are the spiritual graces, or gifts, bestowed by God. The best evidence for this is v7.

so that you are not lacking in any gift, awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

gift = *charisma* = from <G5483> (charizomai); **a (divine) gratuity**, i.e. deliverance (from danger or passion); (special) **a (spiritual) endowment**, i.e. (subject) religious qualification, or (objective) **miraculous faculty** :- (free) gift.

The NIV explicitly inserts the adjective “spiritual” before “gift”—although, in a sense, that is redundant, since *all* gifts are theirs from God (who is, after all, spirit) in Christ Jesus. For the Christian, *all* gifts are spiritual, as James tells us.

[Read James 1:16-17.](#)

Later in this letter Paul will devote considerable time and ink (Chapters Twelve to Fourteen) to the church's proper use of these gifts. Here he gives thanks to God for them.

Just a Thought: Perhaps the Lord was especially generous to the Corinthians in supernatural gifts, knowing they would need them more than others, living in the corruption and license of Corinth.

And there is that word “in” again. The Corinthians are sanctified in Christ Jesus (v2) and they are given God's grace(s) in Christ Jesus (v4). Paul is already addressing one of their big problems, as he describes later.

[Read 1 Corinthians 4:7.](#)

Why do you boast as if these gifts sprang up from within you, by your will, by your inherent superior qualities? They are from God—and only from Him because you are in Christ Jesus.

David Guzik: When Paul looked at the Corinthian church, he could say: “These people proclaim Jesus, they know about Jesus, there are the supernatural gifts of God among them, and they are excited about Jesus' return.” Whatever problems they had, these are some pretty impressive strong points! Can even this much be said about many churches today? We may pride ourselves on not having the Corinthian's problems, but do we have their positives? Yet, these positives were no great credit to the Corinthian Christians themselves. They were not the spiritual achievements of the Corinthians, but the work of the grace of God in them.

v5

In v5 Paul gets a little more specific about the content of his thanksgiving. In v4 he writes, “I thank my God always concerning you.” Concerning *what* about them?

that in everything you were enriched in Him

The Greek word translated “enriched” means wealthy. In his second letter to the church in Corinth, Paul uses the word literally, in an oft-quoted passage about giving.

[Read 2 Corinthians 9:10-11.](#)

That is, you will be given much so that you will have much to give to others. But here in the first letter Paul uses the term figuratively to refer to the wealth of graces (gifts) they

possess because they are in Christ. *They* have been made wealthy because of their relationship with Christ Jesus. And then he proceeds to specify two areas in which they are wealthy.
in all speech and all knowledge

Here are two sometimes-mystical words that require deeper examination. Note the repeated “all.”

speech, utterance = *logos* = from <G3004> (lego); **something said** (including the thought); by implication a topic (**subject of discourse**), also reasoning (the mental faculty or motive; by extension a computation; specially (with the art. in John) the Divine Expression (i.e. Christ) :- account, cause, **communication**, × concerning, doctrine, fame, × have to do, intent, matter, mouth, preaching, question, reason, + reckon, remove, say (-ing), shew, × speaker, **speech**, talk, thing, + none of these things move me, tidings, treatise, utterance, word, work.

knowledge = *gnosis* = from <G1097> (ginosko); knowing (the act), i.e. (by implication) knowledge :- knowledge, science; understanding.

Fee interprets *logos* (speech) in this context as “in every kind of ‘spiritual utterance’”—i.e., as we will see later in this letter, gifts of utterance such as knowledge, wisdom, tongues, prophecy, etc. By *gnosis* (knowledge) Paul refers to their insight into spiritual things, such as the mysteries of faith (13:2).

Paul is walking a narrow line here, broaching a topic that he will develop more fully later. We are familiar with the rest of his letter so we can imagine what is going through Paul’s mind even as he, once again, thanks God for their gifts of speech and knowledge. Later he will show that there is too much of the flesh, too much of *self* in their use of these gifts—that they are worthless if they are not employed in the Spirit, and enveloped in love.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:1-2.

v6

Once again we must bring to a close our study in the middle of another of the apostle’s long sentences. We will revisit v6 in our next session as we complete this paragraph. But now let us complete our thoughts with a brief look at this verse.

even as the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you,

Nevertheless, even if badly realized, their gifts serve as a confirmation—a “testimony”—implied, “God the Father confirmed Paul’s witness to Christ among them by giving them these Spirit giftings” (Fee).

testimony = *martyrion* = neuter of a presumed derivative of <G3144> (martus); something evidential, i.e. (genitive) **evidence given** or (special) the Decalogue (in the sacred Tabernacle) :- to be testified, testimony, **witness**.

We can think of this paragraph as *progressive*—no, not “progressive” as in the new Democrats, but moving from the smaller to the larger or, more precisely here, from the beginning invitation and acceptance (v4: “the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus”) to the fruition and filling of that new relationship (v5: “you were enriched in Him...”) to the extent that they “were not lacking in any gift” (v7).

Put succinctly in more modern vernacular,

Paul came.
Paul preached.
The Spirit came.
The Spirit empowered.
Testimony confirmed.

We will begin with v6 in our next session.

Session 5: God's Faithful Grace

1 Corinthians 1:6-9

Preface

Very often one can outline or organize any Scripture passage a number of ways; come to think of it, that might serve as a profitable hobby or avocation: *outlining books of the Bible for fun and profit!*

The respected scholar and commentator D. A. Carson organizes these opening verses of Chapter One—after the greeting—thus:

vv4-9: empirical evidence of their sanctification

vv10-12: empirical evidence of what is missing in their sanctification

vv13-17: biblical evidence of what is needed in their sanctification

This reveals the balanced approach Paul brings to this letter. He balances criticism of their behavior with, if not praise, at least acknowledgment of their laudable, God-given qualities. He then follows this up with constructive counsel on what is needed—in their case, the need to reestablish the centrality of Christ and the centrality of the gospel in their lives.

C. H. Spurgeon: It was very wise of Paul thus to praise these Corinthians where they could be praised, for he was about to upbraid them and reprove them for many things which were not pleasing to God. If you have the unpleasant duty of rebuking those who deserve it, always take care that you begin by saying all that you can, and all that you ought, in their favor; it will prepare the way for what you have to say to them afterwards.

That seems like a pretty good way to approach the situation in the Corinthian church—diplomatic, yet constructive. Paul's intent is not to make them into something they are not, but to improve what they already are. And he begins this process, in the passage we are currently in, by reinforcing them with the obvious evidence that *they are indeed sanctified*. They belong to Christ.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:4-7.

Let me reiterate the shorthand for v6 I suggested in our previous session:

Paul came.

Paul preached.

The Spirit came.

The Spirit empowered. Thus,

Testimony confirmed.

Paul's work among them bore fruit, and this was confirmed by the Spirit graciously and abundantly dispensing gifts to them. And v7 clarifies this.

v7

so that you are not lacking in any gift

I confess to being bothered by the all-encompassing scope of Paul's remarks in this passage.

v5: that in **everything** you were enriched in Him, in **all** speech and **all** knowledge

v7: you are not lacking in **any** gift

We know instinctively, as well as from what comes later in this letter, that it cannot *literally* be true that every member of the Corinthian church was endowed and imbued with *every* spiritual gift—and that to the full. So the problem must be in our understanding of what Paul is saying. And we may discover a clue to this when we compare the KJVs to the rest of our modern translations of v7.

KJV: So that ye come behind in no gift...

NKJV: so that you come short in no gift...

The NASB and ESV *could* be in agreement with this; they could mean “you are not lacking ~~in~~ any gift” (i.e., **you have all the gifts**) or “you are not lacking in any gift *you have*.” With the inclusion of “in” it seems to point to the latter—and in agreement with the KJVs. That is, *the Corinthians do not fall short in the area of gifts when compared to other churches*.

Paul will reinforce this interpretation in Chapter Thirteen.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:9-10, 12.

He says that, at best, we presently know just a mere portion of what there is to know. So perhaps the best way to interpret these all-encompassing adjectives in Chapter One is that they, the Corinthians, have not been shortchanged; the Lord has not held back anything from them in the area of useful gifts.

awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We might say that in this preliminary “thanksgiving” passage of vv4-9 Paul is putting his best spin on the situation in Corinth. Nevertheless, as we have already seen, he is using this to cue up—or lay the groundwork for—the more substantial exhortations that will come later in this letter.

The awkward juxtaposition of the verse’s two clauses (**what does a wealth of spiritual gifts have to do with Christ’s return?**) forces us to consider that Paul must have something specific, and perhaps deeper in mind.

The Corinthians were proud of their gifts, and Paul’s intention was to not just get rid of their pride and show them a more righteous way of putting them to use, but to also make the point that *this is not as good as it gets*—that the gifts we are privileged to have and use now pale in comparison to what we will enjoy later. **Keep your finger in Chapter One, but please return to Chapter Thirteen if you have left it.** This chapter answers with hard reality the congratulatory points made in our passage. It supplies a series of “buts” to each one.

Chapter One	Chapter Thirteen
v5: you were enriched in Him in all speech	v1: 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.
v5: you were enriched in Him...in all knowledge	v8c: if there is knowledge, it will be done away v12b: now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known.
v7: you are not lacking in any gift	v9-10: For we know in part and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away.

[Back to Chapter One.](#)

When will the partial be done away? When will the “perfect” come? Verse 7b: at “the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ.” See how these two clauses work together now!

The ESV is too soft here (“as you wait”). This is Paul’s traditional word used to express the believer’s expectant, joyful anticipation of the End Times, and the return of Christ Jesus.

apekdechomai = from <G575> (apo) and <G1551> (ekdechomai); to expect fully :- look (wait) for; “**an eager expectancy**” (Robertson).

David Garland has a nice turn of phrase to interpret v7.

Garland: Instead of standing on their dignity as those enriched with speech and knowledge, they should be standing on tiptoe in anticipation of what is to come when God will establish or confirm them as blameless on the day of the Lord.

John MacArthur adds that this Greek word also includes the idea of activity: we are not just waiting expectantly; *while* we are waiting we remain active, we are working for the kingdom.

vv8-9

We could easily devote an entire session—indeed, multiple sessions—to the glorious promises contained in vv8-9. Talk about food for contemplation, for meditation! We await 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.

Note the progressive grace in this passage—progressive, but slightly out of chronological order. Back up a moment and take the long view.

- By grace we are “called into fellowship” with Christ. (v9)
- By grace we are apportioned spiritual gifts with which to serve Him and His church. (vv4-7a)
- By grace we are “confirmed to the end,” declared “blameless” in the Day of the Lord. (v8)

Who does this? Do we slog it out, day after day, struggling to remain faithful to the One who has called us, fearful that we might miss out when this life draws to a close? No, “God is faithful” (Greek: “Faithful is God”). The One who called us into this relationship is the One who guarantees its fruition and culmination.

This is no small thing. This has been a point of division within the church for centuries. When I was growing up in the Baptist church of my youth this was referred to as the “eternal security of the believer”—i.e., “once saved, *always* saved.” As I understood it at the time, if I was a Christian, no matter what I did, no matter how badly I behaved, I would still go to heaven when I died.

The preferred terminology today is the “perseverance of the saints,” and here is how Wayne Grudem defines it.

Grudem: The perseverance of the saints means that all those who are truly born again will be kept by God’s power and will persevere as Christians until the end of their lives, and that only those who persevere until the end have been truly born again.

We could take a side road at this point and spend a few sessions detailing this, but what I would like to do instead is emphasize—as Paul does in our Corinthian text—*who* is responsible for this perseverance. Paul writes in vv8-9,

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.

Even though the *apparent* antecedent to “who” at the beginning of v8 is “our Lord Jesus Christ” (v7b), in the context of this paragraph (vv4-9) the *logical* subject of the pronoun is God. Thus Paul does not call for the Corinthians to remain blameless by their own merits and effort; nor does he call for the Corinthians to be faithful in their Christian walk. Instead he encourages the church with the fact that Father God is the one who will be doing this.

- God will confirm you
- God will keep you blameless
- God is the one (not you) who remains faithful

This hearkens back to the faithful God of the OT. Jews in the Corinthian church reading or hearing this letter would nod their heads in sage agreement that God is indeed faithful. One can trace His faithfulness all the way from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22—but there is a difference at times between the OT and NT. Listen carefully to what Yahweh says in the law.

Read Deuteronomy 7:9-11.

Hear how the responsibility is ultimately placed on the individual to keep the law; God is indeed faithful—if... Now let's close with the NT version.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24.

Here's the difference: Under the law, God was faithful—to *those who kept his commandments*. In Christ Jesus, *God* is faithful to keep you to the end.

Period.

Session 6: Following the Wisdom of Men

1 Corinthians 1:10

Preface (passage)

For the last few weeks we have been looking at Paul's thanksgiving to God for the many gifts—or graces—He has entrusted to the Corinthian church. Paul, in v6, says that these gifts confirm that his “testimony,” his gospel teaching in their midst, did indeed find a home in these individuals. D. A. Carson refers to this as “empirical evidence of their sanctification.”

Now we turn the page to the next section, vv10-12, which Carson titles, “empirical evidence of what is *missing* in their sanctification”—principally, the divisions or factions in their assembly, and their quarreling with each other. Both of which could be reduced down to an attitude and spirit of ‘I’m right and you’re wrong.’ But there is something far deeper going on here.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-12.

To properly interpret and understand the first four chapters of the Corinthian letter we must understand some key points:

- The “divisions” and “quarrels” in the church were less the problem than symptoms of the problem. Divisions and factions within any church are unhealthy and counterproductive, but more important is why they are there.
- A clue to the root problem causing this division in Corinth is revealed by Paul's extraordinary number of references, or uses of from v1:18 to 2:16 and beyond, to the “wisdom” word group. Back in our second session, as we were surveying the letter as a whole, I pointed out that from v1:18 to v2:14 Paul refers to “wisdom” or “foolishness” 27 times. In the context of the entire NT this is an astonishing number of uses of an otherwise infrequent word group.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:20.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:1-5.

- Along with the emphasis on wisdom language (Greek *sophia* or *sophos*) these chapters also include repeated references to the Corinthians “boasting” and being “puffed up.”

Read 1 Corinthians 3:18-23.

The question then remains: What does all this add up to? What was really going on in the Corinthian church? What was causing these divisions? What is the root of the problem? For the answer we turn to the commentator Gordon Fee, from whom we get this interpretation.

Fee: Although the answer to this is somewhat speculative, nonetheless some good guesses can be made. Interpreters commonly see the emphasis on wisdom as stemming from the Corinthian believers' response to the ministry of Apollos, either from his content or his style, or perhaps both. This has much to commend it and may well be so. But since very little in the church in Corinth, as seen in this letter, reflects a Jewish background, it seems better to see the problem as stemming from Hellenistic influences. In this case, therefore, it is possible that the key lies with the phenomenon in the Hellenistic [i.e., Greek] world of the itinerant philosopher, many of whom were sophists [Greek teachers known for their clever, specious arguments]—more concerned with polished oration than with significant content. The coming and going in turn of Paul, Apollos, and Peter (if indeed he had visited the church), and especially some marked contrasts in style and content among them, had perhaps led the Corinthians themselves to begin to think of their new-found faith as an expression of *sophia* [wisdom]—the divine *sophia*, to be sure, but *sophia* nonetheless. Fee continues,

Within this kind of context they were quarreling over their leaders as teachers of wisdom, boasting in one or the other, and judging them from this merely human perspective, from which perspective neither Paul nor his gospel comes off very well. The message of a crucified Messiah, preached by an apostle who lived in considerable weakness, is hardly designed to impress the ‘wise,’ as they now considered themselves. In any case—and this is

the crucial item for these chapters—the greater issue for Paul is not the division itself; that is merely a symptom. The greater issue is the threat posed to the gospel, and along with that to the nature of the church and its apostolic ministry. Thus, in a more profound way than is sometimes recognized, this opening issue is the most crucial in the letter, not because their ‘quarrels’ were the most significant problem in the church, but because the nature of this particular strife had as its root cause a false theology, in which they had exchanged the theology of the cross for an ingenuous triumphalism that went beyond, or excluded, the cross.

Note: As usual, this is not the only interpretation of the text. This is, however, the one that in my opinion does the best job of explaining the reason for Paul’s emphases in the ensuing verses and chapters. Or it may be that Fee is just one of the rare few willing to dig beneath the surface. Some commentators simply deal with the church’s divisions, not bothering to root out their cause. If Paul addressed this in one or two verses, then moved onto something else, I could understand that. But Paul works on this for many verses throughout *multiple* chapters. That makes it important to him—and to us.

It makes perfect sense that in the sophisticated, cosmopolitan milieu of Corinth the church members would become enamored with personalities, with eloquence, with impressive yet specious rhetoric. And in that multicultural, multi-religion environment so heavily influenced by Greek philosophy, it would be easy for them to associate the teaching of these various church leaders with the Greek concept of philosophical wisdom, or *sophia*.

But God says through the prophet Isaiah, quoted by Paul in v19, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside.”

For the spiritual health of the church of God in Christ today I can think of no more important passage than this, no more important verse than v10. What Paul speaks to here is *critical* to the church: in disunity the church collapses; in unity it thrives. This is why it is imperative that we, first, understand what the word is saying here and, second, apply that truth to both our church and our individual lives.

Preface (v10)

Never before in the history of man has it been so easy, so convenient to listen to disparate voices, disparate and potentially conflicting theologies. Certainly in the first century that voice had to *physically* travel to where you were for you to hear it. Paul had to commit to a long and arduous, sometimes treacherous journey to speak the gospel to the Corinthians.

Even as recent as 100 years ago, in the first two decades of the twentieth century, it remained much the same. There was no television or even commercially available radios. Moving pictures were still in their infancy, and although they were plentiful and popular, they remained silent. There were, of course, books and magazines, but one would be hard-pressed to discover and read something truly controversial or scandalous.

Today all these restrictions have been eliminated. No matter where we are—even walking down the street—we can listen to myriad voices from around the world. At a touch or a click we can listen to and absorb unrestricted philosophies, religions and fanciful opinions.

As remarkable—and fascinating—as this is, this is not necessarily cause for rejoicing. Because access is easier and restrictions have been eliminated—not just technologically, but morally—it is easier to take in bad doctrine, heresy, fantasy—garbage. Cults of personality, of winsome rhetoric, of spurious doctrine have become even more numerous and diverse. And all available at our fingertips. Itinerant speakers are no longer necessary; any idiot can sit in his or her basement and reach the world.

This ease of access places a heavier, more critical burden on each individual to not believe everything one hears. It means that every follower of Christ must be even more diligent to insure that everything taken in is judged against the eternal and unchanging standard of God’s word. The words coming from any individual—no matter how eloquent, attractive, popular or credentialed—must be weighed against God’s holy word.

v10

So let us see how Paul begins to address this challenging situation. Verse 10 is only the opening salvo of a campaign that he will prosecute for almost one quarter of the letter. [And because of the constraints of time, we will just begin our look at v10 in this session, returning to it in our next before we press on into the passage.](#)

Now I exhort you, brethren...

Paul opens his argument with both a *pastoral* tone, emphasizing his appeal to family members, and with a more authoritative, apostolic tone, calling upon the full authority of “our Lord Jesus Christ.”

First, as a pastor, he addresses them with the Greek *adelphos*, literally the masculine “brothers” or “brethren.” The *new NIV* (2011) translates this “brothers and sisters”—good interpretation; poor *translation*. We already have evidence in this immediate passage (v11) of the prominence of certain women in the Corinthian church. We also have evidence that Paul, at least in his thinking, included women in his reference to “brethren”; in his letter to the Philippians he uses *adelphos*, and then immediately refers to two important women in the church.

Read Philippians 4:1-3.

There is one more reason for Paul to exhort them as “brethren.” They are not just *his* brethren, but in a letter to a church that is in the process of breaking up into factions, he wants to stress their family relationship *to each other*.

by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ

We have already shown that Paul does not waste words—that he says what he means and he means what he says. This is the fifth time in ten verses that Paul has employed the full title “Lord Jesus Christ” or “Jesus Christ our Lord.” This serves two purposes: to keep the preeminence and authority of Christ before the church, and to emphasize *his* (Paul’s) apostolic authority in that appellation. He calls upon that authority in this moment to “exhort” them.

exhort^{nasb}, **appeal**^{niv, esv}, **beseech**^{kjv}, **plead**^{nkjv} = *parakaleo* = from <G3844> (*para*) and <G2564> (*kaleo*); to call near, i.e. invite, invoke (by imploration, hortation or consolation) :-
beseech, **call for**, (be of good) comfort, desire, (give) exhort (-ation), entreat, pray.

that you all agree

Here the KJVs are the most literal in their translation: “that you all speak the same thing.”

Necessary in understanding what Paul means by the positive, “that you all agree,” is what he says in the negative: “that there be no divisions among you.” But I want to close this session by dwelling for a moment on what is meant by, in the Greek, *to auto legete pantes*: “that the same thing ye may all say.”

This phrase for me immediately brings to mind a lasting, haunting image from the opening ceremonies of the 2008 summer Olympics in the People’s Republic of China. The field was covered by hundreds (perhaps thousands) of drummers—all perfectly, absolutely, *surgically* aligned, moving their arms in *precise* unison. It was not marvelous, it was not impressive; it was *creepy*. It served as a perfect illustration of the hideous nature of communism, of socialism.

This is not at all what Paul means by exhorting the Corinthians to “all agree.” He does not want creepy, unnatural *uniformity*, but *unity*. Pastor Alistair Begg likens the former to a person standing up in the assembly and declaring, “Broccoli is my favorite vegetable,” followed by the person next to the first standing up and declaring, “Broccoli is *my* favorite vegetable, too.”

Which is where we will leave it this week: to establish that God does not care that we all agree on our vegetables—or the type of music played in a worship service, or what color tie one wears to church. God *does* care very much that every assembly agree on what they believe—and declare—about His Son Jesus Christ.

Session 7: Church Unity

1 Corinthians 1:10

Preface

Before we return to our detailed examination of v10 and following, I need to reiterate just a few key points regarding our approach both to this passage and the following verses and chapters. To wit: the *divisions* in the church, the *cause* of these divisions, and Paul's extraordinary emphasis on wisdom (*sophia*) in the first four chapters of this letter. The interpretation of the situation we draw from the excellent commentary on First Corinthians by Gordon Fee. Let me read just the conclusion of what he writes about this.

Fee: Within this kind of context they were quarreling over their leaders as teachers of wisdom, boasting in one or the other, and judging them from this merely human perspective, from which perspective neither Paul nor his gospel comes off very well. The message of a crucified Messiah, preached by an apostle who lived in considerable weakness, is hardly designed to impress the 'wise,' as they now considered themselves. In any case—and this is the crucial item for these chapters—the greater issue for Paul is not the division itself; that is merely a symptom. The greater issue is the threat posed to the gospel, and along with that to the nature of the church and its apostolic ministry. Thus, in a more profound way than is sometimes recognized, this opening issue is the most crucial in the letter, not because their 'quarrels' were the most significant problem in the church, but because the nature of this particular strife had as its root cause a false theology, in which they had exchanged the theology of the cross for an ingenuous triumphalism that went beyond, or excluded, the cross.

This is important, not just to understanding the text, but to living our individual lives in Christ, protecting the integrity of the church—and in both of these, remaining faithful to the word of God. For just as the Corinthians had become enamored of impressive speakers sometimes promoting spurious "gospels," we too are surrounded by impressive voices that can lead us astray. We must remain determined to hold to the *true* gospel presented in God's word. Now let's read the passage again, then return to v10.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-12.

v10

In our previous session I pointed out that Paul opens his argument with both a *pastoral* tone, emphasizing his appeal to family members, and with a more authoritative, apostolic tone, calling upon the full authority of Christ, using His full name and title: "our Lord Jesus Christ."

And where we ended in our previous session was establishing that the literal Greek is best expressed by the KJVs: "that you all speak the same thing." The apostle supplies his own commentary for this within v10. He begins by stating that he wants the members of the Corinthian church to "all agree"—or, "say the same thing." Of course we wonder what he means by this, and he helps answer that question by repeating "the same" twice more. In the NASB,

Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree [say the same thing] and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment.

But we have a couple of things to examine before we get to those. First,

that there be no divisions among you

Our modern translations have wisely not transliterated this, for in this instance knowing the literal Greek can send us in the wrong direction.

divisions = *schismata* = from <G4977> (*schizo*); **a split or gap** ("schism"), literal or figurative :- division, **rent**, schism.

Our modern word “schism” comes from this word, but often refers to a party or sect or faction that is formed *by* the division. For help understanding how Paul uses this word here, let’s look at something Jesus said in the gospel of Mark.

Read Mark 2:21.

That’s the idea; same word. The battling, argumentative opinions are rending, tearing the integrity of the body of Christ in Corinth, dividing it—which is why all our translations use “divisions.” (Another illustration would be how a plow cuts through (or divides) the soil.) And Paul stays with this imagery when he writes,

but that you be made complete...

This word is effectively the opposite of *schismata*.

made complete^{nasb}, **perfectly united**^{niv}, **perfectly joined together**^{kjvs}, **united**^{esv} = *katēttismenoi* (from *katartizo*) = from <G2596> (*kata*) and a derivative of <G739> (*artios*); to complete thoroughly, i.e. **repair** (literal or figurative) or adjust :- fit, frame, **mend**, (make) perfect (-ly join together), prepare, **restore**.

Here is the opposite picture—putting back together that which has been torn apart.

Read Mark 1:19.

Same word used for “mending the nets.” If a fishing net is torn, it is sewn back together. The letter to the Galatians gives us a similar, but slightly different picture of the same Greek word.

Read Galatians 6:1.

Here is a picture not just of repairing that which has been torn, but restoring a person to a previous condition. Paul may be saying that he wants the Corinthians to not just *become* unified, but to restore the unity they had earlier known.

in the same mind and in the same judgment.

What does it mean to be “perfectly joined together” (NKJV)? What does this look like? We will be of the same “mind” and “judgment.” From the same root:

mind = *nous* (noose) = probably from the base of <G1097> (*ginosko*); **the intellect**, i.e. mind (divine or human; in thought, feeling, or will); by implication meaning :- mind, understanding. Compare <G5590> (*psuche*).

judgment = *gnome* = from <G1097> (*ginosko*); cognition, i.e. (subject) **opinion**, or (object) resolve (counsel, consent, etc.) :- advice, + agree, judgment, mind, **purpose**, will.

Though from the same root (thus related), there are subtle differences between these two words. The venerable J. B. Lightfoot gives us the difference between the two: “Of these words *nous* denotes the frame or state of mind, *gnōmē* the judgment, opinion or sentiment, **which is the outcome of nous**” (emphasis added). John MacArthur refers to this as being “‘made complete’ both internally and externally. In our individual minds and among ourselves we are to be one in beliefs, standards, attitudes, and principles of spiritual living.”

What does such unity look like in the church? I can do no better than to quote MacArthur on how this is to play out in the local assembly—beginning with how Paul’s definition of unity (i.e., same mind and judgment) effectively eliminates hypocrisy.

John MacArthur: Being of the same mind and...the same judgment rules out grudging or hypocritical unity. Unity must be genuine. We are not simply to speak the same thing, while keeping our disagreements and objections to ourselves, making a pretense of unity. Unity that is not of the same mind and judgment is not true unity. Hypocrites will add to

a congregation's size but they will take away from its effectiveness. A member who strongly disagrees with his church leadership and policy, not to mention doctrine, cannot be happy or productive in his own Christian life or be of any positive service to the congregation.

It is not that believers are to be carbon copies of each other. God has made us individual and unique. But we are to be of the same opinion in regard to Christian doctrine, standards, and basic life-style. The apostles themselves were different from one another in personality, temperament, ability, and gifts; but they were of one mind in doctrine and church policy. When differences of understanding and interpretation arose, the first order of business was to reconcile those differences. Ego had no place, only the will of God.

Pastoral elders should make decisions on the basis of unanimous agreement. Not even a three-fourths vote should carry a motion. No decision should be made without total one-mindedness, no matter how long that takes. Because the Holy Spirit has but one will, and because a church must be in complete harmony with His will, the leaders must be in complete harmony with each other in that will. The congregation then is to submit to the elders because it has confidence that the elders' decisions are made under the Spirit's direction and power. Because they believe the elders are one in the Spirit, the congregation is then determined to be one with the elders. There may be struggle in coming to this kind of unity, as there was in Corinth, but it is here mandated by the Spirit Himself through Paul.

The apostle Paul did not invent this idea of unity in the assembly. This is not a new covenant construct.

Read Psalm 133.

Even part of the ubiquitous Hebrew word *shalom*, or peace, means wholeness, oneness. Throughout Scripture there are calls for brothers and sisters to live together in peace, in unity. And there are two sources for this unity: the Word and the Lord.

The Word

What does unity look like? First, it looks like the word of God! Our unity is not just based on the *doctrines* revealed in the Bible—the literal words written there—but on the unity of the Bible itself. In the sixty-six books of our version of the Bible (within Christendom there are many different canonical versions), with its many authors (again, not all agree, but somewhere in the 35–40 range), there is perfect unity, or agreement. You will not find one or two writers who abruptly veer off in a left-hand turn when everyone else goes right. It is a cohesive, coherent, unified package from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22.

Paul exhorts the Corinthians—and us—to agree with each other, to be made whole by being of the same mind and judgment. Agree about what? Same mind and judgment about what? The weather? Politics? Which corn hybrid to plant? No, the basis for our agreement, that which it is imperative we all agree upon, is the eternal word of God.

- That we all accept it as God's holy, written word to man.
- That it is perfect, inerrant.
- That within this body we have general agreement on its doctrine, precepts, interpretation.

For us, today, this word consists of printed words on a page; in the first century and earlier, when our printed words were still being recorded for the first time by the power of the Holy Spirit, this word included the words spoken by the prophets and the apostles. But it was *all* the word of God—and the sure foundation of faith.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:13.

The Lord

Just as the members of a human family share one or more common ancestors, the members of the spiritual family called the church *must* share the common 'ancestor' of "our Lord Jesus Christ." We follow Christ Jesus, and no other—no other god, no other man.

Paul's gospel was "Christ crucified."

Read 1 Corinthians 1:22-24.

There is only one throne in the church: the one on which sits our Lord and Savior. Chloe's people reported that some in the church were following Paul, some others Apollos, others Peter. Paul rebuts these followers of men in v13.

Read v13.

Our faith is in Christ Jesus, Messiah, Son of God—the One who suffered and died for our sins. Our faith is based on *His* life, *His* gospel, and the written word of God. Thus the unity and integrity of each local church must claim as its foundation—its *only* foundation—these two authorities.

Anything else will only cause—as it did in Corinth—division, corruption and, ultimately, that church's demise—or worse, a corrupt, adulterated testimony to the world.

Session 8: Misplaced Allegiance

1 Corinthians 1:11-12

Preface

I have always been grateful for the fact that no one person “led” me to Christ, but that I answered the call of the Spirit because of my parent’s upbringing and example, the teaching and example of other adults in the church, and (probably least of all) by the messages of the pastor. A sensitivity to spiritual things was simply born and bred into me, creating a fertile environment for the eventual call of the Holy Spirit—which I answered at the age of seven. It is true, however, that I am grateful to one person who disciplined and nurtured me back into the fold in the early eighties after a period in the wilderness. By the grace of God my gratitude has remained just that; I did not pedestalize him, I did not “follow” him.

But in at least two, and possibly three cases, that is precisely what was going on in the Corinthian church. Their gratitude had evolved into something darker; gratitude became allegiance.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:11-13.

v11

For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren,

This was no mere rumor or bit of gossip. The word translated “informed” (*also, reported, declared*) means “to make plain” by words; we might say, “I have it on good authority.”

by Chloe’s people,

Literally this is “those of Chloe.” The insertion of “people” is the safest, since we know next to nothing about this woman. But certain assumptions can be made—one of which would be that if this referred to a family, Paul would have used the *father’s* name, even if he were deceased. So the insertion of “household,” implying family, may not be the best. Best guess is that this was a business woman, perhaps from Ephesus, conducting trade with Corinth, and (since Paul does not further identify her) is certainly known to the church. And if this woman and those immediately around here are so interested in the health of the Corinthian church, they certainly had a vested interest in it—perhaps some or all as members themselves. Whoever she and her people were, the apostle considered their word trustworthy. And what was this word?

that there are quarrels among you.

quarrels/ing, contentions^{kiv} = *eris* = of uncertain affinity; a quarrel, i.e. (by implication) wrangling :- **contention**, debate, **strife**, variance.

Paul often includes this word in his several lists of vices, often translated “strife.”

Read Galatians 5:19-23.

And we can safely conclude that there was no immediate elimination of this quarreling, for it is still mentioned in his second letter to the church.

Read 2 Corinthians 12:20.

These “quarrels” were the natural outflow of the “divisions” in the church. What precisely caused the divisions is the challenge before us.

v12

Just as we can acquire an unhealthy devotion to a doctor or surgeon who heals us from a terrible disease or injury, it is possible for a Christian to have an unhealthy devotion to someone who is instrumental in the inception of, or our ongoing relationship with Christ. Gratitude and innocent joy can become something darker—unhealthy not just to us, but to the church itself.

Read v12.

Theories abound as to what Paul means here and the *extent* of these divisions. That is, for example, were they little more than the basis for philosophical arguments and petty squabbles, or were they organized parties, becoming literal sub-churches within the larger Corinthian church? Let's first briefly consider the four individuals around which these factions gathered.

Note: There is no evidence whatsoever that these individuals—Paul, Apollos, Peter, and certainly not Christ Jesus—instigated these divisions.

Paul: The apostle, a Jew, founded the church, visited it several times, and wrote at least three letters to the church, two of which are in our canon. He was not a physically impressive man, and though he was extremely intelligent and learned, his teaching was not particularly eloquent.

Apollos: We are introduced to Apollos, a Jew from Alexandria, Egypt, in Acts 18, where we learn that, while an effective leader in the early church, he was the opposite of Paul: a charismatic, eloquent speaker, but, though learned, he was at least initially limited in his understanding of the gospel.

Read Acts 18:24-26.

After this vital instruction, Apollos became an even more effective evangelist and speaker. He traveled to Achaia, and while there visited Corinth.

Read Acts 18:27-19:1.

So the evidence would seem to indicate that at least some in the church had seen and heard Apollos, who was, essentially, their second pastor.

Cephas: Cephas (*kay-fas'*) is the apostle Peter's name translated into Aramaic, and Paul's usual way of referring to him. There is no evidence that Peter ever visited Corinth. Some commentators claim that those waving the banner of Peter would have been the so-called "Judaizers," who would, for example, believe that Christians must also follow the Judaic law.

Christ: Jesus, of course, never visited Corinth, and it is doubtful, although not impossible, that anyone there had ever met Him or heard Him speak. And the words He *did* speak stood against this sort of divisiveness in his followers.

Read John 17:22-23.

So what is really going on here? What does Paul mean when He states, "...each one of you is saying, 'I am of Paul,' and 'I of Apollos,' and 'I of Cephas,' and 'I of Christ'" in v12? To ferret this out requires some reading between the lines and a little bit of guesswork and common sense.

Our first clue is in the repetition of the word "I." These "slogans" read literally as they are translated in the NASB and KJVs: "I am of Paul." But none of our modern translations get it wrong; being "of" Paul means "I am Paul's person," or (as in the NIV and ESV) "I follow Paul." (*Fee*) And that's the problem.

The second clue is that Christ is included in the slogans. What can be wrong with that! Of course we are to be followers of Christ, disciples of His, so the fact that Paul includes this with the others tells us that their true motives were not along this line.

David Guzik: The Corinthians' boasting about their "party leaders" was really boasting about themselves. It wasn't so much that they thought Apollos was great, but *that they were great for following him*. (emphasis added)

Because Paul includes them, we see that those "of Christ" did not have the right spirit. Sadly this group was probably the most pious and self-righteous, thinking they held a special claim on Christ. (*MacArthur*)

There is no indication of this being an organized effort, resulting in physical separation, as in the various “parties” meeting in separate homes. Nor were these divisions based on theological, doctrinal disputes.

S. M. Pogoleff: [Commentators] fail to recognize that the smoke of divisions do[es] not necessarily imply the fire of doctrine.

Garland citing T. B. Savage: Savage points out that people in the first century were more interested in show than in doctrine (“The bulk of religious people had little or no theology”) and cites as evidence the declaration in Petronius, “No one cares a button for dogma.”

Remember that we have already made the case for Paul’s emphasis on “wisdom” (*sophia*) in the first four chapters being his response to the Corinthians being enamored with the Hellenistic idea of eloquence and presentation being more important than content. These parties, with the resulting divisions in the church, were not based on doctrinal differences between these four leaders. In the case of the first two names—Paul and Apollos—it could be little more than a loyalty to a favorite pastor: Paul was their first, Apollos their second.

It is a short hop from exaltation of a man to exaltation of self. When we set another human being on the throne reserved for Christ Jesus—and when we “follow” or proclaim allegiance to any fellow human, that process has begun—we are just a few steps away from “following” ourselves.

See what the Corinthians are doing? Do you hear the arrogance, the air of superiority in their slogans? “I follow Paul.” “I follow Apollos.” We believe *ourselves* better than others when we believe our lord (small “L”) better than other lords. This is why Paul includes in his disapproval, those who claim to follow Christ. He understands that what they are really saying is the same as everyone else: *I am better than you, because my L/lord is better than yours.*

We all must be cognizant of the subtle gradations of our relationships with leaders—not just in the church, but in every walk of life—for some may take us down a dangerous path. We must understand the sometimes subtle difference between

- listening to—and following a leader;
- respecting, honoring a leader—and becoming a slavish follower of him;
- submitting to the authority of a God-ordained leader—and obeying his every dictate without question or thought.

Not being aware of this danger is how cults, and cults of personality are formed. When we slavishly follow the teaching of someone like Joel Osteen, who declares that God wants us to be healthy, and God wants us to be wealthy, and that we have within us the power to tell God what to do for us—when we follow this aberrant teaching without checking it against God’s word, we have just set a mere (and horribly wrong) man on the throne of Christ.

The apostle Paul warns us about such men, and those who follow them, in his letter to the Romans.

Read Romans 16:17-18.

When we follow false teachers such as this, we are tacitly saying that *we* know better than Christ.

The church is to be united before the throne of Christ Jesus, and united under His authority. We are to carefully acknowledge the God-given wisdom and authority of our shepherds, but *never* relinquish the responsibility to hold them to the truth of God’s word—and the true gospel of Christ found there.

Read Ephesians 1:18-23.

Session 9: Three Rounds from a Gatling Gun

1 Corinthians 1:13

Preface

In v13 of our text, Paul really nails his response to the situation in Corinth. He could have approached it from one of several directions, but in three short sentences, delivered like rounds from a Gatling gun, the apostle cuts right to the nut of the issue.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-13.

Has Christ been divided?

Naturally, the first round from Paul's Gatling gun is a head-scratcher. What does he really mean by "Is Christ divided?" We can consider this from several possible angles, and we can gain a measure of insight from each of them.

You have divided Christ!

Because the Greek can be read as a statement, as well as a question, a minority of (mostly earlier) commentators render it so: "Christ has been divided!" or "Christ is divided!" The idea is that by the various factions in the Corinthian church sub-dividing the assembly, they are effectively—since each surely still calls upon the name of Jesus—dividing Christ Jesus among them. Each would be claiming, by their allegiance to their respective figureheads, to claim the *true* Lord. But later in this same letter Paul will refute the idea of any subdividing of Christ.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:5-6.

Although the *grammar* can support making this a statement rather than a question, most interpreters believe it is meant to be a question.

Can only one group have Christ?

Another minority view is espoused by Gordon Fee, who interprets this as "not so much that Christ is being divided into parts and apportioned out [i.e., a leg here, and arm there], [but] that he has been apportioned out as only one among many. Thus Paul is asking, in direct response to the final slogan ['I of Christ.'], 'Absurd! Can Christ be made a party in the same breath as the others?' or 'Do you mean to say that Christ has been apportioned out so that only one group has Him?'"

Again, the argument can be made for this interpretation, but it feels labored to me.

Has Christ been divided?

I believe the interpretation with the best fit is similar to the first interpretation, but a rhetorical question instead of a statement, as most of our translations have it. As he does on a number of occasions, Paul is using a rhetorical question—the obvious answer, as regards this situation, is "yes"—to make the point that since it is utter nonsense to think that Christ Jesus Himself can literally be subdivided, and since the church *is* the mystical body of Christ, it should not be subdivided as well—a point he makes later in this letter.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:24b-27. ("But God...")

Because Christ *cannot* be subdivided, the church (the body of Christ) should not be divided.

Paul was not crucified for you, was he?

It makes perfect sense that the second round from Paul's Gatling gun would include this, again, rhetorical question, since it is his priority in ministry.

Read v17.

Read vv22-23a.

And though this argument seems absurd on its face, it forces one to answer the fundamental, central question: *Who is my Lord?* If I am a Christian, I can have only *one* Lord: the One who died that I might live, the One who suffered for my salvation, the One who reigns even now at the right hand of the Father in heaven. No human being, nor any so-called god fits that definition.

This key question can also be turned around, to be used as a check and balance against incipient idolatry.

- to the parishioner beginning to think too highly of his or her pastor, the pastor should confront them with, “I was not crucified for you, was I?”
- the shepherd of a church, sensing a preening sense of importance taking root in himself, should occasionally inquire of himself, “I was not crucified for them, was I?”

Paul’s third and final round fired regards baptism.

Or were you baptized in [lit., into^{niv}] the name of Paul?

Before Christianity, and even well into the centuries after Christ, baptism was a rite required of proselytes to the Jewish faith—both men and women. This was adopted and adapted by John’s baptism, which was one of “repentance for the remission of sins” (Luke 3:3), which then was adopted and adapted by the early church to be a public sign of association with Christ Jesus. Unlike John’s baptism, Christian baptism was administered “in the name of Jesus” (New Bible Dictionary, 1984).

from our church’s Articles of Faith: We believe Christian baptism is the immersion of the believer in water to show forth in a solemn and beautiful emblem our faith and union to the crucified, buried, and risen Savior.

Christian baptism is the believer declaring openly his or her allegiance to *and immersion into* the life of Christ Jesus.

in, into = *eis* (ace) = to or into (indicating the point reached or entered, of place, time, fig. purpose, result).

Gordon Fee: To be baptized “into the name of” someone means that the baptisand [i.e., the initiate, the one being baptized] has turned over allegiance, has given oneself to, and thus entered into an enduring relationship with, the one *into* whose name one has been baptized, where *name* carries the greater significance of all that is associated with the person who bears that name.

In closing,

Read Ephesians 4:4-6.

Session 10: The Call: Preach the Gospel

1 Corinthians 1:13-17a

Preface

Time and again we are reminded of—and reminded of the critical importance of—the centrality of Christ. If you read God's word and get nothing more out of it, at least get that Christ Jesus—and in many aspects of this we can assume that Jesus and God are essentially synonymous—that Jesus is, and is to be in believers' lives, the central focus of everything. Paul, and God's word as a whole, repeatedly make this point. As Paul states in Romans regarding God, "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen." (Romans 11:36)

In Hebrews the writer tells us that no celestial being, no prophet is more important than God's Son, because it is now through Him—Christ Jesus—that He speaks.

Read Hebrews 1:1-4.

And in Chapter Three of Hebrews notice the similarities to our text in First Corinthians, regarding following after other of God's earthly representatives (e.g., Apollos, Paul, Peter), where the writer compares Moses—a figure exalted by Jews—to Christ.

Read Hebrews 3:1-6.

Moses *served* the house; Christ *built* the house = the church.

And in the letter to the Colossians we find perhaps the most glowing affirmation of the centrality of Christ Jesus.

Read Colossians 1:15-20.

Pastor Alistair Begg summarizes how all of this applies to the Corinthian text.

Begg: Jesus makes church, church. Therefore, when a church loses focus on Jesus, it loses everything.

Since v10 of our text this has been Paul's emphasis. He stresses the need for *unity*, for agreement, that everyone in the church be of the same mind, saying the same thing, having the same judgment. But this is not just a mechanical slavishness to identification, such as everyone wearing the same color clothes; nor is it to be a unity based on just anything—"Let's all agree to meet on Tuesdays instead of Sundays."

No, we are to unify around a *person*—and not just any person, but the Person who is One with God, the person who was crucified to redeem every believer, the person in whose name we are baptized, and into whose life *our* life is now to be subsumed.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:13-17.

v14

On one level the apostle, in vv14-16, seems to throw in a parenthetical interruption to his thoughts. (In fact the NIV places v16 in parentheses.) But this is also more than that; Paul is making an important point here that speaks to what he has been saying in vv12-13.

I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius,

Paul is not denigrating baptism; in this verse and the next the first point he is making is that it doesn't matter *who* did the baptizing—and that it did not require "apostolic hands" to administer it (*Hays*). No disruptive faction can possibly form around those baptized by Paul because he baptized so few.

- Crispus: certainly the former leader of the Jewish synagogue that we read of in Acts 18.

Read Acts 18:8.

- Gaius: a common name at the time; since Paul wrote the letter to the Romans while in Corinth, this may be the one who hosted him while there.

Gaius, host to me and to the whole church, greets you. (Romans 16:23a)

v15

Why did he thank God that he baptized so few?

so that no one would say you were baptized in [lit., into] my name.

As already mentioned, so that no schism for dividing the church could claim him as their leader. David Garland points out another possible reason, based on a passage in the third chapter.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:5-7.

Garland: Some plant, some water, others harvest. All these workers are interchangeable, but none are interchangeable with Christ or separable from Him.

Like Moses, we are all servants (better translation: slaves) in the house—the church. We may even be, on an earthly level, important; Moses was certainly an important cog in God’s economy. But not one of us is more important than Christ. We participate, we employ our gifts, we serve faithfully—but not one of us is the Head; not one of us is required for the whole thing to hold together. That would be Christ Jesus, Son of God.

v16

God’s word is so real, so transparent with the characters on its pages. We can almost see the apostle pausing in his dictation, scratching his head, and saying, *Oh yeah, I almost forgot, I did baptize Stephanas’ family—but I can’t think of anyone else right at the moment.*

Read v16.

Sidebar: This reference to the “household” of Stephanas is one of the passages, among others, on which individuals such as the late R. C. Sproul base their position on infant baptism. For they claim that the Greek behind the word translated “household” (*oikos*) would include not just adults in the household (or dwelling, or family) but children and infants as well. Not for *salvation*, but for their inclusion in “the visible covenant community.”

As to who Stephanas was, we glean that information from Paul’s closing remarks near the end of the letter.

Read 1 Corinthians 16:15-16.

Apparently that family head, as well as the rest in the family unit (including slaves), was the first convert in the Achaian region ([Corinth](#), [Athens in the southern, Achaian, region](#); [Philippi](#), [Thessalonica](#), [Berea in the northern, Macedonian, region](#)).

And he was probably in the group that came to Paul in Ephesus, delivering the letter and other information to him regarding the state of things in Corinth.

v17a

In v17 Paul artfully segues from the subject of baptism to the issues that will predominate in the following chapters: his role as a preacher of the gospel, and the difference between human wisdom and the wisdom of the cross. In this session we will look at just the first part of the verse.

For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel

Saul of Tarsus is a spiritual descendant of Isaiah son of Amoz, in that each was “sent” by God personally—in Saul’s case, by Jesus the Christ—to perform a specific task.

Read Isaiah 6:8-10.

send = Hebrew *shalah* (shaw-lakh’) = to send away, for, or out

In the familiar story from Acts 9, the risen Christ grabs hold of Saul but, in this account, does not tell him specifically what He is sending him to do, but says only, “...get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do.” Later, to Ananias the Lord gives more specifics:

But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name’s sake.” (Acts 9:15-16)

As Paul relates the incident again in his defense before King Agrippa in Acts 26, he gives a fuller account of what the Lord told Him on that road to Damascus.

Read Acts 26:16-18.

Back to our text.

That’s a pretty good description of “preach[ing] the gospel,” as Paul puts it to the Corinthians. Paul does not denigrate baptism, nor its importance in the life of a believer. He is just pointing out that that is not his assigned apostolic role. There were others who could baptize new believers; for that one did not need to be an apostle.

But in that time and place, in the formative years of the church prior to the canon of Scripture being established, one had to be an apostle to faithfully and accurately speak for God and His Christ (*ex cathedra*) before Jews and Gentiles alike.

Session 11: Emptying the Cross

1 Corinthians 1:17b

Preface

As mentioned in our study last week, v17 is a transitional verse, connected to the earlier passage, but segueing into the next.

Paul brings up the subject of baptism, not to discourse on it at length, but to help make his point in two directions:

1. using it as an example for how their divisions may have come about, i.e., each of the opposing factions favored different leaders, because they had been baptized by them; and
2. to demonstrate that he, Paul, had come for a higher, more “mission-critical” purpose: “to preach the gospel.”

Godet: To preach the gospel is to cast the net; it is apostolic work. To baptize is to gather the fish now taken and put them into vessels.

Now, in the second part of the verse, Paul cracks the door open to the next topic, on which he will be for the next several chapters.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:14-17.

v17b

Many years ago, when Linda and I were touring in Southern California with our *His Company* drama group, we met and worked with the pastor of a church in San Diego. He was young, and earnest, but his sermons were rather stiff and dry. In person he was gregarious, with a comfortable sense of humor, but when he got behind the pulpit the humor seemed to disappear, and his delivery was that of a colorless lecturer. His delivery was a good match for the old, dusty church building in which the congregation met.

Some time later we visited his church—now meeting at a local theater—on a Sunday morning. And to us the pastor was barely recognizable. Now his suit fit better, and was stylish. His haircut was more refined. Instead of being glued to a pulpit, he now moved easily about the stage. Most changed of all was his delivery. Now his sermon was more conversational; he smiled more often, and his message was interrupted here and there with bits of humor.

But something else had also changed. The young pastor had lost much of his sincerity. Showmanship had replaced dull but earnest exposition. The pastor’s sermons were more entertaining, but now *he* was the star, instead of God. And Linda and I left the service that morning saddened by the change in our friend.

The apostle Paul was much like this pastor *before* his change. In his own words he describes a lackluster delivery when speaking.

Read 2 Corinthians 10:10.

Read 2 Corinthians 11:6.

What Paul fears for the church in Corinth is that they are being drawn to preaching of a style much like our pastor friend *after* the change. And he refers to this in the second part of v17.

...not in cleverness of speech,

Just what does he mean by “cleverness of speech”? The NASB is not the most literal translation, but it best captures the idea behind the Greek. When we look at the two words that are the root of this phrase—*sophia* (wisdom) and *logos* (word)—we might well wonder, *What’s the harm in that?*

ouk en sophia^{nasb}logou = **cleverness of speech^{nasb}, with words of eloquent wisdom^{esv}, with words of human wisdom^{niv}, with wisdom of words^{kjvs}**

JFB: philosophical reasoning set off with oratorical language and secular learning, which the Corinthians set so undue a value upon in Apollos, and the want of which in Paul they were dissatisfied with.

Garland: a wisdom that Paul finds incompatible with the gospel because it relies on manipulative rhetoric.

Olshausen: word-wisdom, i.e., a wisdom in appearance and not in reality.

Lange: not in the style of a philosopher trained in the rhetoric and dialectics of the schools, [but in that of a witness, bearing testimony to the great facts in and through which God had chosen to reveal himself].

Note: The ESV seems to have this backwards. Of course we favor wisdom to be dispensed with eloquence—but that is not what Paul is saying here. What the Corinthians were guilty of was favoring *the wisdom of eloquence*, which is something entirely different. This is captured in the KJVs “wisdom of words.”

Note: The English use the word “clever” in conversation more often than Americans. When a Brit remarks, “How clever you are!” they mean it as a compliment, meaning smart, intelligent, or inventive. But the word can also be used sarcastically, “Well, aren’t you the clever one!” implying that the one being called clever is perhaps up to no good, or is at least being wily, or conniving, with ulterior motives. This latter usage is closer to the manner in which the NASB uses the word “cleverness.”

Garland: The result is that they are swayed by the power of the orator’s rhetorical skill rather than converted by the power of the cross. **Eloquence that elevates the status of the preacher cancels the power of the cross.** (emphasis added)

so that the cross of Christ would not be made void.

Sidebar: This is Paul’s first use of the word “cross” in any of his letters, just as his use of the word “crucified” in v13 is the first. Paul more often speaks of Christ having “died” for us.

I fear that most of us do not spend as much time as we should appreciating the explosive, universe-shaking ramifications of the cross. We may be profoundly grateful for His sacrifice, even dedicating our lives to Him for the unimaginable grace of the cross. But too often we restrict our understanding of Calvary to the personal, to the act itself, forgetting how that selfless act reverberated throughout all of creation.

(from Reflections by the Pond #810)

Don’t get lost in the Nativity. It *was* important for the Son of God to come in flesh, for only then could He be sacrificed for our sin. It was important for Him to walk this earth as one of us, for only then could He reveal to man the true nature of the Father. But never forget that the little one born to the maiden created the world to which He came. Never forget that He created time itself, and the thread of history into which He was born. And never, *ever* forget that the tiny helpless baby of the manger is the Lord and ruling King of all that is. He is the one who holds it all together.

The Nativity is a tender moment expressing the love of God for man, but it pales against the moment that took hold of the entire universe and snapped it like the ragged tails of a cheap rug.

And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were split. The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many. Now the centurion, and those who were with him keeping guard over Jesus,

when they saw the earthquake and the things that were happening, became very frightened and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!" (Matthew 27:50-54)

The Son of God just died for mortal man! The story was flashed throughout the universe, and all of creation quaked at the staggering truth. *He did it! He actually did it!* All of history came to a grinding halt in that cataclysmic moment. Then, a few days later, it restarted. Now it would have a different trajectory, man would have something it had never had before: both a Savior and the promise of resurrection. All because of Jesus.

This moment in time was like no other: the immediate effect was so powerful it split rocks and emptied graves, and the after-shocks of that moment reverberate still. This world and its people were and remain irrevocably changed by "the cross."

There was nothing special about the fact that Jesus died on a *cross*. The cross was just another means of execution, one of the more hideous means used by the Romans. The one being executed would slowly, over days, drown in his own fluid as it filled his lungs. At the same time his body would be wracked with agonizing cramping, being pinned to the cross in an unnatural position.

It was a horrible way to die.

But the means of execution was not what made *this* execution special. It was not the cross, *but that **the Son of God** was on that cross, dying as a sacrificial lamb for the sins of all mankind.* That's what made it special—and it is from this that "the cross" acquires its power.

Examining how our modern translations interpret this phrase gives us a pretty good picture of what it means:

NASB:	would not be made void
ESV:	be emptied of its power
NIV:	be emptied of its power
KJVs:	be made of none/no effect

Of these I favor the NIV/ESV "be emptied of its power." The operative word here is

kenoo (ken-ah'-oh) = from <G2756> (*kenos*); **to make empty**, i.e. (figurative) **to abase, neutralize, falsify** :- make (of none effect, of no reputation, void), be in vain.

Colin Brown: In the first instance [things], [the noun] *kenos* means lit. empty (e.g., an empty well or house). When applied to people, it means devoid of sense, foolish, senseless... With the verb *kenoo* the emphasis falls on emptying and making void. The cross and faith form the central subject matter of the gospel and thus constitute its power. Hence the offence of the cross which both condemns and saves should not be made void by word[s] of worldly wisdom.

This is one of those passages in God's word that, when it is fully digested, takes one's breath away! There is something supernatural going on here—which is realized when we flesh it out with a couple of verses later in this chapter.

Understand, Paul is not preaching against eloquence itself; there is nothing wrong with a preacher or teacher being well-spoken so as to effectively deliver his message. May God in His grace grant us more. But, again, as Garland writes, "Eloquence that elevates the status of the preacher cancels the power of the cross."

There is the offense.

Let's see how some following verses help us understand the second part of v17. *Star Wars* gave us "The Force," and God's word gives us the Greek *dynamis*.

dynamis = from <G1410> (*dunamai*); **force** (literal or figurative); **specially miraculous power (usually by implication a miracle itself)** :- ability, abundance, meaning, might (-ily, -y, -y deed), (worker of) miracle (-s), power, strength, violence, might (wonderful) work.

First, notice how Paul connects v17 and v18. As we have seen, the word translated “speech” (NASB) is a form of *logos*, usually translated “word.” In v17 he employs it to denigrate those who would use “clever” speech to impress the crowd. That kind of *logos* empties the cross of its power.

Then Paul links v17 with v18 by referring to the *logos* of the cross. And what is the word of the cross? If you remove the contrasting reference to the unsaved, v18 would read, “For the word of the cross...is the *power of God*.” (emphasis added)

Read 1 Corinthians 1:23-24.

In v23 we are back at the cross; as we have cited a number of times, Paul declares forcefully that his calling is to “preach Christ crucified.” What *is* “Christ crucified”? It is (v24) the *dynamis* of God! *That* is what tore the veil in-two; that is what split the rocks; and that is what released the dead from their tombs!

And it is that same power, the same “force,” that saves us from our sin *because* the Son of God was nailed to a cross. And, incredibly, it is this same supernatural power that is squelched, extinguished by teaching that seeks to impress and exalt self, rather than pointing people to the cross.

Session 12: Audacity

1 Corinthians 1:18-19

Preface

In the next extended passage of our text—1:18 to 2:5—Paul wholeheartedly embraces God’s audacious plan for man’s salvation. He gives not an inch toward contemporary sensibilities; he makes no apology for God’s use of a cruel and shameful death for His Son.

- There is no “Yes, but…” where it comes to the cross: *Yes, you’re right, Christ died—but He rose from the grave.*
- There is no “Yes, but…” where it comes to wisdom: *Yes, the Greeks are wise, but God is wiser.*

Paul unabashedly embraces (in this context) not Christ *resurrected*, but Christ *crucified* (v23). And he unapologetically declares the ‘wisdom’ of this world to be nothing more than “foolishness” (v20).

Before we even begin to dig into the text, God has given us here a valuable take-away. Whether from the pulpit to hundreds, or over the backyard fence to a neighbor, we need never apologize for the gospel. We need never round off its sharp edges, or soften its unabashed truth. We are, instead, to embrace it fully, as is.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:17-19.

v18

As mentioned in our last session, Paul links v17 to v18 by using the same word: *logos*. The word translated “speech” (NASB) in v17 is a form of *logos*, often translated “word.” Then Paul links v17 with v18 by referring to the *logos* of the cross. And I think the NIV and NKJV “message” is good: What is the cross telling us? What is the message of the cross?

For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.

It is important that we understand how scandalous Paul’s declaration is regarding the cross; to that end, we need to understand *why* it would be regarded as “foolishness” to many in the first century.

The cross was “a particularly cruel and shameful death, which as a rule was reserved for hardened criminals, incorrigible slaves, and rebels against the Roman state” (Hengel). If we look upon the event of Jesus’ execution dispassionately, as an outsider might at the time, we would see that

- “He was rejected by the very people He came to save,
- was deserted by His own disciples,
- was strung up by the proper [and lawful] authorities, and apparently
- was powerless to save His own skin...
- The cross was repugnant to ancient sensibilities” (Garland).

To us, in the context of our religion, the imagery of the cross might represent love and life—eternal life—and God’s power, but the typical imagery for that to the religious in the first century might be stalks of grain, a basket of fruit or (with apologies) an erect phallus (Furnish). Not a means of execution.

Proclaiming a crucified Jew from some backwater of the empire as “a divine being sent on earth, God’s Son, Lord of all and the coming judge of the world, must have been thought by any educated man to be utter ‘madness’ and presumptuousness” (Hengel).

This is why Paul writes that to those who are perishing—i.e., unbelievers—the *logos* of the cross is utter foolishness. Disengage yourself from our time, and consider it from a first-century, pagan perspective. The cross was not yet the “old rugged cross” sentimentalized in hymns, glorified in stained-glass windows, perched on marble altars, or fashioned into gold charms (Garland). It was just an ugly method of execution for presumed guilty criminals, something civilized people in the first century did not want to see, to think about or discuss. Contemplation of the cross was, to them, loathsome. It represented nothing less than abject humiliation.

It is the *gospel* that transforms the cross as a symbol of Roman terror and political domination into a symbol of God's love and power (Garland). And Paul relies on *that* power—the power of God and His Christ, and the power of the cross itself—not the power of clever eloquence, to convict his audience of the truth.

Foolishness? Just think about it: In your world of the first century, all the gods have a measure of power; those in the upper echelons of divinity have the most power, while those at or near the bottom have less—sometimes *far* less, and they are referred to as “demigods” (*demi* = *half*). But even these lesser gods would not permit themselves to be nailed to a tree—and to die. *And now you expect me to believe that the most supreme God of all, the one with power over every other god, delivered His own Son to suffer such a powerless, humiliating death. Rubbish. You're insane.*

The Corinthians were letting the world's philosophies—and the world's love of philosophy—invade the church and weaken the truth of Christ's gospel. I am intrigued by something John MacArthur wrote in his commentary.

MacArthur: A Christian has no need of human philosophy... Where it happens to be right it will agree with Scripture, and is therefore unnecessary. Where it is wrong it will disagree with Scripture, and is therefore misleading. It has nothing necessary or reliable to offer.

The older I get—the more I study God's word—the more I realize that ultimately—and the earlier the better—one must choose between the cross and the philosophies of this world. Most of us, even if a Christian at an early age, pass through stages where we try to mix the two: We are followers of Christ, but also believe that the “wisdom” of this world has something to contribute—not for salvation, but as regards life and living, social interaction, philosophical thought, etc.

But the two do not mix. At all. We must decide: Will it be God in Christ, or will it be the “wisdom of words”—those claiming that “the word of the cross is foolishness”?

Read Colossians 2:6-8.

but to us who are being saved...

Technically the opposite of foolishness would be wisdom, and the opposite of power would be weakness, and Paul will make that comparison in v25. But here Paul is pointing back to what he said in v17, where the “wisdom of word” empties the cross of its *power*.

Here we have, in the correct translation of the verbs in v18, the concept of “now—not yet,” or “already—not yet.”

- those who are perishing (i.e., in the process of perishing)
- us who are being saved (i.e., in the process of salvation)

Because I have addressed this in-depth in a number of studies (not least in our study of *Christ in the Old Testament*), I won't spend much time on it now.

Now

Every follower of Christ is immediately, absolutely saved / sanctified / atoned for / redeemed / justified. Nevertheless, the Christian remains on this fallen earth—and remains in flesh. The “old man” (*Romans 6:6 KJV*), the sinful nature of the flesh in which we are born, remains, setting up the tension between righteousness and sin with which we are all familiar. Ideally our sanctification does not remain static, but throughout the life of the believer progresses, matures, until the day the old flesh is no longer. We are “now” saved, but not complete.

Not Yet

On that day the ongoing battle between holiness and sin with which we have become so familiar will immediately cease, and, standing in His presence, we will be complete. That day has “not yet” come for us still here. But it will—that is the promise of God.

it is the power of God.

From v17 to v23, then back to v18 and v24 we can trace Paul's flow of thought:

v17: [I came] to preach **the gospel** =

v23: we preach **Christ crucified** (i.e., the cross) =

v18, v24: the word of the cross...is **the power of God**.

Naturally, the "power" of God is limitless and pervasive, but what does Paul mean by it here? Let's look at a few other references to this power for a fuller picture. Let's begin with what God says about it Himself in the book of the prophet Jeremiah—and as I read this passage, remember, to the Corinthians Paul wrote that the *word* of the cross is the power of God.

Read Jeremiah 23:24-29.

In the first chapter of his letter to the Romans, because there he is emphasizing faith and belief, Paul associates the power of God with salvation for all.

Read Romans 1:14-17.

In Chapter Six of 1 Corinthians Paul associates God's power with resurrection.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:14.

We could do this all day. For example, in the gospels and the Acts alone *dynamis* is used forty-eight times to reference Christ's and the apostles' miraculous powers. But let's return to our passage.

Just as in Romans, Paul's usage of the word is based on the context, and the context in our passage is comparing the wisdom of men to the wisdom of God. So in v24 he tacks that onto his second use of *dynamis*.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:24.

But perhaps my favorite example of God's power is seen one day out on the Sea of Galilee.

MacArthur: God's power is real power, power that means something and accomplishes something. It is not *of* men, but it is offered *for* men.

But as they were sailing along He fell asleep; and a fierce gale of wind descended on the lake, and they began to be swamped and to be in danger. They came to Jesus and woke Him up, saying, "Master, Master, we are perishing!" And He got up and rebuked the wind and the surging waves, and they stopped, and it became calm. (Luke 8:23-24)

There is *real* power. The scene is of utter calamity: a fierce wind, high waves, the boat being swamped, everyone fearing for the lives. And Jesus is sound asleep. They wake him, He rubs the sleep from his eyes, notices the wind and high seas, and says to the wind, "Be quiet." And it stops. Period. Full stop. *That's* power.

v19

Then in v19 Paul backs up v18 with a quote from the prophet Isaiah.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:19.

The verse in Isaiah 29 immediately follows the more familiar v13.

Then the Lord said, "Because this people draw near with their words And honor Me with their lip service, But they remove their hearts far from Me, And their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by rote..."

Because they do not mean what they say, and their hearts do not truly revere Me, then this is what I am about to do (and there are Messianic undertones in the text):

"Therefore behold, I will once again deal marvelously with this people, wondrously marvelous; And the wisdom of their wise men will perish, And the discernment of their discerning men will be concealed." (Isaiah 29:13-14)

The Corinthians who still value "the wisdom of the wise" have failed to notice God's apocalyptic judgment on such wisdom through the crucified Messiah. For Paul, Isaiah's words are not just a judgment on ancient Judean leaders, but also an indictment of the rhetorical affectations of the Corinthians (R. B. Hays).

And in all of this we see evidence for "the power of God."

Session 13: The Time Machine

1 Corinthians 1:19-21

Preface

Most of us are familiar with the story by H. G. Wells in which a man invents a machine capable of transporting him either backward or forward in time. In our study two sessions back I tried to describe the indescribable: the supernatural, epochal moment of Christ's death on the cross.

This moment in time was like no other: the immediate effect was so powerful it split rocks and emptied graves, and the after-shocks of that moment reverberate still. This world and its people were and remain irrevocably changed by "the cross."

What the cross—that is, not the instrument, but the death of the Son of God upon it—what the cross fully is and was, what it accomplished and represented, is beyond the imagining of mere flesh. But God in His word supplies for us step-stones we might take at least *toward* that understanding.

Last week we looked at v19, where Paul quotes the prophet Isaiah.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:19.

Note the future tense of the verbs in that:

**"I *will* destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the cleverness of the clever I *will* set aside."** (emphasis added)

The prophecy says this will happen in the future—the future from Isaiah's time. Now, note the verb tense in our passage today, especially in the rhetorical question that ends v20.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:20-21.

Note first Paul's inclusion of "this age" in "Where is the debater of this age?" Behind that choice of words is Paul's perennial eschatological emphasis; it is woven throughout this extended passage. A portion of Paul's mind is always looking toward the culmination of all things in Christ's return. Now note the past tense verb in v20.

"Has not God *made* foolish the wisdom of the world?" (emphasis added)

Paul says that God has already accomplished this. It's done.

Question: When did He do this? When did it happen?

Answer: at the cross.

The cross is the believer's time machine! And David Garland puts it together for us:

Garland: Paul assumes that this age is tottering on its last legs and passing away. It is "beyond mere reform or correction by 'wisdom' or prophetic word but calls for a new creation" (Thiselton). *The wisdom of the cross, by contrast, is the wisdom of the world-to-come.* (emphasis added)

Christians very often get ridiculed for being old fashioned, behind the times, etc. But in fact we are the ones already living in the future, for *we* have a time machine, and it is called "the cross."

v20

Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age?

One gets the impression that after the apostle quoted from Isaiah 29 to back up his point in v19, he kept reading from the scroll. Because he picks up not the theme, but the *rhythm* of Isaiah 33:18 for v20.

**Your heart will meditate on terror:
 “Where is he who counts?
 Where is he who weighs?
 Where is he who counts the towers?” (Isaiah 33:18)**

Thus in v20 he mimics the rhythm:

**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? (1 Corinthians 1:20)**

Paul is not opening up a new discussion here, but using sarcasm to reinforce what Isaiah wrote in the future tense, and what he (Paul) will write in the past tense. God said He would destroy the clever, self-serving wisdom of this world and its societies. So Paul rhetorically looks around and says, *Well then, tell me: Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater?*

Who is he referring to? He would seem to be listing the prominent “wise men” of his age.

wise (man) = *sophos* (sof-os') = probably referring to Greek philosophers. We get the word “sophistry” from this: [Webster's: “unsound or misleading but clever, plausible and subtle argument or reasoning” \(and today we are literally surrounded by sophistry.\)](#)

scribe = *grammateus* (grahm-ah-tooce') = writer or secretary, but more to the point, among the Jews their rabbis and teachers, interpreters of the law. [The “scholar” in the earlier NIV is not good.](#)

debater^{nasb, esv}, **disputer**^{kjvs}, **philosopher**^{niv} = *syzetetes* (sood-zat-tay-tace') = a disputant, i.e., sophist; used only here ([in all of Greek literature only here and once in Ignatius](#)). Again, the “philosopher” in the NIV doesn't quite capture the combative aspect of this word. “The man who wanted to dispute every issue and solve it by human reason” (W. Harold Mare).

See if David Garland's summary of these three categories doesn't ring true—not just in the first century, but today.

Garland: ...those who refract their search for truth through the lens of human wisdom and derive their status from their expertise. These who have made it their goal to search for “truth” greet with skepticism anything that does not match their own prejudgment of what truth is.

Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

To my ears, Paul answers the rhetorical question at the end of v20 with v21.

v21

Read 1 Corinthians 1:21.

He closes his list of the worldly wise with, *Hasn't God already made foolish the wisdom that is of this world? How, you ask? Well, just think about it: God, in His wisdom, decided that fallen man could not come to know Him through their own brand of wisdom. Instead, He decided that the only way to truly know Him would be through the gospel of Christ—that is, the cross—through a message the wise of this world would consider utter foolishness!* (a Lampel paraphrase)

Here's how *The Message* paraphrases vv20-21.

So where can you find someone truly wise, truly educated, truly intelligent in this day and age? Hasn't God exposed it all as pretentious nonsense? Since the world in all its fancy wisdom never had a clue when it came to knowing God, God in his wisdom took delight in using what the world considered

dumb—preaching, of all things!—to bring those who trust him into the way of salvation.

Every morning when I read even a tiny subset of the world's news, I am reminded of this. There really are two separate worlds simultaneously in play:

- First, there is the old, rotten world of fallen man and his earthen dwelling place, a world populated by individuals who think they are oh, so smart, but who are, in fact, only irretrievably ignorant.
 - Then there is the future world of God's kingdom—some of it already here, but most of it still waiting in the wings—a futuristic, other-worldly place populated by cherubim, angels, saints and, most of all, God Almighty and His Son, who created the universe and created the rules for salvation. It is a spiritual place, yet more real than anything we know on this earth.
- And we know it only because of God's Time Machine.

Verse 21 is one of those passages that is a bit confusing—on the surface it sounds circular, as if chasing its own tail. But when one digs in, it presents a fascinating picture of the way things are. So let's take it a piece at a time.

For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God,

Mere creatures haven't the capacity within themselves to discover the living God. Why not? Because this is according to God's design. The citizens of this world that do not know Him can deny it all they like, but God's wisdom always wins over theirs. And, once again, we are left with a timeless truth—true in the first century, and true today. Here is how Gordon Fee explains it.

Fee: A "God" discovered by human wisdom will be both a projection of human fallenness and a source of human pride, and this constitutes the worship of the creature, not the Creator.

Fee is referring to the passage in Romans, a letter written after 1 Corinthians, in which Paul really cuts loose on this topic.

Read Romans 1:21-25.

God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.

Most of our popular versions properly translate the Greek behind the word "preaching."

NASB: the foolishness of the message preached
NIV: the foolishness of what was preached
NKJV: the foolishness of the message preached
ESV: the folly of what we preach

Because the Greek *kerygma* ([kay'-roog-mah](#)) refers not to the *act* of preaching, but the *content* of that proclamation—here, the message of a crucified Messiah, as Paul details in the following verses—the KJV, with "foolishness of preaching" is misleading.

God was well-pleased...

This is not passive, but active. Saying that God was "well-pleased" does not mean He simply gave His assent to something that occurred. This verse says that "God was well-pleased...*to save those who believe*" (emphasis added). God was not just pleased by what happened; He was pleased to ensure that it would happen.

...through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.

Don't miss the importance of what Paul is declaring here. If 1 Corinthians was written before Galatians and Romans, which seems to be the case, this would be the earliest expression of something not just central to Paul's theology, but something of foundational importance to our understanding of God's salvation plan.

Read Galatians 1:15-16.

Because we are surrounded by elements that preach foolishness instead of God's wisdom, and because we carry around in our flesh the proclivity to *believe* foolishness, we must keep reminding ourselves of the point Paul makes here. The society in which we dwell, and our own flesh are persistent in convincing us that we are somehow responsible for our own salvation. Many of us heard it first at our high school or college graduation, those loathsome lines from the poem "Invictus" by William Ernest Henley.

*I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.*

Our salvation is all of God! *He* initiates it; *He* makes it possible; *He* does it all. And, once again, this was not something invented under the New Covenant. Listen to what Yahweh said to the prophet Jeremiah.

Read Jeremiah 1:4-5.

It is not wisdom that saves us—it is the gospel. It is not the preacher who saves us—it is the gospel. And the only way to know God is through believing the "foolishness" of the message preached—the gospel.

Session 14: The Cleverness of God

1 Corinthians 1:22-25

Preface

Let's back off a bit to reestablish our perspective on the extended passage before us. The passage from v1:18 to v2:5 deals a lot with foolishness and wisdom, and can be subdivided neatly into three sections.

- Verses 1:18 to 1:25 – The “Foolishness” of the Cross
- Verses 1:26 to 1:31 – The “Foolishness” of the Corinthian Church
- Verses 2:1 to 2:5 – The “Foolishness” of Paul's Preaching

We are still in the first section, in which Paul contrasts the apparent “foolishness” of the cross, in the eyes of this world—that is, “Christ crucified”—to what this world considers wisdom. By God's grace we will complete this section today.

Impress Me

Approximately forty-six years ago, Linda and I bought our first car after we were married. *Before* we were wed we had purchased a sturdy, used, Chevy pickup which served to get us and all our belongings cross-country from Marshalltown to San Diego. But it wasn't long before that practical old pickup seemed *impractical* for the streets of sunny Southern California. So we visited a local dealership, located on the “Mile of Cars” in Mission Valley, where they gave us oh, such a deal on a zippy, red, Mustang convertible. It was still used, but boy was it a flashy little thing, and with the top down we could really enjoy the warm, Mediterranean climate of the region.

Now, it's true we did not discover sawdust in the crankcase, but one day we were driving through one of the worst areas downtown; when the light changed and I shifted to first gear, the stick shift dropped straight down to the floorboards. That, along with other mechanical problems and the sheer impracticality of a convertible taught us some valuable lessons. We had been dazzled; we had been impressed by something that was pretty much all flash and little substance.

Which is a pretty good description of much of society in the first century, as well as today. Paul refers to them as “Jews and Greeks,” which, since “Greeks” can also refer to Gentiles, covers pretty much everyone. They were saying, “Impress me with flash,” and Paul was answering with substance: “Christ crucified.”

Read 1 Corinthians 1:22-25

v22

For indeed Jews ask for signs...

The Jews became so persistent in requiring signs and miracles of Jesus that even the Son of Man got fed up with it.

Read Mark 8:11-12.

In the gospel of John a royal official comes to Jesus requesting healing for his son. Jesus loses patience and says, “Unless you people see signs and wonders, you simply will not believe” (John 4:48)

There is a dark arrogance implicit in the Jewish demand for supernatural “signs.” Think about it: This has the relationship backwards. Instead of meeting with God on the level of faith and trust in Him, they expect Him to “present His credentials in the form of visible and identifiable acts” (Barrett). Thus they set themselves up as the authority passing judgment upon God. “They expect God to submit Himself to their criteria” (Conzelmann). And this remains even today the predominant manner in which “those who are perishing” approach God: expecting *Him* to kowtow to *them*. In their confused “wisdom” it is the pot that tells the potter how to make the pot! (Isaiah 29:16)

and Greeks search for wisdom;

As we have seen in this study, the Greeks sought after and honored worldly wisdom (*sophia*). Paul could be using the Greek word *Hellen* (hel'-ane) to refer to all non-Jews (i.e., Gentiles), but I think he uses *Hellen* instead of *ethnos* (the standard word for Gentiles) because in his arguments he is emphasizing the Hellenistic search and love for wisdom.

Both of these cultures, each in their own way, wanted to be impressed. Whether by miraculous demonstrations of the power of God, or by nuanced rhetoric, they were looking for something with flash, something impressive—as was, apparently, some in the Corinthian church.

Oh, let us learn from these twin idolatries that still pervade not just “those who are perishing,” but often “us who are being saved” (v18) as well. The Lord God is sovereign over all. He alone has the power; He alone has the wisdom and truth.

v23

But Paul was offering them a Chevy pickup rather than a red, Mustang convertible.

but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness,

Note: “Christ crucified” = “a crucified Messiah” or even “a crucified messiah” (i.e., no definite article)

to Jews a stumbling block

The very idea of a crucified Messiah was utterly unacceptable to the Jews. The Greek translated “stumbling block” is *skandalon*, from which we get our words scandal and scandalous. And, from their perspective, we can't really blame them. The law was clear about anyone “[hung] on a tree.”

Read Deuteronomy 21:22-23.

Literally, he has the curse of God upon him.

To the Jews this—crucified Messiah—would be a ridiculous contradiction of terms. “*Messiah* meant power, splendor, triumph; *crucifixion* meant weakness, humiliation, defeat” (Fee).

Although all of our popular versions translate this “stumbling block,” Fee points out that “scandal” would be closer to the sense. “The word does not so much mean something that one is tripped up by, as something that offends to the point of arousing opposition.”

and to Gentiles foolishness,

Even non-Jews of the time—just as so many people from different cultures today—consider the notion that God died on a cross (then on the third day after was resurrected) to be utterly ridiculous. This raises the question then, Why do *we* believe? What makes the difference in us?

v24

Paul answers the cry of “foolishness!”—and note this—not by softening his message, not by backing down or giving in, but by declaring with unblinking clarity,

but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

We live in a time in which the “wisdom” of the world is becoming, by the day, increasingly bizarre. Every morning one can read headlines that announce with a straight face the utter lunacy of our times. Just this last week I saw this one: “City Removes Gorilla Statue From Playground Over Complaints It's 'Racially Insensitive'.”

I recall several years back when someone in Washington used the word “niggardly” in a discussion of economics and was immediately denounced for being a racist! (*niggardly, from the Scandinavian *hnæggr*, has nothing to do with race, but simply means stingy, miserly*)

And *these* people are the wise ones? In contrast to what happens so often today, Paul doesn't back down. He, essentially, says, *No, you are the crazy ones.*

Paul says that what to you, Jew, is a scandal, and to you, Greek, is foolishness, to us—those called by God—the same thing is the power and wisdom of God. To those who think the scandal of the cross sucks away the power of Jesus, and to those who think the idea of very God being hung from a tree is stupid, Paul says, *You're both wrong; the cross declares power, and declares the eternal wisdom of a sovereign God.*

Note Paul's synonyms in this larger passage:

v18: us who are being saved

v21: those who believe

v24: those who are the called

In the context of God's salvation economy, Paul employs these in reverse order. In actuality, one is called, then he believes, then he is saved. Because someone is “called” (chosen by God) he or she is able to *hear* God's call, and be open to it.

Because of this calling, the believer's circuits are reversed. It is very much like getting glasses for the first time. After a lifetime of 20/20 vision, I remember getting angry at the TV because the text on the screen was not clear, and sometimes double. But when I got my first pair of glasses, I suddenly realized the problem was not with the TV, but with *me*.

Those “who are perishing” look at the gospel, look at the cross, and see foolishness. They think there is something wrong with *that*. But if they subsequently become someone “being saved,” and now in possession of that great Translator, the Holy Spirit, they suddenly realize the problem was not with the gospel; the problem was with *them*.

And when we become someone “being saved,” and the wisdom we follow is not that of the world, but of eternal God—the power and wisdom of God in Christ—then we can understand and embrace the “foolishness” of a bloody, slaughtered Lamb as the “the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

Read Revelation 5.

There, in the apostle John's vision, is the visible reality to prove the truth of Paul's statements in our text. Jesus *is* the Lion of Judah, but He is also the Lamb that was slain, and as both He is due—and already has—all majesty and wisdom and power. And, at the same time, the slain Lamb represents the inherent wisdom and power of Almighty God.

v25

Paul is still employing irony and sarcasm as he closes this passage in v25.

*Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men,
and the weakness of God is stronger than men.*

I am reminded of how things have been playing out for the last year with our current president. Love him or hate him, one has to admit that Donald J. Trump can be clever. His foes will repeatedly think they have him on the ropes, perhaps even beaten into whimpering submission, then he will spring on them something unexpected and bizarre, which all the talking heads will declare utter “foolishness”—yet, in the end, it works. Listen to how Gordon Fee describes not President Trump's actions, but God's.

Fee: In the cross God “outsmarted” his human creatures and thereby nullified their wisdom. In the same cross God also “overpowered” his enemies, with lavish grace and forgiveness, and thereby divested them of their strength.

If we had been consulted on that decision, we would have said, *That won't work!* But we weren't consulted. And it *did* work. Perfectly.

Read Psalm 119:46-47.

Read Romans 1:16-17.

As believers we are left with a choice: Will we make apologies for, or wholeheartedly embrace that which the world considers foolishness? Will we mumble and stutter before the world's wisdom and try to shave off the sharp edges of the gospel, or will we unabashedly stand for God's way of doing things?

The choice is ours.

Session 15: Those Who are Not

1 Corinthians 1:26-28

Preface

Jesus' closest disciples consisted of four, maybe five, common fishermen; one tax collector; and one freedom fighter. Of the remaining five, maybe six, we know nothing of their previous professions. These were obscure little men; most were country yokels. Not one of them would stand out in a crowd. Save for the apostle Paul, later, not one of them (that we know of) was a scholar. Yet Jesus called each one of them specifically, intentionally, to be His intimates, and to perform the critical job of carrying the gospel to both Jews and Gentiles after His ascension.

This is a trademark of the way God works. From the very beginning He has chosen common, sometimes deeply flawed human beings through which to work on this earth. Since v18 Paul has been leading into this point, first referring to the "foolishness" of the gospel. And I wonder if he wasn't looking back over his shoulder, anticipating a bolt of lightning to strike him, when he wrote v25:

Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

To paraphrase, *If it were possible for God to be foolish, His foolishness would be wiser than the wisest human being; if it were possible for God to be weak, His weakness would be stronger than the strongest human being.*

After stating that thesis, Paul then proceeds to expand on it in vv26-31, in which he contrasts the "foolishness" of the Corinthian church with the wise and strong and noble of the world.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:26-31.

v26

Nothing has changed from the beginning; God's methods remain the same. He has specific things he means to accomplish here on earth, and to that end He calls—specifically, intentionally—individuals for those tasks. Jesus walked the dusty roads of Palestine and said, *I want you, and I want you, and I want even you.* Before they were even born the Son of God had selected those who would be his disciples during His time of ministry on earth. And that remains the method: Before they are even born, Jesus Christ has already selected those who will, and will not, be His followers, disciples, and brethren.

And He selects from every strata of society: the high and mighty, those high in intellect, kings and queens, those who are impressive and influential—but more often than not, just regular folks like you and me. In v26 Paul is making the point that most of them—those comprising the Corinthian church—were just regular, unimpressive folk when God called them.

For consider your calling, brethren...

Literally "calling" (*klesis*) refers to the act of calling—i.e., an invitation. But the NIV rightly captures the context with "think of what you were when you were called." It is not the best literal translation, but it expresses how Paul is using the word to make his point.

Just a Thought: Perhaps we all would take more seriously our relationship with Christ and our service in His name if we consistently reminded ourselves that God, personally, called each one of us. Paul captures it in his second letter to Timothy: **Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God, who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity, (2 Timothy 1:8-9; emphasis added)**

that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble;

Sidebar: By stating that "there were not many" so defined, we know that there were, indeed, some who *were*. This will come into play later on in this letter. Also, just as

“of this age” modifies all three categories in v20, “according to the flesh” (ESV: “according to worldly standards”) modifies all three categories in v26.

With these three categories Paul defines what would be the privileged elite of the time, as opposed to the plebeians.

wise = *sophoi* = the learned, clever, and experienced.

mighty, powerful = *dynatoi* = **powerful or capable** (literal or figurative); neuter possible :- able, could, (that is) mighty (man), possible, power, **strong**: “the influential whose wealth gives them the social and political levers of power” (Sanger).

noble = *eugeneis* = from <G2095> (*eu*) and <G1096> (*ginomai*); **well born, i.e. (literal) high in rank**, or (figurative) generous :- more noble, nobleman; “the well-born who have a proud pedigree and belong to the wealthy ruling class” (Garland).

In Roman society (after which the new Corinth was fashioned) status was everything. Patronage and clientage was a way of life for the upper class—in all things, not just in politics. For example, rooms with street access were included in upper class homes for the expressed purpose of doling out patronage to one’s clients every morning at the start of the business day. The patron’s clients would queue to receive their handouts, bribes, etc.

At the same time there was a dramatic—especially to Americans—separation between the upper and lower classes.

In every city a crushing sense of social distance between the notables, the “wellborn,” and their inferiors was the basic fact of Roman Imperial society. The most marked evolution of the Roman period was the discreet mobilization of culture and of moral grooming to assert such distance. The upper classes sought to distinguish themselves from their inferiors by a style of culture and moral life whose most resonant message was that it could not be shared.

Even the definition of “poor” was different from ours in the Roman culture and society.

The trouble is that the word “poor” does not mean the same thing in Latin and English. For us “poor” establishes an implicit comparison between the majority who are poor and the handful who are rich; the whole of society is included in this comparison. For the Romans, however, the majority did not count, and the word “poor” took its meaning as a relative term within the minority that we would consider rich. The poor were the rich who were not very rich. Horace, who made a virtue of poverty, said he was prepared to see his ambitions come to naught, for this poverty would serve as his life raft. This “life raft” consisted of two estates, one at Tivoli and the other in Sabine, where the master’s house covered some 6,000 square feet. Poverty in the Christian and modern sense was inconceivable. Only common folk worked for a living.

(from *A History of Private Life: From Pagan Rome to Byzantium*; Paul Veyne, Editor)

In other words, to the Roman elite, most of the population around them were “not”—nothing, nothings, of no account. Remember that word “not.”

Sidebar:

according to the flesh

Here is Paul’s first use of *sarx* (flesh) in his known letters. This concept will evolve in his mind, until we see it fully mature in his letter to the Romans, where he expounds at length on the difference between living “in the flesh” and “in the Spirit.”

Read Romans 8:5-8.

So when Paul remarks that few in the Corinthian church were wise or mighty or noble, he was essentially saying that they were—even from a worldly perspective—of no consequence whatsoever. If God behaved like human beings, if He called individuals based on their earthly status or accomplishments, these people would have been out of luck. But, to their—and to our—benefit, He doesn’t.

vv27-28

In vv27-28 Paul answers the three categories of v26.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:27-28

- the wise are shamed by the foolish
- the strong are shamed by the weak
- the noble are nullified by the base

(comparison more clear in the Greek: *agenes* means “without kin,” as opposed to those from noble families)

It is important to note how and why he modifies each of them with “of the world.” One should not assume from this passage that Paul thinks the world is divided into, for example, the wise and the stupid, and God is going to ensure that the stupid win. It is clear from the context that Paul is tacitly putting the foolish, the weak, and the base in scare quotes; that is, the “foolish” are only so in the eyes of the wrongheaded of the world who fail to recognize that *they* are the real fools (Barrett). Whereas the “wise” may think themselves learned, clever, and experienced, God has chosen the

foolish = *moros* = probably from the base of <G3466> (*musterion*); **dull or stupid** (as if shut up), i.e. heedless, (moral) **blockhead**, (apparently) absurd :- fool (-ish, × -ishness).

Whereas the “strong” may think themselves powerful or capable, God has chosen the

weak = *asthenes* (ahs-then-ace') = from <G1> (*a*) (as a negative particle) and the base of <G4599> (*sthenoo*); strengthless (in various applications, literal, figurative and moral) :- more **feeble**, **impotent**, **sick**, **without strength**, weak (-er, -ness, thing).

Whereas those that “are” may think themselves to be prominent, of noble birth and station, God has chosen the

base things = *agenes* (ah-gen-ace') = from <G1> (*a*) (as negative particle) and <G1085> (*genos*); properly **without kin**, i.e. **(of unknown descent, and by implication) ignoble** :- base things; **slave class**.

despised = *exouthenemena* = a variation of <G1847> (*exoudenoo*) and meaning the same :- **contemptible**, despise, **least esteemed**, set at naught.

things that are not = *me* (may) = a primary particle of qualified **negation** (whereas <G3756> (*ou*) expresses an absolute denial); (adverb) not, (conjecture) lest; also (as interrogative implying a negative answer [whereas <G3756> (*ou*) expects an affirmative one]) whether :- any, but (that), × forbear, + God forbid, + lack, lest, neither, never, no (× wise in), **none**, nor, [can-] not, **nothing**, **that not**, un [-taken], **without**. Often used in compounds in substantially the same relations. See also <G3362> (*ean me*), <G3363> (*hina me*), <G3364> (*ou me*), <G3372> (*mekos*), <G3373> (*mekuno*), <G3375> (*men*), <G3378> (*me ouk*).

God doesn't play by the rules of this fallen world.

- When He sent His Son, God in flesh, as the long-awaited Messiah, He arrived not in a flurry of power and majesty, but as a baby born in a place reserved for housing the beasts of the field.
- To save mankind from its inevitable doom because of its sin, God did not send His Son out with vast legions of angels, but nailed Him to a miserable cross.
- To witness for the Savior to a fallen world, to send the gospel into foreign lands, and to pen the fundamental Christian doctrine of the New Testament, God did not select the most faithful and true disciple of His Son, but the leading persecutor of the church.

Session 16: By His Doing

1 Corinthians 1:29-31

Preface

Last week we learned how the first-century Roman elite defined poverty—that one could believably claim to be poor while owning multiple estates—and that the common people were not considered poor, but simply nonexistent: of no consequence, no worth, invisible. Then there is *America's* idea of poverty: two cars in the garage, cable TV, a smart phone, good clothes, your neighbor's taxes buying your food for you.

This week, as we continue in the passage that closes Chapter One of First Corinthians, we will learn, among other things, *God's* definition of poverty. The fascinating paradox is that God's idea of being poor is deeper, more profound, more *real*, yet ultimately more rewarding.

Read James 2:5.

One more:

Read Matthew 5:3.

In the NT, the “poor” seem to make out pretty well. How can this be? Is it because His idea of poor isn't really that poor at all? No,

poor = *ptochos* (pto-hos') = from *ptosso* (**to crouch**; akin to <G4422> (*ptoeo*) and the alternate of <G4098> (*pipto*)); **a beggar (as cringing), i.e. pauper** (strictly denoting absolute or public mendicancy, although also used in a qualified or relative sense; whereas <G3993> (*penes*) properly means only straitened circumstances in private), literal (often as noun) or figurative (distressed) :- beggar (-ly), poor; *of one who crouches and cowers*.

God's idea of poverty is *real* poverty: cringing, cowering destitution. It is a picture of someone with no resources left of their own, utterly dependent on others.

This level of destitution is used in the NT to describe favorably those who understand their need for God through Christ Jesus, that without Him they have and are nothing. In the Beatitudes, with which He opens his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that those who recognize their own spiritual poverty—and thus recognize their need for Christ—will be granted “the kingdom of heaven”—not a new car, not a house, not food for a meal, but an *eternal* kingdom.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:26-31.

v29

Verse 29 supplies the ultimate “why” for the “what” of vv26-28.

Notice, first, how Paul connects v29 with v26. In v26 he states that “there were not many wise [in the Corinth church] according to the flesh”—his first use of the Greek *sarx*. In the KJV we see that in v29 he uses the term again: “so that no *sarx* [flesh] may boast before God.”

...so that no man may boast before God.

The phrase “so that no man” (KJV: that no flesh) is a Hebraism reflecting the OT idiom *kal-basar*, and we can entertain two interpretations of Paul's use of this.

- First, the word *sarx* (flesh) traditionally referred to all human beings, whether Jew or Greek: man, mankind.
- Second, Paul is here developing the idea of *sarx* into something fairly new in Christ. More than just representing humanity in general, *sarx* refers to the fragility and inadequacy of man when compared to God. But again, Paul did not invent this; Christ Himself used it in this way on the night He was betrayed.

Read Mark 14:37-38.

It can take years, sometimes decades for this truth to sink into, well, flesh. We are born with the proclivity to think highly of ourselves, and in today's society this is reinforced at an early age, when children are taught to have, above all else, a nauseating level of self-esteem: when they are told that they have won, even when they haven't ("everyone is a winner," and receives a trophy for "participation") and that they are smart when they are not ("Good for you, Janey. If you believe that two and two equal five, then that is *your* truth.").

With this indoctrination it can take many years for the *real* truth to sink in—that we do not know everything; that what we believe, or feel, or even think may be absolutely wrong—that two and two do *not* equal five. More to the point, even for the follower of Christ it may take many years of the Spirit working in his or her life, of earnest prayer, of reading and studying God's word to understand that before our God—in His presence—we stand utterly destitute of anything of which we might boast.

- We belong to Him not because we decided to, but because He chose us.
- Our sins are forgiven not because of our penitence, but because of Christ.
- We are loved by Him not because we are lovable or lovely, but because of His grace.
- Everything we are and have and will be is because of Christ Jesus and the Father.

It would be fun—and profitable—to delve deeper into this, because what v29 is ultimately speaking to is our bowing before Almighty God, and acknowledging His lordship over our lives in all things. But let's push on to complete this first chapter.

v30

Verse 30 gives the empirical evidence for the statement in v29.

Read v30.

by His doing / because of Him / of Him

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians he captures the fullness of this truth. First he speaks of our election by God.

Read Ephesians 1:3-4a.

Then he speaks of this "gift of God" saying that not only did God select us, but He *fashioned* us specifically for those things we would require to serve in His name.

Read Ephesians 2:8-10.

He fashions the job, and fashions us for the job. Understanding all that, what have we to boast about?

...you are in Christ Jesus

When one collects up all the evidence, from 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, Romans, et al, it is at once overwhelming, encouraging, humbling and motivating to realize that our relationship with God is all His doing. *By God's doing we are in Christ!* Most of us can recite Romans 8:28 from memory, and my bet is that when we do the first thought that comes to mind is that God causes "all things to work together for good" right now, in the here and now of our lives. Which is perfectly true. But read on in that passage; He means this to apply to our lives long before we were ever born.

Read Romans 8:28-30.

I like how Gordon Fee summarizes Paul's point in our text in v30: "In contrast to the world, **you owe your existence to the prior activity of God**, which has been effected in history through Christ Jesus."

who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption,

We need to chew on this a little bit to understand what Paul is really saying. Primarily because of the KJV's "...Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom," this phrase has been interpreted to mean that Christ became wisdom for us so that we might thereby become wise. MacArthur, among others, holds to this interpretation:

First, believers are given God's wisdom. They not only are *saved* by God's wisdom rather than their own but are *given* God's wisdom to replace their own.

This interpretation then is applied, as well, to the following three "gifts": believers receive God's righteousness, God's sanctification (or holiness), God's redemption. But, first, do you notice something not quite right with this last "gift"? The first three—wisdom, righteousness, and holiness—are all qualities of God that we, in and through Christ, positionally acquire. But God was never a slave, and so was never redeemed. We *do* have redemption in Christ, but it is not a quality of God passed to us through Christ.

Gordon Fee takes a different position on this verse, and I think it makes a lot of sense. It is a subtle difference, but a difference indeed. In a passage in Jeremiah we have a clue to this difference.

Read Jeremiah 23:5-6.

Not, through this "righteous Branch" (Christ) will we receive God's righteousness, but God will declare this righteous Branch *to be* "Yahweh our righteousness." Do you see the difference? Jesus is not just the channel of salvation, He *is* our salvation—and v30 gives us synonyms for this salvation: righteousness, sanctification, redemption.

Christ is all in all. I am not *made* holy because of Christ, in the sense that now I can stand on my own because now I am holy. No, my holiness is *in Christ*; it resides in Him—not in me. I have been made holy *positionally* by Him, but take Him out of the equation, even post-salvation (theoretically), and my "holiness" vaporizes in thin air. *Christ* is my wisdom, *Christ* is my righteousness, *Christ* is my holiness, *Christ* is my redemption—which is to say, Christ is my salvation.

This is the meaning of "to us" or "for us" in v30, which leads us into v31.

v31

so that, just as it is written, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord."

Here Paul adapts a passage from Jeremiah to fit his context.

Read Jeremiah 9:23-24.

Since v18 of this first chapter Paul has been addressing the business of wisdom—the wisdom of the world vs. the wisdom from God—and although it would seem that he has reached an obvious conclusion with v31, he is really just getting warmed up on the topic, which will continue through 2:5 and beyond.

God sent His Son to be crucified for our sins—that is the gospel: Christ crucified (v23). To the world this is utter foolishness: placing one's faith in a murdered Messiah. But in that "foolishness" Christ became to us wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. That is, in the "foolishness" of the cross, we were saved!

Because of that, we have literally nothing in which to boast—except the Lord.

Session 17: Testifying

1 Corinthians 2:1

Preface 1

When I first thought about relating to you what I am about to, it occurred to me that it would be worthwhile, perhaps even edifying, but off-topic from our text. But then I realized that it did indeed fit in, because the “moral of the story” (as it were) involves interpreting the events of our lives by *God’s* wisdom, rather than the wisdom of this fallen world. And that is precisely what we have been studying for some time, and continue now in Chapter Two, in this extended passage from v1:18. [\[listen to the tale in the audio version of this session’s notes\]](#)

Preface 2

This first paragraph of Chapter Two completes the three-part outline, suggested by D. A. Carson, of the letter beginning at v1:18.

Verses 1:18 to 1:25 – The “Foolishness” of the Cross

Verses 1:26 to 1:31 – The “Foolishness” of the Corinthian Church

Verses 2:1 to 2:5 – The “Foolishness” of Paul’s Preaching

And again, “foolishness” must be placed in scare quotes. Paul is saying here that the *real* foolishness of human “wisdom” considers the cross, the church, and Paul’s preaching of the gospel to be foolishness. Because some in the Corinth church are beginning to listen to the “wisdom” of the world, they are beginning to question the gospel message. Now Paul, to close out this section, turns to the “foolishness” of his preaching when he was in their midst.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:1-5.

v1

While it is not the best *literal* translation, the most recent NIV captures the idea of Paul’s statement in v1.

NIV: And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God.

This shows how v1:31 flows right into v2:1 without a break. Here is how Gordon Fee paraphrases the transition, beginning with v31:

By means of the cross and in choosing you, God in effect eliminated human boasting, so that the only boast left is in the Lord. And I, for my part, when I came to you, evidenced the same reality. I was totally stripped of self-reliance, so that God’s power could be manifested and so that your faith might rest on God alone.

And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom,

Note: The *new* (2011) NIV is good: “not...with eloquence or human wisdom.” That’s the idea. But for some strange reason the original NIV translated this with the adjective “superior” (or excellence) modifying *wisdom*: “not...with eloquence or superior wisdom.” Not good.

Since v1:18 Paul has been speaking against human wisdom.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:19-20.

In v1, Paul is simply saying that when he came to the Corinthians and ministered God’s word to them—the gospel—he came without “superiority of speech” (*logos*), or eloquence—which refers here to the *manner* or *form* of his presentation—and without (human, worldly) “wisdom” (*sophia*)—which refers to the *content* of his message.

In contrast to many preachers and evangelists today, Paul made no effort to impress his audience with glowing eloquence or intellectual gymnastics. He simply delivered the gospel to them in plain language. Just as we do not need to apologize for the gospel—Christ crucified—

we do not need to dress it up in the plastic finery of contemporary society for it to do its work in the hearts of people.

In v1:17 Paul wrote, “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.” When we try to remake and repackage the gospel into something that we think will make it more palatable for the sensibilities of modern man, we are effectively sucking out the inherent power of the cross. The picture is of the well-meaning but misguided speaker standing in front of a group of unbelievers with the cross behind him. He drones on and on with happy talk, trying to translate the gospel into the clever, hip vernacular of the day, while all the time the cross is tapping him on the shoulder, saying, “Just move aside and let me do what I do.”

Somewhere we picked up the notion that as wonderful as it is, the gospel—the cross of Christ—has become a bit dated, and doesn’t translate well into modern minds. But that notion comes from the lips of Satan. To the apostle Paul, “Christ crucified” was “the power of God and the wisdom of God (vv1:23-24).” We are to deliver, as Joe Friday was wont to say, “just the facts,” and then get out of the way to let the cross do its work.

proclaiming to you the testimony of God.

Commentators are split on the word translated “testimony” in this phrase. They do not argue over the meaning of the Greek behind it—*martyrion*—but they part company based on the original manuscripts being used for the translation. There are earlier manuscripts that have, instead of *martyrion*, *mysterion*, which would be translated “mystery.”

We need not feel forced to pick sides, or to delve deeper into the debate. Both could be true; in a few verses (v7) Paul will use *mysterion* explicitly in a different argument. So if some early manuscripts have it in v1, it does no violence to the overall meaning of the text. “Mystery” would refer to those things hidden before, but now revealed in Christ. Since all of our popular translations make it “testimony,” we will stick with that.

proclaiming = *katangelo* = from <G2596> (*kata*) and the base of <G32> (*aggelos*); to promulgate :- **declare, preach**, shew, speak of, teach.

testimony = *martyrion* = neuter of a presumed derivative of <G3144> (*martus*); **something evidential, i.e. (genitive) evidence given** or (special) the Decalogue (in the sacred Tabernacle) :- to be testified, testimony, witness.

When he showed up in Corinth, Paul’s purpose was not to engage in impressive rhetoric or philosophy, but to declare, in simple, unaffected language “what God had done in Christ to effect salvation” (Fee).

Session 18: Just an Ugly, Clay Pot

1 Corinthians 2:2-3

Preface

Read 1 Corinthians 2:1-5.

In our previous session on v1 we read that when he came to Corinth, the apostle Paul made a point of delivering his gospel message devoid of any glowing, impressive eloquence and human, societal wisdom. For him, the simple and powerful message of Christ crucified came first. Which brought to mind...

Most of us are comfortable referring to ourselves as a “follower” or “disciple” of Christ. Some of us are comfortable with the description of “servant” of Christ, and a few of us may even be comfortable with the more radical, yet accurate term “slave” of Christ. But how many of us who accept those descriptions really *live* that way?

If Paul *had* come to the Corinthians with a message wrapped in “superiority of speech” and human, societal “wisdom” that message would have been all about *him*—or at least a demonstration and exaltation of everything temporal and earthbound.

Acknowledging Christ as Lord means submitting to Him in all things as our Master, and Paul makes the point here and elsewhere that this goes beyond simple obedience to His will, but includes, as well, *always putting Him first*. Paul expands on this in his second letter to the Corinthians, where he writes,

For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake. (2 Corinthians 4:5)

In this passage he refers to the gospel as a glowing thing, a treasure entrusted to the servants of Christ, calling it “the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” But by comparison to this glowing, radiating treasure, we carry it around in base, dispensable, earthen jugs:

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; (2 Corinthians 4:7)

John the Baptist put it another way—and more succinctly:

He must increase, but I must decrease. (John 3:30.)

As slaves of Christ, *we* are not the message; *we* are not the treasure. That all belongs to our Master and Lord, Christ Jesus. We are just the ugly, throw-away clay pots that deliver the message. Paul in Corinth—and everywhere he served his Lord—knew this, always putting Christ and His gospel before himself.

v2

For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.

In v2 he reinforces this. But I have always thought this was an odd way to express the thought. To my ears, “I determined to know nothing...except...” sounds like he is resolved to wipe every bit of knowledge from his brain except the crucified Christ. Gordon Fee helps us with this.

“To know nothing” does not mean that he left all other knowledge aside, but rather that he had the gospel, with its crucified Messiah, as his singular focus and passion while he was among them.

That is, Paul stayed on-point, on-message. And if we broaden this out just a bit, to encompass *all* the messages from God’s word that a local pastor might bring to a congregation, we can gain a valuable lesson from the apostle’s *modus operandi*.

John MacArthur: We should not come to church to hear the pastor's opinions about politics, psychology, economics, or even religion. We should come to hear a word from the Lord *through* the pastor. God's word edifies and unifies; human opinions confuse and divide.

To a brand new congregation living in a worldly, cosmopolitan city, the apostle delivered the clear message of Christ crucified, uncluttered by human opinion.

v3

I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.

In v3 we once again find ourselves in scriptural territory for which there are many interpretations—primarily around what Paul means by such terms as “weakness,” “fear,” and “much trembling.” Even before that, interpreters cannot decide whether Paul *arrived* in that condition (NIV) or was in that condition after he got there (NASB, KJVs, ESV). I would like to focus on just two of the possible interpretations, but let's first examine the words themselves.

weakness = *asthenia* (as-then'-ee-ah) = from <G772> (*asthenes*); **feebleness (of body or mind)**; by implication **malady**; moral frailty :- **disease, infirmity**, sickness, weakness.

fear = *phobos* = **from a primary *phebomai* (to be put in fear, or to be put to flight)**; alarm or fright :- be afraid, + exceedingly, fear, **terror**.

much trembling = *polys* (pol-oos') *tromos* = from <G5141> (*tremo*); a “trembling”, i.e. **much quaking with fear** :- + tremble (-ing).

Paul could have been using these terms in a figurative, or we might say a “spiritualized” sense, as he does elsewhere. We will look at that interpretation in a moment. But I first want us to consider a more physical, more human and emotional interpretation. For that we need to return to Acts 16.

It had not been an easy journey for the apostle, since landing in Macedonia. In Philippi he, along with his companion Silas, had been beaten and jailed.

Read Acts 16:22-24.

Because of trouble stirred up by local Jews, Paul's stay in Thessalonica was relatively brief; under cover of darkness they left the city and went to Berea, where the citizens welcomed them, but some of those same troublemakers from Thessalonica came down to do the same in Berea.

Read Acts 17:13-15.

We too often think of the apostle Paul in terms of his theology and doctrine, forgetting his humanity. Without forgetting his successes in these cities in sharing the gospel and forming new churches, we also must not forget the effect these trials and persecutions had on mere flesh. There were, of course, the *physical* effects of being beaten and imprisoned, but I believe the spiritual and emotional effects would have also taken their toll.

By this point, Paul had been repeatedly run out of town, and now, placed on a ship that would take him down the coast to Athens, he was separated from his companions. The only thing worse than suffering discouragement is suffering it alone. And once he arrived in Athens, his spirit did not improve.

Read Acts 17:16.

And after delivering one of his finest sermons, response was tepid, at best. Some became believers, but at his mention of the resurrection many sneered at him. Ultimately, to the best of our knowledge, Paul did not found a church in Athens, but subsequently departed for

Corinth. And at this point permit me to flesh-out, so to speak, this story with a portion from a devotional I wrote in an issue of *The Journey*, in 2004.

It was an itinerary that would bring anyone to their knees. So it must have been a weary and possibly low-spirited apostle who entered the cosmopolitan, and immoral, city of Corinth. Paul would not have been interested in the flashy distractions of this metropolis, nor the companionship of one of its famous temple prostitutes. He would instead—after months of travel and fleeing for his life—be searching for a place of rest and restoration with people of like mind and spirit.

People like Priscilla and Aquila.

Just imagine, if you will, being so terribly far from home, bereft even of your traveling companions, bone-weary from being constantly challenged, ridiculed, and pursued. You find yourself now in a strange and alien city, where licentiousness is not only permitted, but the official religion. Imagine, evening is approaching and the dying sun is burnishing the streets of bustling Corinth a deep orange. Strangers jostle and bump against your shoulders, eager shopkeepers beckon you closer, hoping to separate you from what little currency you have. The evening air is filled with the disorienting stench of this foreign culture. Nothing is familiar, nothing comfortable.

Out of desperation, you ask a street vendor where you might find a prosperous tent-maker in the city; you tell him you are of that trade and seeking employment. With a dismissive wave of his hand he tells you to go down this street, then that street, until you reach a house that looks like this. With the mumbled directions repeating through your head, you wend your way through the darkening streets and alleyways, until at last you stand before the previously described address.

Timidly you rap against the heavy, wooden door; loud voices and angles of lamplight seep through the cracks that outline the door's timbers. Abruptly the gate swings open, and before you know it you are standing in the midst of friends—brothers and sisters to whom moments before you were unknown. For you have found not only fellow tentmakers, but the open arms of fellow believers.

I suggest that Paul, dictating what in our Bible are the opening verses of Chapter Two, would hearken back to those days in his second missionary journey, traveling from Berea on ship to Athens, then on to Corinth, remembering his physical and emotional weakness, dispirited, alone, and perhaps trembling with fear over what next might be required of him by the Lord.

I think the foregoing, more “human” explanation for Paul’s words, is background, subtext to the more substantial literary, contextual purpose for his statement.

weakness

While it is true that *asthenia* can refer to sickness or physical infirmity, Paul uses it in his Corinthian correspondence as an antonym to “power,” which would be, as translated in v3, not sickness but weakness.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:42-44.

Here he contrasts the weakness of the natural body to the power of the spiritual body—the resurrected body, the *glorified* body.

fear and much trembling

If we stay with the same context for Paul’s reference to being “in fear and in much trembling,” he could be drawing a contrast of himself to the apparent confidence of the cultured orator, of which the Corinthians were becoming enthralled.

Again, we could read the text in 2 Corinthians in this light:

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; (2 Corinthians 4:7)

Look back at what he wrote to the church near the end of Chapter One; Paul is explicitly addressing the members of the church: “For consider your calling, brethren, that there were

not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble” (v26), but implicitly, we know from the context that he includes himself in what follows.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:27-29.

And this theme continues in our text, flowing naturally out of v3.

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. (1 Corinthians 2:3-5)

For Paul it was *God*, it was the gospel of Christ crucified that was strong and powerful. In contrast to it, the rest of us are but weak and trembling clay pots.

Session 19: Power of God

1 Corinthians 2:3-5

Preface

Question: In any gathering of believers, where is the power of God manifested or evidenced? That is, where does the effect of the power of God occur?

Answer: In the hearts of individual believers.

We should keep this in mind as we study the passage before us. On the surface our text could be interpreted to mean that the power of God was visibly manifested in Paul. But in everything Paul is saying here, he describes a process of getting *himself* out of the way for the “power of God” to go to work in the hearts of those in the Corinthian church.

Perhaps one of the more challenging concepts of life in Christ to apprehend, is that it is, at root, a mystical, supernatural process. The triune Godhead—works *through* people—invisibly, yet powerfully—for the good of others. There is a literal *transfer* of power from, say, the preacher to the parishioner, the teacher to the student. It isn’t the speaker’s power, but the power of God working *through* him—very much like what happens when the Spirit sends a bolt of lightning from the pages of familiar Scripture into the heart of the believing reader.

David Garland: Faith is based not on how entertaining, informative, or compelling the speaker is but on the power of God transforming the hearts of believers.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:3-5.

v3

We looked at v3 in our previous session, but just to refresh our memories,

- in Corinth, Paul had just emerged—one might even say escaped—from a period of intense physical and spiritual persecution, as well as a period without the companionship and support of fellow believers;
- he is also saying that neither his rhetoric or physical appearance expressed the strong confidence of the polished orator.

v4

Listen to how Paul describes the members of the church at the beginning of this letter.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:4-9

How did this happen? Clearly a truly remarkable change took place in that group of men and women, something quite powerful. But how? Clues are woven throughout the paragraph:

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. (emphasis added)

Does one find anything of Paul in that paragraph? Save for his thanksgiving over what has taken place in the Corinth church, not one syllable that I can find. Verse 4 of our text explains how it happened.

and my message and my preaching...

These two words—*logos* and *kerygma* (kay’ roog-mah)—can be virtually synonymous in their meaning, referring to either the *content* of the speech or the *manner* of the speech. But I would point you to what Lothar Coenen writes in the Brown *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*:

Coenen: *kerygma* is the phenomenon of a call which goes out and makes a claim upon the hearers; it corresponds to the life and activity of the [OT] prophets.

I believe Paul's choice of this word, which means proclamation (translated, "preaching") is one more reminder of his removal of self from his message. The most important aspect of the OT prophets was not the outward quality of their presentation or their glowing rhetoric, but the word they delivered to the people direct from Yahweh. And that word was delivered with the purpose of changing behavior, changing lives. Once a true prophet finished his message, the people did not stand around commenting on his dress, his behavior, his impressive manner of delivery; they stood in stunned silence, cut to the quick by the message from God.

...were not in persuasive words of wisdom

John MacArthur writes, "[Paul] saw no place for calculated theatrics and techniques to manipulate response."

MacArthur: I remember a pastor's saying to me one day after the morning service, "Do you see that man over there? He is one of my converts." He then explained, "Not the Lord's, but mine." The man had become a disciple of the pastor, but not a disciple of Christ.

This is not a simple, black and white issue. As is so often the case, the critical component determining the propriety of a speaker's technique is less his visible, audible delivery than the condition of his *invisible* heart. The Lord may have gifted an individual for public speaking—a gift that attracts people to hear the word of God—and it would be a misuse of that gift to restrict his delivery to a flat, dull monotone that repels more than it attracts.

The important factor is the speaker's motivation, and this is not limited to preachers: pastor, teacher, neighborhood friend, male, female—anyone who speaks to others in the name of Christ. Powerful, dynamic, even eloquent speakers have faithfully presented the gospel, pointing people to Christ, while dull, uninteresting speakers lacking charisma have promoted only themselves with false piety. What makes the difference is the condition of the heart.

but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power

The Corinthians were becoming dangerously impressed by the eloquence and wisdom of this temporal world. Paul offers an alternative: the "demonstration of the [Holy] Spirit and of power."

Before we go any further into this important and illuminating phrase I need to point out that linguistically the Greek may be translated as in most of our versions: "the Spirit and of power"—that is, referencing two things: the Holy Spirit and power. But most modern commentators agree that it can also be translated, as in the NIV: "the Spirit's power"—that is, referencing *one* thing: the power of the Holy Spirit. Gordon Fee reminds us that Paul very often combines the two.

Read Romans 15:13.

Read Romans 15:18-19.

I learned a new word this week—a word which describes how Paul may be using this phrase if he is combining the two words into one:

hendiadys (hen-deye'-uh-dis) = a figure of speech in which two nouns joined by "and" are used instead of a noun and a modifier (*Webster's*). Example: "deceit and words" instead of "deceitful words." Or "the use of two words to express the same reality" (Fee).

This may be what Paul is doing here—which the NIV reflects: "the Spirit's power."

Why is this important? Because the point here is that *in any room in which a speaker is expounding the word of God, any effective power present, belongs to the Spirit of God*. And the effective result of that power is manifested in those hearing the words of the speaker.

Some would say that the reference here is to the various spiritual (or *charismatic*) gifts evidenced in the church, such as speaking in tongues, which Paul addresses later in this letter. But I believe the context calls for a more general reference to their conversion. That is, when

Paul refers to “demonstration,” he is not speaking specifically of the external “proofs” of the indwelling Spirit (such as tongues, interpretation, prophecy, etc.) but of the Corinthians themselves, their faith, the evident changes to their lives.

And here we can once again contrast the “weakness” Paul speaks of to the “wisdom” of the unregenerate world—specifically, the Hellenistic culture and its mystical wisdom philosophies and cults. Those who, even as believers, tried to weave this into the Christian faith, saw the “Spirit” as the gift of tongues; to them it meant “to have entered into a new existence that raised them above merely earthly existence.” Paul’s concept of the Spirit, however, “*included* inspired utterances—as long as they edified—but for him the emphasis lay on the Spirit’s *power*, power to transform lives, to reveal God’s secret wisdom, to minister in weakness, and to effect holiness in the believing community” (Fee). And Gordon Fee concludes with this—in which I am convinced he had in mind one Dave Lampel in Winterset, Iowa.

Fee: In other words, the purpose of the Spirit’s coming was not to transport one above the present age, but to empower one to live with it. (ouch!)

v5

And v5 gives us the all-important “why” for this.

so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.

I think that verse could and should close every study of God’s word, no matter the chapter and verse.

In vv1-4 Paul itemizes the steps he took, when arriving in Corinth for the first time, to insure this.

v1: I did not come with **superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God.**

v2: For I determined to know **nothing among you except Jesus Christ**, and Him crucified.

v3: 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**,

Why all this? Verse 5:

so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.

...so that your faith—your conviction, your creed, what you consider religious truth—would not be in the *sophia* of *anthropos*—men, women, mankind—but in the *dynamis* of *Theos*—the miraculous force of very God.

More often than not today, for believers the “wisdom of men” will consist less of pagan worship or bizarre philosophies than of error-filled teachings about God and His Christ.

We often forget how instrumental and vital are the Spirit and power of God—or, “the Spirit’s power.”

- Without the Spirit there would be no Scripture, no authoritative word of God;
- without the Spirit no one could understand God’s word if it had been written;
- without the Spirit no one would be called to Christ Jesus;
- without the Spirit there would be no effective preaching or teaching;
- without the Spirit we would not have effective interpreters and commentators of Scripture; and
- without the Spirit we would not be equipped to know if their interpretation of Scripture was right or wrong.

Without the Spirit and power of God *nothing* would work. The entirety of God’s economy for man is fitted together with precision finer than a Swiss watch. It is all necessary, and it is all there, in place, giving each of us a firm, dependable foundation on which to rest our faith.

Session 20: Listening to the Right Wisdom

1 Corinthians 2:6

Preface

With only a couple of exceptions, since v18 in the first chapter Paul has been using the term “wisdom” (*sophia*) ironically, sarcastically—primarily referencing the “wisdom” of this world, which in the economy of God is no wisdom at all.

But now in v6 of Chapter Two there is a change in tone, and in the space of just three verses he uses *sophia* five times to speak of an enduring wisdom, a timeless wisdom, a mysterious hidden wisdom that can nonetheless be known—a *true* wisdom. And for the previous five verses of Chapter Two Paul has been detailing what he did *not* do and say when he first came to Corinth, but now, with v6 (we can almost see him taking a breath and standing a bit taller), he begins a thread that will carry through to the end of Chapter Two and beyond, detailing what he *did* do and say when he was among them.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:6-9.

Paul's use of *pneumatikos*

Once again, before we proceed, we need to establish a baseline understanding for a word Paul employs four times from v13 to the first verse of Chapter Three. We aren't there yet, but it is not too early to clarify what Paul means, for two reasons:

- the entire passage beginning with v6 is infused with the concept; and
- Paul's use of the word is at odds with the contemporary world in which we live.

That word is *pneumatikos*, translated “spiritual.” Now, in our culture this word is used and applied in quite broad terms; not just grammatically but in application and perception it is decidedly a small “s” spiritual. In this culture one is “spiritual” if one thinks high thoughts, if one contemplates deep things, if one prays to or worships any god of one's choosing; if one meditates on just about anything.

Not surprisingly this is not how Paul uses *pneumatikos*. In the *Webster's Dictionary* at my desk, in the six possible usages of the word spiritual there is no mention of the Holy Spirit. The closest it gets is number 5: “of religion or the church; sacred, devotional, or ecclesiastical; not lay or temporal.” But again, that could apply to the small congregation in the Arizona desert that worships a glowing crystal or the planet Jupiter!

Though the word is not capitalized in our Bibles because of the grammar rule, the apostle *means* it in a capitalized way. When Paul writes in v15 that “he who is spiritual appraises all things,” he is referring to the person who considers himself to be a person of *the* Spirit, a person in whom the Holy Spirit of God dwells. Paul *always* uses *pneumatikos* as “an adjective having to do with the person or ministry of the Holy Spirit” (Fee).

v6

Read v6.

Right off the bat Paul places his discussion about wisdom realized through the power of the Holy Spirit in an eschatological (i.e., end-times) setting. Those still of “this age” are those without the Spirit; they do not understand the wisdom of God. Those “not of this age” (i.e., of the age to come) are those *with* the Spirit, who *do* understand God's wisdom.

But there is also another, and perhaps more troubling to Paul, division: that between infants and grown-ups within the body—those who are equipped with the Spirit, but remain child-like in their faith, and so are unable to process the wisdom Paul offers.

Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature;

You may note that Paul shifts to first person plural in v6 and following. The reason for this here is probably a combination of the editorial “we,” and including those fellow teachers in his team.

speak = *laleo* (lah-leh'-o) = a prolonged form of an otherwise obsolete verb; **to talk, i.e. utter words** :- preach, say, speak (after), talk, tell, utter. Compare <G3004> (*lego*).

wisdom = the familiar *sophia*.

Note: Just as there are no perfect churches, there is no perfect translation of the entirety of God's word. Each has its strengths and weaknesses. That is, depending on any given passage, some will be smack on, some will be just OK, others will leave one scratching one's head over their choice of English word to translate the Greek, Aramaic, or Hebrew. Here and in v7 the ESV leaves us scratching our head. "Yet among the mature we do **impart** wisdom" (also in v7; emphasis added). The Greek means just to speak or preach—to talk. The English "impart" suggests some sort of mystical *transference*—the very thing from which Paul is trying to pry loose the Corinthians: a Hellenistic wisdom mysticism.

mature, perfect^{kiv} = *teleioi* (tel'-ay-oy) = from <G5056> (*telos*); **complete** (in various applications of labor, growth, mental and moral character, etc.); neuter (as noun, with <G3588> (ho)) completeness :- of full age, man, perfect.

Many have debated what Paul means by "wisdom" and "mature" here. But there is no reason to pump more into it than is there. Chapter Two as a whole is a remarkable treatise on the wisdom and insight available to those in possession of the Spirit. This is one definition of the "mature": those equipped, by the Spirit, to process the "wisdom" of the gospel.

At the same time, however, the "mature" (those not of "this age") can be subdivided into the mature and the infantile—or at least childish, immature. Tomorrow someone may give me a complete garage-full of every imaginable tool for the mechanic. Absolutely complete. With these tools I can perform any repair job on any part of any automobile.

But none of that would make me a mechanic.

Within the body of Christ—those not of this age—there are those who are, we might say, fully vested in the things of God. But there are many—far too many—who are in possession of all the same tools, but remain novices in the trade. They have the tools—the Holy Spirit and God's word—but they have never learned to use them, or they have just dabbled in their use, never seriously learning the trade. In comparison to the unregenerate world, they belong to the "mature," but within the body of Christ they remain immature.

The writer to the Hebrews gives us one of the most convicting passages of Scripture.

Read Hebrews 5:12-14.

I have been walking with Christ for almost sixty years. Imagine consuming, studying any discipline for *six decades*: mathematics, geology, music, philosophy. In that amount of time one would surely be considered an expert in that discipline, an authority to whom others would flock for knowledge and insight. Yet, after sixty years I am ashamed of what I do *not* know about Christ, how I remain so immature in certain aspects of faith, how I have plumbed still so little of the "depths of God" (v10).

a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away;

This wisdom (*sophia*) of which Paul speaks, and which he *does* speak, does not emanate from "this age," nor does it speak to those who are part of it, for they are not equipped by the Spirit to comprehend *this* wisdom. They remain enmeshed in the spirit of this fallen world, which the brother of the Savior describes so well.

Read James 3:13-18.

No, Paul speaks that kind of wisdom, a wisdom that comes from above, and is eternal. And now the emphasis is not on *form*, but on *content*. Just what was this content? He doesn't say here, but he said it earlier; we need not guess.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:23-24.

This wisdom is not just future; it is ancient, and leapfrogs over this age, to lead believers into the next.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:7.

Question: When does our glory come? or, When do we receive it?

Answer: In the future, in the resurrection.

But this wisdom was “predestined before the ages” (i.e., before *any* ages).

By comparison, “the rulers of this age... are passing away.”

To be fair we need now to add the NASB to the ESV regarding their translation of this verse; “passing away” is not the best translation of the Greek.

pass(ing) away^{nasb,esv}, **coming to nothing**^{niv}, **come to nought/nothing**^{kjvs} = *katargeo* = from <G2596> (*kata*) and <G691> (*argeo*); **to be (render) entirely idle (useless)**, literal or figurative :- abolish, cease, cumber, deliver, destroy, do away, become (make) of no (none, without) effect, fail, loose, bring (come) to nought, put away (down), vanish away, make void.

That this age and its rulers will ultimately “pass away” is true, of course. But is that what Paul is saying here? The consensus agrees with the KJVs, as Johann Peter Lange writes, “That is, they are bereft of all authority and consideration in the kingdom of God, in the world to come.” Everything they stood for, everything they proclaimed as wisdom, as right, as better, everything they lived for—all will come to naught.

This is exquisitely portrayed by Isaiah in his Chapter Fourteen—the same chapter in which we have the fall of Satan from heaven—in a another “now—not yet” prophecy.

Read Isaiah 14:5-7.

Sidebar: From the earliest days of the church the argument has raged over who Paul refers to here as “rulers of this age.” Many have interpreted this to mean the “princes of the air”—that is, demons (because *archon* can also be translated “princes”). But again, most modern interpreters favor human, societal rulers.

Let me close with something else prophesied by Isaiah.

Read Isaiah 40:21-24.

We need to be reminded of this from time to time. We all know it in our hearts, but the sometimes oppressive “wisdom” of this age can force it back into forgetfulness. We serve a God who is Lord over all. These today who think they are sooo, so smart—are in for a rude awakening.

Session 21: The Key: The Essential Spirit

1 Corinthians 2:7-9

Preface

R. B. Gaffin: Believers and unbelievers belong to two different worlds; they exist in not only separate but antithetical [exactly opposite] “universes of discourse.”

David Garland: Consequently, unbelievers will continue to grope in their own darkness and yet think that they see and understand.

What King Solomon wrote almost 3,000 years ago remains true today: “There is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9). What is, has been before; what will be tried has *already* been tried; anything new is already old.

Even so, in my lifetime I cannot recall a time in which Gaffin’s and Garland’s sentiments were more true than now. The church is surrounded by those who live in darkness yet are absolutely sure—aggressively so, combatively so—that they are in possession of the true light. As Solomon wrote in Proverbs 4,

**But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn,
That shines brighter and brighter until the full day.
The way of the wicked is like darkness;
They do not know over what they stumble.
(Proverbs 4:18-19)**

The apostle Paul paints the picture of these two different worlds in our text:

- there is this age, and there is the age to come;
- there is the wisdom of this age, and there is the wisdom of God;
- there are those who are mature, and those who are infantile;
- there are those who understand the wisdom of this age, and those who understand the timeless wisdom of God;
- and in an implicit sub-text, there are those seeking God’s glory (and the glory He will dispense in the age to come), and those seeking their own glory in this age.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:6-9.

v7

After spending some time detailing what he did *not* bring to the Corinthians, in v6 Paul begins his treatise on what he *did* bring them: “a wisdom...not of this age.” Because it is not of this age, this wisdom is a “mystery.”

but [“No,” (strong adversative)] we speak God’s wisdom in a mystery

mystery = *mysterion* = from a derivative of *muo* (to shut the mouth); a secret or “mystery”

(through the idea of silence imposed by initiation into religious rites) :- mystery.

Understanding how Paul uses this word is critical to understanding the passage. There is not one mystery; that is, as Paul develops his use of this ancient concept from secular Greek, through OT theology, into life in Christ, he employs it to illustrate various aspects of God’s wisdom, His incomparable truth—but always realized through Jesus Christ.

For example, in Colossians Paul writes that “Christ in you” is a mystery.

Read Colossians 1:25-28.

What is this mystery? “Christ in you.”

In his letter to the Ephesians the inclusion of the Gentiles in God’s salvation—their inclusion in the church, and their direct access to the Father (Ephesians 3) is a mystery.

And now in our text Paul, using “mystery” for the first time in his letters, writes that “Christ crucified”—that is, as he emphasizes in v8, a “crucified...Lord of Glory”—is a “mystery.” Although in various letters he associates mystery with different aspects of God’s salvation economy in Christ, in general “the term ‘mystery’ ordinarily refers to something formerly hidden in God from all human eyes but now revealed in history through Christ and made understandable to His people through the Spirit” (Fee).

This passage is not just the first time Paul has mentioned a “mystery,” but really it is the root of it all. There is surely nothing more mysterious, more unknowable to the unregenerate of *any* age than the Son of God—i.e., God Himself—dying an ignominious, shameful death for the salvation of any who would believe.

The subject of v7 is not “mystery,” however, but “God’s wisdom,” in contrast to the wisdom of this age.

the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages...

And understand, Paul is not speaking or delivering God’s wisdom in a mysterious manner. If he were he would be doing precisely what he accused the Hellenistic mystery cults of doing. The context does not permit such an interpretation. No, what he is saying is that God’s wisdom is, shall we say enveloped in, contained in a mystery.

Paul is couching his argument in the vernacular of the mystery cults with which the Corinthians are enamored. And, if we are honest, there *are* some similarities—with one really big difference. In the mystery cults there existed a set of “mysteries,” or secrets known only to those who had proved themselves sufficiently “mature”—or “perfect”—to receive them. One would have to pass through a series of initiation rites to prove oneself worthy of learning the secrets.

If we are honest God’s wisdom is sort of like that. Before time began (“predestined before the ages”) God decided that He would wrap His wisdom in a mystery—knowable not through human effort or human perfection, *but by the Spirit*. “For to us God revealed them through the Spirit” (v10a). There is indeed a requirement to learn and comprehend the wisdom of God; that requirement is found in Christ. Through Christ we receive the Holy Spirit, who unlocks the wisdom. The literal *words* of God’s wisdom are not secret, but there for all to see. Absent the Spirit of God, however, the words are meaningless—it is the difference between “foolishness” and “the power of God.”

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18.

That is the difference the Spirit makes in a life: He unlocks what is knowable about God.

to our glory;

And here is the other really big difference. There is a “why” to all this, and it bears no similarities to the wisdom cults. The why is “to our glory.” Again Paul references the end-times, and the believer’s resurrection. But this is also another “now—not yet” situation. Each believer, to varying degrees, has already begun the transformation process, already experiencing the glory to come, and will do so in ever increasing ways until he or she comes to the final glory (Garland). This is not an exalted, earthly glory in which we consider ourselves better than others because we’ve cracked the mystery. No, this is the gradual (at first) apprehension of God’s glory through Christ, culminating in the totality of our glorification at the resurrection. It is never really *our* glory, but the acquisition by grace of *God’s* glory.

At the risk of being redundant, I don’t want you to miss the difference between the “mysteries” that have been corrupting the gospel in Corinth and the mystery of which Paul speaks. They have a few similarities, but there is one critical difference. Human effort was required to acquire the “wisdom” of the mystery cults, but the “hidden wisdom of God” which is wrapped in a mystery is acquired only in Christ, and through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Thus any “glory” that results is not our own, but God’s.

v8

the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood;

Of course not; how could they without the Spirit of God.

for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory;

The “rulers of this age”—specifically here, the Jewish and Roman rulers in Jerusalem—were using *human* wisdom, human logic to ascertain God’s wisdom. This is like coming up to a locked door and brushing aside someone’s offer of the appropriate key in favor of a splinter of wood. “I think this will work, I think I can get it,” while all you are doing is mangling the piece of wood. The other person stands there, offering the key, but you prefer to jam chunks of wood into the hole. So, of course, the door never gets opened.

The wisdom of God—and here Paul returns to the specific: Christ crucified—is not ascertained by earthly means, but by supernatural means. It is true that once the Spirit has unlocked the door, human knowledge and wisdom of Spirit-enabled pastors, teachers, interpreters, and commentators can assist us in understanding God’s revealed wisdom, but they will never unlock the door in the first place. The door must be opened first by the Spirit before they can be of any help.

By earthly wisdom the “rulers of this age” determined, for political reasons, that Jesus of Nazareth was a fraud, a messianic pretender. The Jewish rulers said He couldn’t be the *true* Messiah; He wasn’t behaving or speaking as they thought He should. And the apostle Peter pointed out one aspect of the irony in his remarks at the temple.

Read Acts 3:14-15

Note: *archegos* can be translated either Prince or Author.

Gordon Fee points out the epochal irony of the rulers’ decision.

Fee: The very ones who were trying to do away with Jesus by crucifying Him were in fact carrying out God’s prior will. Instead of crucifying a messianic pretender, they killed the “Lord of glory” Himself.

And the words of Joseph to his brothers presaged this moment:

“As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.” (Genesis 50:20)

The “rulers of this age” meant the crucifixion of Christ Jesus for evil: their motives were evil, their intent was evil. But God meant it for good: “to preserve many people alive.”

v9

For now let us just take this verse at face value. I reserve the right to supplement with additional information in our next session. Most commentators agree that Paul is *probably* quoting—loosely, in part—Isaiah 64:4. Both seem to be making the same point.

Read Isaiah 64:4.

Now Paul’s loose adaptation—or, quite possibly, his quotation of a familiar loose adaptation:

Read 1 Corinthians 2:9.

Joseph’s brothers did not know that their evil intent would turn out for good. They had no way of knowing that God was orchestrating the whole thing.

The “rulers of this age” did not know that their evil intent would turn out for good. They had no way of knowing—that is, unless they had been better students of OT prophecy—that God was orchestrating the whole thing.

Earthly, human senses—eye, ear, the heart—cannot perceive or even imagine all that God has preordained to be worked out for the good of those who love Him.

This earth is home to two different—and opposing—worlds: one natural, earthly, human; and the other supernatural, spiritual, other-worldly. The first does not, indeed *cannot*, comprehend God’s wisdom and His purposes; it rejects such foolishness. The second has had God’s wisdom and His purposes unlocked by the Holy Spirit through faith in Christ. It’s citizens, remaining in flesh, may not always understand the fullness of the Lord’s purposes, but their faith in Him bridges that gap.

Key to this is the essential Spirit.

Session 22: The Holy Bathosphere

1 Corinthians 2:9-11

v9 (revisited)

I mentioned last week that I reserved the right to revisit v9 of our passage—and I would like to claim that right, and do a better job of placing it in the context of this passage.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:9.

Let's set aside the problem verifying the actual source for what Paul is quoting (because scholars will be divided on this until Christ returns); the more important question for us is: In this context, what does he mean by using this text? What is his point?

Some have interpreted this to be a reference to the future, to the end times. That is, for example, "eye has not *yet* seen... what God *yet* has in store for those who love Him." But that ignores the context.

The best explanation considers this a continuation of vv6-7; in this it further illuminates what Paul means by the "wisdom" he speaks. That is, "we speak God's wisdom..." (v7) "which eye has not seen..." (v9). Or in a fuller paraphrase,

We speak God's wisdom, salvation through Christ crucified, which none of the rulers of this age understood; but even as it is written: What no one could see, hear or understand about God's ways, these are the very things God has prepared for those who love Him.

v10a

In the Greek, v9 is not a grammatically complete sentence, so it follows that the NIV and ESV treat it so by making the first portion of v10 a continuation of Paul's thought process in v9.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:8-10a

ESV: None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him"—these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit.

This whole passage—from v6 through v10a—is a cohesive unit on the inability of those "of this age" to comprehend God, and the salvation He offers us in His Son. The wisdom Paul speaks—"Christ crucified"—is *not* of this age, so the unregenerate cannot understand it. Then in v10 he nails the reason for this, by stating, in the positive, why those *not* of this age *can* understand it.

For to us God revealed them through the Spirit;

The "them" in that phrase has been inserted by the translators of the NASB and KJVs (just as "these things" has been inserted by the translators of the ESV) to help us understand the connection between v10a with v9. They point back to "Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man." Those things that the natural senses cannot recognize or understand do not exist for the unregenerate, because they haven't the Holy Spirit to reveal and interpret them.

Sidebar: The emphatic position of "to us" is not so much intended to contrast believers with unbelievers (us vs. them), but to connect "us" to "those who love Him." That is, we could paraphrase it, "For to us, namely those who love Him, God has revealed what is otherwise hidden." (Fee)

The Spirit is essential to our relationship with God. I am reminded of King David's plea when he was on his knees before the Lord, confessing his egregious sin of adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband. His greatest fear was that this transgression would cause God to exit his life.

**Do not cast me away from Your presence
And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.
(Psalm 51:11)**

As we go about our temporal lives, dealing with all that is necessary to dwell here, it is easy to forget the importance of the Spirit in our lives. King David knew how important He was.

If we ignore the Spirit, we are separating ourselves from God; if we do not have the Spirit, we are disconnected from God. Initially the Spirit convicts us of our need for God in Christ; it is His ministry to make contact with those predetermined for regeneration. Afterward the Spirit becomes our two-way umbilical to God: through whom Father God reveals Himself to us, and through whom we commune with Him.

10b

for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God.

The first part of v10 is connected with what has come before, while the second part of v10 begins what follows—an extended riff to the end of the chapter on the critical work of God’s Spirit in our lives.

Sidebar: There is an ancient, Greek philosophic principle known as “like is known by like,” and Paul makes this the basis for his argument in the following verses.

Fee: Humans do not on their own possess the quality that would make it possible to know God or God’s wisdom. Only “like is known by like”; only God can know God. Therefore, the Spirit of God becomes the link between God and humanity, the “quality” from God Himself who makes the knowing possible.

This pertains to knowing and communicating while we are on earth. In an identical sense, only God can live where God lives, because He lives in holiness. Thus believers must receive new, glorified bodies so as to live with Him for eternity.
(Philippians 3:20-21)

One of the qualities of the Holy Spirit is that He cannot be contained: He moves about at will, unrestricted, wherever He likes—including the very depths, the “deep things” of God (Greek, *bathos*). Which follows, since the Spirit *is* God, and God is spirit-kind.

Read John 4:23-24.

v11

Read 1 Corinthians 2:11.

For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him?

Here Paul draws a comparative analogy that will be completed in the second part of the verse: *God’s thoughts are known by His Spirit the way man’s thoughts are known by his spirit.*

Proverbs 20:27

In this instance, even though he does not cite it as a Scriptural quotation, Paul clearly had Proverbs 20:27 in mind when he wrote v11.

Read Proverbs 20:27.

Proverbs 20:27 is *not* saying that the Lord (Yahweh) searches man, as the NIV implies, but that the spirit of man *placed there by God* searches the depths of his being. Certainly God can do that; it is just not what this verse is saying.

The Hebrew word translated “spirit” (literally, breath), *neshamah*, is the “word to denote the self-conscious personal human spirit in contradistinction to the spirit of the beast” (K&D),

“that inner spiritual part of human life that was inbreathed at the Creation and that constitutes humans as spiritual beings with moral, intellectual, and spiritual capacities” (Allen P. Ross).

That is, the Lord God has placed in each person the ability and the capacity to know himself. He did not grant this to animals; the spirit he gave them is a different spirit. This is one thing that sets man above the beasts of the field. This spirit is not God’s Spirit; it is our own spirit that was given us by Him, and it can search out every room, every closet in our being.

This was, for me, another of those lean-back-and-get-lost-in-the-wonder moments. In fact I recalled the last line in that great Wesley hymn (*Love Divine, All Loves Excelling*), “Lost in wonder, love, and praise”—the first stanza of which includes the lines, “Fix in us thy humble dwelling,” and “Enter every trembling heart.” I think of it this way: Engineers will design into space vehicles docking rings that enable other spacecraft to dock—to safely lock onto—them. It is planned for, well in advance of the moment of need.

God has so designed us. Well before it is time for His Holy Spirit to “dock” with us, he creates each one of us with a “docking ring”—our own spirit. For each believer there comes a moment when God’s Spirit enters to permanently dock with our life, and there He finds a compatible connection, something of like kind: our own spirit. This moment is described in Romans.

Read Romans 8:15-16.

The two spirits, now joined, testify that we are now a child of God. [Back to our text.](#)

1 Corinthians 2:11

Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God.

The analogy offered in v11 states clearly the principle, “like is known by like.” Just as the only person who knows what goes on inside one’s own mind is oneself, so only God knows the things of God. If A, then B. If it is true that only the spirit of a man knows the thoughts of a man, then it follows that only the Spirit of God knows the thoughts of God.

Let’s put this together, for the conclusion one draws from this is truly breathtaking—a conclusion Paul reaches in the next two verses, which we will look at in our next session. In closing, let us consider this from the aspect of love—God’s love. And let’s key off that Wesley hymn title: *Love Divine, All Loves Excelling*—that is, divine love, God’s love, surpasses all other loves.

In our daily lives we can become so self-involved, and so insecure in our relationship with God, seeing situations not from God’s perspective but from the perspective of fallen flesh, that we too quickly forget how much and how profoundly He loves us.

When we don’t get the parking spot we want, when we fail to get that promotion at work, when our prayers are not answered as quickly as we wish—when things don’t work out to our liking we conclude that God no longer loves us, or is, at least, displeased with us for some reason.

But here is how much God loves us:

- Out of all the myriad beings created for this earth, He makes us in His image: “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness...’” (Genesis 1:26a).
- Into each one of us He placed a unique kind of spirit, one capable of examining every part of our own being, and capable as well of communing with His Spirit: “The spirit of man is the lamp of the Lord, Searching all the innermost parts of his being” (Proverbs 20:27).
- By means of His indwelling Spirit communing with the spirit of believers, God reveals to us those things incomprehensible to unbelievers (2:10).
- This same Holy Spirit knows the thoughts of God and freely shares those thoughts with believers (2:11-12).

God does this freely, generously, graciously for all those who love Him (2:9), who call upon His name. Put simply, we are made supernatural by God, so that we can understand Him and His ways. By His own efforts we are made capable of knowing and understanding Him.

That is love indeed.

Session 23: Made Supernatural

1 Corinthians 2:12-13

Preface

Several weeks ago I pointed out that to fully grasp the teaching of this latter part of Chapter Two, we need to understand how Paul employs the word *pneumatikos*, translated “spiritual.” So far we have been nibbling around the edges of this, but in this session, and to the end of the chapter, we hit it head-on. In our culture this word is used and applied in quite broad terms; not just grammatically but in application and perception it is decidedly a small “s” spiritual. In this culture one is “spiritual” if one thinks high thoughts, if one contemplates deep things, if one prays to or worships any god of one’s choosing; if one meditates on just about anything.

This is not how Paul uses *pneumatikos*. Though the word is not capitalized in our Bibles because of the grammar rule, the apostle *means* it in a capitalized way. When Paul writes in v15 that “he who is spiritual appraises all things,” he is referring to the person who considers himself to be a person of *the* Spirit, a person in whom the Holy Spirit of God dwells. Paul *always* uses *pneumatikos* as “an adjective having to do with the person or ministry of the Holy Spirit” (Fee).

There will come a day when our entire being—body, spirit, soul, mind—will be completely and eternally supernatural. That day will come at the bodily resurrection of the dead, so energetically related in the climax of this letter in Chapter Fifteen. Paul pulls out all stops, and one can hear the cathedral walls vibrating as the pipe organ rumbles accompaniment to these dramatic words.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:50-55.

As we detailed last week, right now for every Christian, regenerated but still dwelling in fallen flesh, we are *spiritually* made supernatural by the joining of our spirit with the Holy Spirit of God—both spirits given us by Him. And this supernatural condition is what sets believers apart from the “natural man” (v14)—those *not* spiritual.

There is one more point to establish before we examine our passage. That is, we need to understand—or remind ourselves—what Paul meant in vv6-7, when he opened this argument.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:6-7.

So that we can accurately interpret what Paul refers to when he uses such words as “wisdom” and “mystery,” we need to realize that when Paul speaks (v6, v13) of what is revealed to believers about God, because of the Holy Spirit (who “searches all things, even the depths of God”) he is not likening God’s wisdom to the cultic “mysteries” of the Hellenist society—those deep, dark secrets so mysterious that one must be painfully initiated into their knowledge. Paul is simply, once again, referring to the gospel: “Christ crucified.” *That* is the mystery.

We should not imagine that Paul refers to delicious, fantastical secrets of God reserved for those who are in Christ. The “wisdom...not of this age” (v6), the “hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages” (v7), all discerned by spiritual means, refers to God’s plan of salvation for man in Christ. That is sufficiently fantastical in itself.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:12-13.

v12

Now we...

We should not journey beyond the second word of our text without stopping to clarify, as best we can, the pronoun “we.” There are generally two schools of thought on who Paul includes in the pronouns “we” and “us” in these two verses. Both can be substantiated by the context (vv6-16).

The Apostolic Position

Respected interpreters such as John MacArthur, Adam Clarke, W. C. Kaiser and Matthew Henry take the position that with “we” Paul means “we apostles.”

- v6: **we** do **speak** wisdom
- v7: **we speak** God’s wisdom in a mystery
- v10: to us God revealed them through the Spirit
- v13: [things freely given to us by God (v12b)] **which things we also speak**

W. C. Kaiser writes, “Paul is not talking about the Spirit that animates believers, but about the Holy Spirit’s operation in delivering the Scripture to the apostle.” This position essentially keeps the entire passage from v6 to v16 focused tightly on the apostles’ ministry, from “we do *speak* wisdom...” (v6) through “which things we also speak...” (v13). (By the way, Kaiser’s book, *The Messiah in the Old Testament* was one of my principle references for our study *Christ in the Old Testament*.)

The “all believers” Position

On the other side are equally respected interpreters such as Gordon Fee and David Garland and many others, who take the position that the “we” refers to *all* believers.

- v7: predestined before the ages **to our glory**
- v9: all that God has prepared **for those who love Him**
- v10: to us God revealed them through the Spirit
- v12: **we have received...the Spirit** who is from God

It is certainly true that all Christians have the Holy Spirit, and that He is instrumental in our “know[ing] the things freely given to us by God” (v12). Beyond that, however, Gordon Fee adds to that “our glory” (v7) and “those who love Him” (v9), pointing out that Paul’s language “seems to make the most sense as referring especially to the Corinthians”—that is, Christians in general.

Once again we can safely conclude that both positions *can* be true; one cannot be labeled a heretic for subscribing to either. My position (for whatever *that* is worth), is that for the *entire passage*, Paul *primarily* has in mind the work of the Holy Spirit in implementing God’s wisdom through the apostles, but within that focus he also, for a few verses, includes a discussion of the Spirit’s work in *every* believer.

Now we have received...the Spirit who is from God,

A. T. Robertson informs us that the tense of the verb translated “received” (*elabomen*), means that this refers to a “definite event.” We can receive things accidentally, we can take or even seize things for ourselves (which the root, *lambano*, can also mean), but this refers to a specific, eventful reception of something given us by God: the Holy Spirit.

Now we have received, not the spirit of the world,

Paul is not suggesting there is a supernatural spirit, a distinct entity, that is a counterpart to God’s Holy Spirit, nor is he referring to demonic spirits. He is saying that the spirit we *did* receive from Him is not of this world. Paul repeatedly uses every tool at his disposal to convince the Corinthians that they now “belong to a different world order, a different age” (Fee), and thus should be rejecting, rather than embracing, the world order of *this* age.

This may be one of the most difficult lessons for believers to accept and put into practice. It can seem almost impossible to live and work and eat and breathe in this world, yet to think and live as if we are *not* of this world. Some are better at this than others.

This is one aspect of what is meant by “walking by the Spirit.” Galatians Chapter Five is our textbook for this; here the apostle paints a picture for us contrasting living by the flesh and living by the Spirit of God.

Read Galatians 5:16-18, 24-25.

Walking by the Spirit requires diligence, practice, determination; it does not come naturally to us. But our gracious God gives us a head start and advantage by implanting His Holy Spirit within each one of us as a guide and helper.

so that we may know the things freely given to us by God,

Just as in v5—where he gave us the “why” for what he says in vv1-4—Paul now, at the end of v12, gives us the why for what he says in vv10-12a. And again, this does not refer to mystical, secret revelations known only to a few, but refers to God’s salvation plan for man. There is a clue for this behind the word translated “things freely given.”

things freely given = *charizomai* = middle from <G5485> (*charis*); to grant as a favor, i.e. gratuitously, in kindness, pardon or rescue :- deliver, (frankly) forgive, (freely) give, grant.

Paul uses the same imagery and words—but more explicitly referring to salvation in Christ—in Romans.

Read Romans 6:22-23.

freed from sin = *eleutheroō*

free gift = *charisma* (this *charisma* is “eternal life in Christ Jesus”)

v13

Read v13.

which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit

And now he swerves back into explicitly mentioning his apostolic work in their midst. Which things? Eternal salvation through the crucified Messiah: “Christ crucified.” The first portion of this verse is a restating—thus, reemphasizing—of what Paul said in vv4-5.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:4-5.

But here he also segues out of what he has been saying about *all* believers. *Just as you all have received the Spirit so you can understand the gift of salvation in Christ, we too bring a message in words taught by the Spirit.*

The first part of this verse is straightforward, and since it reiterates a previous truth, it is quickly apprehended. Unfortunately, not so the remainder of the verse.

combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words.

Aside: One of the burdens of in-depth Scripture study is that from time to time the student comes across passages such as the one before us here—one in which there is no definitive correct translation. And it prompts a rather obvious question: If God through the Holy Spirit bothered to leave us His authoritative word in the first place, couldn’t He have insured that every passage was crystal clear to all? Whatever His reasoning, God did not do this.

Although there does seem to be a narrow consensus among scholars favoring the NASB, a comparison of our popular translations alone reveals the differences of interpretation.

NASB: combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words.

NIV: expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.

ESV: interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

KJVs: comparing spiritual things with spiritual.

I will not inflict on you the grammatical minutia behind the reasons for these discrepancies—the opaque verb tenses, the mysterious gender of *pneumatikos* (the word translated “spiritual”) and implied, rather than specified, objects—but let A. T. Robertson summarize his conclusion.

Robertson: If *pneumatikois* be taken as neuter plural, the idea most naturally would be, “combining spiritual ideas (*pneumatika*) with spiritual words” (*pneumatikois*). This again makes good sense in harmony with the first part of [the verse]. On the whole this is the most natural way to take it, though various other possibilities exist.

Thus we could paraphrase v13, *We apostles speak to you the things freely given to us by God—not using words of human wisdom, but words taught us by the Holy Spirit of God—the result of combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words.*

Here is one more definition of walking and living by the Spirit. We get our truth from one source: from Father God via His Spirit. Everything we live by—even down to our very thoughts—is informed and energized by the Spirit of God.

And *this* is what makes us supernatural, *spiritual* beings.

Session 24: Through Spiritual Spectacles

1 Corinthians 2:14-16

Clarification

Based on a few remarks made in class last week, I believe it would be helpful to clarify what I meant when I spoke about God's grace in placing us where he did so that I might best serve Him according to His will. When I spoke about the contrast between our lifestyle and the typical "nine-to-five job, coming home to mow the lawn," I was not referring to conditions at that work place, nor was I even referring to the time element (although that *would* be a factor) but was primarily referring to the "head-space" element. For me, personally, living and working out in the world, day after day—even just living in a typical neighborhood—I would be incapable of shifting my head space into where it would need to be to fulfill my calling by the Lord—as a writer, teacher, and illustrator of Scripture through drama. Since He knew this, the Lord found us a home more conducive to that necessary "head space."

Preface

For most of my life my vision had been 20/20, so, naturally, when the text written across the TV screen became illegible to me—I blamed the TV. Only later, when street signs began behaving the same way, did it occur to me that perhaps my eyesight was the culprit. I was then introduced to my first pair of glasses—bifocals, no less. And then that myopic gibberish suddenly became legible.

This is precisely the point Paul has been making since v6—and especially from v10, regarding the work of the Spirit of God. Those without the Holy Spirit—referred to as a "natural man" in v14—cannot comprehend what is before them because they lack the corrective lenses of God's "spectacles"—the Holy Spirit.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:14-16.

Verse 13 can be considered parenthetical, as there is a natural flow from v12 to v14:

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. (1 Corinthians 2:12-14)

v14

But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God,

I appreciate the simple but faithful definition of "natural man" supplied by the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*: "Man as he is by nature, contrasted with man as he becomes by grace." That is the succinct version, and it is smack on, but we might also profit from the slightly more verbose version supplied by M. R. Vincent—which bears an eerie similarity to my TV experience.

But *psychikos*, natural, is not equivalent to *sarkikos*, fleshy. Paul is speaking of natural as contrasted with spiritual cognition applied to spiritual truth, and therefore of the soul, as the organ of human cognition, contrasted with the spirit, as the organ of spiritual cognition. The man, therefore, whose cognition of truth depends solely upon his natural insight is *psychikos*, natural, as contrasted with the spiritual man (*pneumatikos*) to whom divine insight is imparted. **In other words, the organ employed in the apprehension of spiritual truth characterizes the man.** Paul therefore "characterizes the man who is not yet capable of understanding divine wisdom as *psychikos*, natural, i.e., as one who possesses in his soul, simply the organ of purely human cognition, but has not yet the organ of religious cognition in the *pneuma*, spirit" (Dickson). (emphasis added)

As David Garland wryly adds, “Only one with spiritual perception can examine beyond the visible evidence and attest that the ‘foolishness of God’ plus the ‘weakness of God’ equals the ‘power of God’.”

man = *anthropos* = man-faced, human being (male or female); hence ESV “person.”

Note the word “accept” (KJVs: *receive/eth*). This is not saying that he does not understand (although that is also true), but that he does not admit the things of the Spirit of God into his heart. (Vincent)

for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.

The point all of this is that the natural person *cannot* “accept the things of the Spirit of God” because he hasn’t the necessary organ to comprehend it—just as the lettering on the TV was gibberish to me until I put on a pair of spectacles. Every individual believer *can* accept the things of God because we have the Spirit as a specific promise from Christ Himself.

Read John 14:16-17.

And here we are back to the concept of “like is known by like.” The nonspiritual person is not “like” God because he hasn’t the Spirit of God to make him like God, who is spirit-kind. The spiritual person, who *has* the Spirit within, is now, as it were, of the same species as God; being spirit-kind, he not only understands but can accept, apprehend and embrace the things of God.

v15

But he who is spiritual appraises all things,

In contrast to the natural man (*psychikos anthropos*), the one who is spiritual (*pneumatikos*) is able to appraise all things—a word which v14 ends and v15 begins and ends: *anahrino*.

It is necessary for us to spend just a few moments with this word—especially because of the versions other than the NASB that translate this “judges/judged.” There is a sense in which those translations are not incorrect, if one interprets judging as investigating, discerning. But the word does not mean to hand down a verdict, as a judge would in a court of law. That’s not the idea.

appraised/appraises^{nasb}, **discerned/makes judgments (judges)**^{niv, esv, kjvs} = *anahrino* = from <G303> (ana) and <G2919> (krino); **properly to scrutinize, i.e. (by implication) investigate**, interrogate, **determine** :- ask, **question**, discern, **examine**, judge, search.

A short verse in Chapter Nine, using the same word, illustrates this in all but the NIV.

Read 1 Corinthians 9:3. (Not NIV)

The venerable Bishop Lightfoot wrote, “*Anahrino* is neither to judge nor to discern; but to examine, investigate, inquire into, question, as it is rightly translated in 1 Corinthians 9:3.”

Spiritual people can appraise the things of God because God is spirit, and His ways are spiritual. But I have purposely used the words “can,” and “is able to.” We are graciously given the spectacles that reveal spiritual truth, but, sadly, not all avail themselves of their use.

David Guzik: The natural man is unsaved. Too many Christians still *think* like natural men, refusing to spiritually discern things. When our only concern is for “what works” or the “bottom line,” we are not spiritually discerning, and we are thinking like the natural man, even though we might be saved. (emphasis added)

As we will see when we turn the page to Chapter Three, this was the problem in Corinth. The members of this congregation were believers; they each had the Spirit within them, but they were still living as *psychikos anthropos*—natural men. God supplies the spectacles, but He does not force us to put them on.

yet he himself is appraised by no one.

We must keep this within its context. Paul is not saying that the spiritual person is above examination or discipline by others who are spiritual—

Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. (Galatians 6:1)

—but that those who remain natural, without the Spirit, have not the capacity or standing to examine those *with* the Spirit.

Albert Barnes: That is, his feelings, principles, views, hopes, fears, joys, cannot be fully understood and appreciated by any natural or sensual man. He does not comprehend the principles which actuate him; he does not enter into his joys; he does not sympathize with him in his feelings.

v16

For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he will instruct Him?

As he has before, Paul backs up his point by lifting some text from the Old Testament—in this case Isaiah 40:13 from the Septuagint (Greek translation of the OT).

Original	LXX	1 Corinthians 2:16a
Who has directed the Spirit of the LORD, Or as His counselor has informed Him?	Who has known the mind of the Lord? and who has been his counsellor, to instruct him?	For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, THAT HE WILL INSTRUCT HIM?

(All are questions that expect the answer, “No one.”)

To be in possession of the Holy Spirit of God—that is, for our spirit to be connected to His Spirit—is to know the “mind” of God. In the context of Chapter Two, spirit and mind are virtually synonymous, for “mind” here refers not to some mystical permission to roam about in every nook and cranny of the Sovereign’s brain, but to understand God’s *mindset*, the way He thinks.

But we have the mind of Christ.

And just as Spirit and mind are synonymous in this context, so are the Lord—i.e., Yahweh—and Christ, or at least Christ as a channel of understanding the mind of God.

Even here we have not left the context of the gospel, the cross of Christ and God’s plan of salvation for man through Christ crucified. Thus Paul does not describe (as perhaps the Corinthians had hoped) a mystical possession of Christ’s brain or, as above, the ability to know every thought in our Lord’s brain—the privilege and ability to read His mind. Instead it means that spiritual people are those who share in the cross of Christ, and everything that entails. It means “to have a cruciform mind” (A. R. Brown). Paul illumines this further in his second letter to the Corinthians.

Read 2 Corinthians 5:14-15.

To “have the mind of Christ” means to think like Him. And how does He think?

Read Philippians 2:3-8.

Sigurd Grindheim: To be spiritual...is to have apprehended the word of the cross in such a way that it has transformed the entire existence of the believer into its image—to a cruciform life, a life characterized by self-sacrificing love, and where power is manifest through weakness.

To be spiritual, instead of just natural, is to perceive and receive all of life here on earth during this age—*everything*—through the prescription of God’s spectacles by means of the Holy Spirit, who “searches...even the depths of God.”

Session 25: Babies, part one

1 Corinthians 3:1-3 (1-2a)

Preface

In the second half of Chapter Two, Paul makes the argument that because followers of Christ have the Spirit of God, they possess the capacity to appraise the things of God. This is in contrast to the “natural man” who literally cannot appraise the things of God because he does not possess the Spirit of God. Thus, in Chapter Two, Paul contrasts those who are spiritual (*pneumatikos*) with those who remain natural (*psychikos*) and without the Spirit. In that setting the contrast is between those who are saved and those who are not saved by faith in Christ.

In Chapter Three there is a subtle shift in Paul’s use of *pneumatikos*. Instead of contrasting believers to unbelievers, he now contrasts spiritual believers with *fleshly* or carnal (*sarkikos*) believers. This means that in this setting, “spiritual” no longer defines all Christians, simply because they are in possession of the Holy Spirit, but a *subset* of Christians—those who are spiritual. And “fleshly” does not define unbelievers, but Christians who possess the Spirit of God yet remain babes in Christ, and thus too much bound to the flesh and the world system that it so loves.

And so we must be sure to understand this use of *sarkikos* (flesh) and *sarkinoi* (fleshly). On the one hand, as we have discussed many times, everyone of us remains in flesh; the flesh, with its base proclivities, does not magically disappear when we receive the Spirit of God. Would that it did; life would be far simpler. So that cannot be how Paul means it here. In fact the apostle uses the same term to describe himself in the beginning of his lengthy lament in Romans 7.

For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. (Romans 7:14)

Remember that the apostle Paul always uses the word “spiritual” in an upper case way: even though our grammatical rules dictate lower case, Paul always means upper case “Spiritual.” Also recall how, last week, Sigurd Grindheim defined those who are “spiritual.”

Grindheim: To be spiritual...is to have apprehended the word of the cross in such a way that it has transformed the entire existence of the believer into its image—to a cruciform life, a life characterized by self-sacrificing love, and where power is manifest through weakness.

As we will see when we dig into v1, Paul does not contrast those who are spiritual with those who are *in* flesh, for we are *all* in flesh. But the contrast is with men *of* flesh, or, as in the ESV, men *of the* flesh. This refers to those—men and women—who persistently, stubbornly cling to the ways of the flesh, instead of maturing into the ways of the Spirit. It describes individuals who, though believers with the Holy Spirit, tenaciously cling to the ways of the world. Note the chart below.

Chapter Two Usage		
<i>pneumatikos</i>	=	spiritual (with the Holy Spirit; i.e., a Christian)
<i>psychikos</i>	=	natural (without the Holy Spirit; i.e., not a Christian)
Chapter Three Usage		
<i>pneumatikos</i>	=	spiritual (a Christian controlled by, living by the Spirit)
<i>sarkikos</i>	=	fleshly, carnal (a Christian not controlled by, living by the Spirit)

Read 1 Corinthians 3:1-3.

v1

There is a quotation from an unknown source that says, “The profane person cannot understand holiness, but the holy person can well understand the depths of evil.”

As we have learned, without the Holy Spirit it is impossible for the unbeliever to appraise God, but the opposite is, sadly, not true. The believer on earth has not lost his memories of, his knowledge of, nor his taste for evil. It is bad enough when a Christian is living in a carnal, fleshly fashion; it is even more tragic when this same person believes himself to be spiritual—a person of the Holy Spirit, living *by* the Spirit.

Many of those in the Corinthian church believed they were spiritual, but they were living fleshly (v3). This is the problem Paul addresses in this passage.

Sidebar: The NIV “worldly” (vv1, 3) is not the best. The words *sarkinoi* (v1) and *sarkikoi* (v3) “emphasize especially their humanness and the physical side of their existence as over against the spiritual” (Fee).

And I, brethren,

Paul makes it clear that he is addressing believers, and the Greek is clear that he is addressing the entire congregation. Not that all were guilty of this transgression, but the church as a whole was being defiled by it.

could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh,

Let’s be clear: Paul is *not* saying there were Christians in Corinth without the Holy Spirit; they were unspiritual “not because they lack[ed] the Spirit but because they [were] thinking and living just like those who live outside the household of faith, people who know nothing of the Holy Spirit” (Fee).

as to infants in Christ.

It is a common interpretation that Paul is accusing the Corinthians of being not far enough along in their understanding of their faith-walk in Christ. But that is not the case. Let’s compare this to the familiar passage in Hebrews, to better understand what Paul is saying here.

Read Hebrews 5:11-14.

The writer to the Hebrews is clearly shaming his audience into facing the truth—that they are far enough along in their Christian walk that they should be instructing others in the faith. But they have regressed; they’ve lost their chops.

That was the situation in the church this letter of Hebrews was addressed to. They should have been teachers, but they were out of practice, they had lost their chops for teaching and now required others to reteach them the basics of the faith. [Back to our text.](#)

This was not the situation in Corinth. Paul uses the word translated infants or babes to describe them.

infants, babes = *nepios* (nay'-pee-os) = from an obsolete particle ne- (implying negation) and <G2031> (epos); **not speaking, i.e. an infant** (minor); figurative **a simple-minded person**, an immature Christian :- babe, child (+ -ish); “almost always has a pejorative sense, in contrast with being an adult, and refers to thinking of behavior that is not fitting for a ‘grownup’” (Fee). <British “Nappies!”>

Why babies? Why does Paul refer to these fleshly Christians as infants? Spend much time watching babies or toddlers? They are not deep thinkers, and they certainly are not very “spiritual”—even in a worldly sense. The other day we were in Wal-Mart and I watched a toddler pick up a brightly colored bag from the shelf and carry it toward her mom’s shopping cart. The mom took the bag from the child and returned it to the shelf. After a dramatic pause for effect, the child lifted her head and wailed her displeasure with tears flowing. Now, I doubt that little girl even knew what was in the bag, but she wanted it, and when she couldn’t have it, she threw a fit.

That is the picture of the Corinthians in these verses. They were only concerned with what the flesh wanted, and if they couldn't have it, they were going to complain loudly. They were not moved by the spiritual things of God, but by the demands of the flesh. Babies indeed.

But, because they were literally, chronologically adults, the Corinthians were even worse than real babies. They saw themselves as spiritual, as wise, as mature—yet they were thinking and behaving as spoiled brats concerned only with what pleased their fleshly appetites. See his rebuke of their “wisdom” near the end of this chapter.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:18-21a.

v2a

I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it.

Note that in the first two sentences of this passage Paul is speaking in the past tense; he refers to the earlier time when he was in their midst. And I struggled with this: If he is referring to his first visit, the earliest days of the church when he had just arrived, preached the gospel and converted a number of souls, then of course (I thought) he would begin with milk rather than solid food. They were just babes in Christ! Cut 'em some slack!

But that is not what Paul is saying when he speaks of “milk” instead of “solid food.” To understand what he means, it is helpful to compare it, again, to the Hebrews passage.

Read Hebrews 5:12-14.

The Hebrews passage is clear: “milk” equals “elementary principles,” the basics. But in the Corinthian passage, the context, while seemingly the same, is different. Paul has already given us a picture of the message he delivered in Corinth, and it doesn't at all sound like a watered-down gospel.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:4-8, 10-13.

That doesn't sound like a simplified, bare-bones snack; it sounds like a twelve-course feast!

The key to this passage is not what Paul delivered, but *what the Corinthians were able to receive*. To my ears the KJVs and ESV say it best:

I fed you with milk and not with solid food...

That seems to point us in the right direction, emphasizing the recipient over the giver. Think of it like this: Paul came to Corinth with the same gospel he shared with everyone else—a banquet of spiritual food. But the Corinthians were more accustomed to a different sort of diet—the insipid, multicultural pap offered by the Hellenist mystics. Thus what was “meat” to the apostle became just “milk” to the Corinthians. So when Paul writes about this in his letter, for effect he uses *their* terms, turning them back on them.

This is, admittedly, a challenging passage and interpretation; it is one of those instances where it helps to read and re-read the explanation until it finally sinks in. For this I commend to you David Garland's commentary, especially. Both Garland and Gordon Fee quote the British theologian and New Testament scholar, Morna Dorothy Hooker.

Hooker: Yet while he uses their language, the fundamental contrast in Paul's mind is not between two quite different diets which he has to offer, but between the true food of the gospel with which he has fed them (whether milk or meat) and the synthetic substitutes which the Corinthians have preferred.

And Fee continues:

The problem, [Paul] insists, is not on his side, but on theirs. “I could not” [v1] (explain the cross as God's wisdom in a mystery) “because you could not” [v2] (so understand it, given your “advancement” in the wrong direction). The problem, it turns out, is not with the message at all, but with those who had put themselves in a position so as not to be able to hear and understand what Christ through His apostle says to them.

Hooker again:

The Corinthians' failure to understand the wisdom spoken in a mystery is not due to the fact that Paul is withholding it from them, but is the result of their own inability to digest what he is offering them.

When one has been on a liquid diet for an extended period, the first bite of steak may be not just foreign, but actually painful to the teeth, and we may spit it out.

Session 26: Babies, part two

1 Corinthians 3:1-4 (2b-4)

Preface

In Chapter Two Paul detailed the difference between the “natural man” (the unbeliever) and “he who is spiritual” (the believer in possession of the Spirit of God), in how the former cannot receive the things of God and the latter can.

Now, at the beginning of Chapter Three, he says—and we can hear the regret, even sorrow in his voice—that back when he stood before the Corinthians and presented to them the gospel of Christ crucified, they couldn’t handle it. They were so accustomed to the slippery sweetness of the culture in which they lived that the meat of God’s word presented to them by the apostle became like thin gruel.

Oh, they believed. Even after two years (perhaps more) Paul still addresses them as “brethren.” In the second verse of this letter he describes them as

...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: (1 Corinthians 1:2)

These were Christians who were and—we learn in our passage today—remain in a struggle against their fleshly nature, no doubt influenced mightily by the fleshly nature of the society in which they dwell. So Paul says that even though they are believers, he must still speak to them as if they are not, because they are still behaving as “mere men.”

Read 1 Corinthians 3:1-4.

v2b

Indeed, even now you are not yet able.

So far in Chapter Three Paul has been speaking in the past tense, referring back to the time he was standing in front of the Corinthians. Now, at the end of v2, and the beginning of the next sentence, he declares that nothing has changed in this department. Again: The writing of this letter would have been at least two years after his visit—perhaps longer—and the church was still having problems in this area.

Not yet able to do what? To receive what he had to offer—i.e., the fullness of the gospel message. And why were they “not yet able” to receive the word?

v3

for you are still fleshly.

ESV: for you are still of the flesh (*sarkikos*).

David Garland: They hankered after the more exquisite charms of clever oratory to tickle their ears, which made the simplicity of the word of the cross seem bland and elementary. If Paul’s message looks like milk to them, it discloses that they are not as mature or spiritual as they think.

A. T. Robertson does a splendid job of sorting out the Greek for us. For the one brave enough to wade into his delineation of the various Greek terms employed by Paul in this paragraph, there is profit. But for right now let’s just focus on his definition of the word translated “fleshly” in the NASB.

KJVs: carnal; ESV: of the flesh; NIV: worldly

“*Sarkikos* means adapted to, fitted for the flesh, one who lives according to the flesh.”

A. T. Robertson: *Sarkikos*, unlike *sarkinos*...means adapted to, fitted for the flesh (*sarx*), one who lives according to the flesh (*kata sarka*). Paul by *psychikos* describes the unregenerate man, by *pneumatikos* the regenerate man. Both classes are *sarkinoi* made in flesh, and both may be *sarkikoi* though the *pneumatikoi* should not be. The *pneumatikoi* who continue to

be *sarkinoi* are still babes (*neḗptoi*), not adults (*teleioi*), while those who are still *sarkikoi* (carnal) have given way to the flesh as if they were still *psychikoi* (unregenerate).

A Clarification

Let me take just a moment here to address the disagreement that arose in class during last week's session. It is not my job, nor is it my place, to get everyone to agree with me. My job is to offer, by the grace of God and the working of the Holy Spirit, exposition of God's word.

I have only recently learned that to some in the evangelical community the term "carnal Christian" can be a red flag because of a certain sect that believes that so long as one says the right words, prays the right prayer, one is a Christian no matter how one lives his life after. Thus today the term "carnal Christian" represents in their mind a fraudulent gospel and theology that preaches one can live any way one likes and still call oneself a Christian.

My use of the term "carnal" is used quite simply in the same way the KJVs use it in our text—as a synonym for "fleshly," an alternate English word to express the Greek *sarkikos*. So permit me to reduce this down to three bullet points pertinent to the understanding of our text:

- Is it possible for one to be a believer in possession of the Holy Spirit, yet spend his entire life on a path of rebellion against Christ without any subsequent repentance, and still go to heaven? No.
- Is it possible that a person who believes himself to be a Christian, passes through a period of rebellion and only then realize he never was a Christian in the first place, but then after this period realize his need for Christ and become a believer? Yes.
- Is it possible for a true believer in possession of the Spirit of God to, for a brief period of time (remember, the "brethren" in Corinth had remained "fleshly" for over two years), take a left turn in his faith-walk, behaving more like the world around him, yet repent, confess his sin and return to fellowship with the Lord? Yes.

John MacArthur: Christians can be carnal. That is, they can behave in carnal ways. But "carnal Christian" is not a plane of spiritual existence where one can remain indefinitely. Carnality is never spoken of by Scripture as a perpetual state for believers. In other words, while Christians can be carnal in their behavior, they are never carnal by nature.

Let me close this topic with a summation by Gordon Fee.

Fee: Like the preceding passage, this paragraph has had its own history of unfortunate application. Very often the text has been used in the debate over eternal salvation, or whether the saved can ever be lost. The implication is often that because these people are believers, yet "carnal," it is therefore permissible to be "carnal Christians." That, of course, is precisely the wrong application, and flies full in the face of what concerns Paul. There is no question that Paul considers his Corinthian friends believers and that they are in fact acting otherwise. But Paul's whole concern is to get them to change, not to allow that such behavior is permissible, since not all Christians are yet mature. Paul's language is ironic, not permissive. The eternal destiny of such people, were they to persist in their "merely human" ways, depends on how one views the various warning texts in this letter (e.g., 6:9-11; 10:1-13). But *this* text is not speaking to that question. We would do well to let it carry Paul's own point, not to use it for a theological concern of our own making. Spiritual people are to walk in the Spirit. If they do otherwise, they are "worldly" and are called upon to desist. For the apostle, remaining worldly is not an option.

In this passage Paul speaks to members of the Corinth church who were believers, who were spiritual in the sense of Chapter Two (possessing the Spirit of God), who considered themselves to be spiritual men in the sense of Chapter Three (living lives controlled by the Spirit of God), who nonetheless were behaving—still, at least two years after their conversion—as men of the flesh, in a fleshly manner, in a carnal manner.

If we set aside any controversy over eternal salvation, “once saved always saved,” “perseverance of the saints” et al, we can all agree that as believers we need to guard against living in a fleshly manner. This need not always be a conscious decision: “I am going to live for a while as if I am not a Christian.” In fact, I would dare say that it is rarely such a cold decision. More often than not it seeps into our life like a virus, unawares, almost innocently, until one day we realize our flesh has overwhelmed the influence of the Spirit in our life.

The world in which the Corinthians lived was not unlike ours today. They were surrounded by, enveloped in a cesspool that stood against everything of their Christian faith. Without diligence the standards of the society could and did seep into individual lives, as well as the church itself. This is the situation Paul is addressing. And then he gives some of the evidence for this.

For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly,

Paul broached this subject earlier; in fact it was the first topic he mentioned immediately after his greeting in Chapter One.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-11.

Now he returns to it as evidence to back up his position that they were and remain “fleshly.”

jealousy = *zelos* = from <G2204> (zeo); properly heat, i.e. (figurative) “zeal” (in a favorable sense, ardor; in an unfavorable one, jealousy, as of a husband [figurative of God], or an enemy, malice) :- emulation, envy (-ing), fervent mind, indignation, jealousy, zeal; rivalry; [here, a zeal for oneself over others](#).

strife = *eris* = of uncertain affinity; a quarrel, i.e. (by implication) wrangling :- contention, debate, strife, variance.

This ugly behavior in a church is indicative of individuals being controlled by the flesh, rather than being controlled by the Spirit.

Read James 3:15-18.

and are you not walking like mere men?

When one is nothing more than a human being, as every one of us is at birth, the behavior Paul describes is perfectly acceptable—indeed, expected. Looking out for oneself, a zeal for always coming out ahead of the rest of the pack—all part and parcel of living in the world. But when we are in fact something more than a human being—something more than mere flesh and bones—a spiritual being—then this behavior is unacceptable. A spiritual person (Ch. 3) lives and walks by the Spirit, “a life characterized by self-sacrificing love, and where power is manifest through weakness” (Grindheim).

v4

Then Paul loops back to the problem he raised earlier in this letter and uses it to bolster his case for their carnal behavior.

For when one says, “I am of Paul,” and another, “I am of Apollos,” are you not mere men?

That is how the world operates: one group against another, one faction struggling for superiority against the others, always looking to come out on top. That is not how a spiritual person behaves. That is how a natural, unspiritual human being behaves.

Let’s close by reminding ourselves of what should be the contrast between natural and spiritual, between walking in the Spirit and walking in the flesh.

Read Galatians 5:16-26.

Session 27: In the Garden of the Lord

1 Corinthians 3:5-8

Preface

As far as the apostle Paul is concerned, a predominant indicator of the Corinthians' fleshly behavior is their "pride of ownership" in the respective leaders or influences to their congregation. As we were reminded in our previous session, this was the first problem Paul addressed in this letter after his greeting.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:11-13.

Without question the most prominent influence on the church after Paul was Apollos—which is probably why Paul, here in Chapter Three, reduces the names down to just two: Apollos and himself. Let's read the next paragraph.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:5-9.

v5

What then is Apollos? And what is Paul?

As our various translations reveal, the jury is split pretty much down the middle on the pronoun that sets off his two questions. The best argument for "what" (neuter singular interrogative pronoun, *ti*) over "who" (*tis*) is that not just the Greek, but the context calls for "what." The whole point of this paragraph is to diminish the importance of personalities. To ask "Who then is Apollos?" anticipates an answer such as, "A nice guy," or "the son of so-and-so," or "my good friend." But to ask, "What then is Apollos? And what is Paul?" anticipates an answer that describes a role or an occupation. Chances are good that if you meet a stranger and ask him, "What are you?" he will answer as if you asked, "What do you do?" and he will respond with, "I'm an electrician," or "I'm a bricklayer."

Servants...

And Paul's response to his rhetorical question is in that vein. What is Paul? A servant—a *diakonos*. What is Apollos? A servant.

servant, ministers^{kjvs} = *diakonos* = probably from an obsolete *diako* (to run on errands; compare <G1377> (*dioko*)); an attendant, i.e. (genitive) a waiter (at table or in other menial duties); specially a Christian teacher and pastor (technically a deacon or deaconess) :- deacon, minister, servant.

That is, someone subservient, who serves others. As Pastor Jeremy recently pointed out, Christ's favorite title for Himself was "Son of Man." There is a lot of meaning behind that, but part of it represents His willingness to become something less than what and who He truly was, to freely associate Himself with those He came to save, and to serve them without reservation.

Read Mark 10:43-45. (*diakoneo*, verb form of *diakonos*)

[He] emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:7-8)

This is Paul's counterpoint to the self-centered pride displayed by the Corinthians. We can imagine that this did not include every member of the church, but we also note that it is not so few that he can name names, as he does on other occasions.

There is another counterpoint taking place that is less obvious. Note how in both Chapter One and v4 here in Chapter Three, when Paul quotes these individuals the emphasis is on "I": "I am of Paul," and "I am of Apollos." This is part of what makes them "mere men"; this is

nothing but an attempt to exalt themselves by association with the leaders in the faith. But the literal text reveals the contrast, with instead of “I” it is “God” in the emphatic position. Literally v9 reads, “God’s we are co-workers; God’s cultivation, God’s construction you are” (Garland, after Yoda).

The emphasis of the entire paragraph (and into v10) is that God is the one responsible for it all. Not “men.” Men are just the servants of God ministering to His people.

through whom you believed,

Against their apparent fleshly adulation of these mere servants, Paul reminds the Corinthians that they were simply “channels of the act” (*dia*). They were not saved by Paul or Apollos—they did not believe in Paul or Apollos; God just used them to both deliver and nurture (plant and water, v6) the gospel message.

even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one.

This not only sets up the details of service as explained in the analogy of vv6-8, but also foreshadows the lengthier discussion of Chapter Twelve about the use of spiritual gifts.

Note: There is no noun in the original text of this clause; it must be inferred from the context. Literally, “and to each as the Lord gave,” which the NKJV translates most faithfully.

v6

And now Paul expands the previous remark with an agricultural analogy. Verse 6 states the analogy, v7 explains the analogy, v8 extends the analogy. And v9 reiterates and summarizes the centrality of God through the entire process.

I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth.

Verb tenses are important in God’s word. Being aware of them expands our understanding of what is written. Unfortunately, these tenses are often hidden beneath the English, as is the case here except in the latest (2011) NIV. The NASB comes close, but is incomplete.

For our practical purpose, we can say that the first two are past tense (although in the Greek they are first aorist active indicative, which means they mark definite acts that have already occurred). Thus Paul planted the church, and Apollos came along after and watered the seeds and the new growth. The third verb (*ēuxanen*) changes to the imperfect tense, which means that it not only occurred in the past, but is continuing. The latest NIV captures it.

NIV (2011): I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. (emphasis added)

We see clearly in v9 that Paul, in this agricultural analogy, is not speaking of the individuals that were converted; he is not speaking of planting individual souls, followed by Apollos nurturing the growth of the individual’s faith, but of the planting and watering of the church (“you [plural] are God’s field, God’s building”).

What man does for God’s kingdom is useful and might even be important, but the Lord is behind it all. And only what He does spans the centuries and millennia. Jesus Himself affirms our dependency on Him for the fruit we bear in another agricultural analogy.

Read John 15:4-5.

With just a handful of words in v6 Paul accomplishes several things:

1. The ministries of both men are affirmed.
2. There is no reason to place one leader above another, or in competition with the other. They each played a role in the church and are, essentially, on equal footing.
3. But what they did in the Lord’s name is nothing when compared to the Lord God—the One they should be focusing on.

v7

So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth.

Then in v7 Paul explains or restates his analogy. If it was God causing the growth (v6), then the planter is nothing, the one who waters is nothing (“neither...is anything”).

The apostle has not left his discussion on living spiritually. By focusing on the men who led in the founding and nurturing the church, the Corinthians are betraying their earthly, fleshly perspective. In this paragraph Paul is trying to change their perspective to one that is spiritual: Don’t you see? God is the one doing all this! Quit exalting the lowly workers out in the field and start exalting the Master who owns the land.

Fee: Without God’s prior activity bringing them to faith and causing them to grow, there is no church at all. Hence the point is clear: Stop quarreling over those whose tasks are nothing in comparison with the activity of God... It is only God who makes things grow!

v8

In v8 Paul extends his analogy, keying off what he said in v5b: “...even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one.”

Now he who plants and he who waters are one;

The Greek doesn’t help us much in trying to figure out what Paul means in the first portion by stating that the two field hands “are one” (which is the most literal translation), so we are left to determine this from the context. The NIV translators make their position clear in rendering it “have one purpose,” and this may indeed be the best interpretation—but not the best literal translation.

In this verse Paul speaks of both unity and diversity, and here is the unity. The planter and the waterer work together: If no one planted, the watering would be useless. If no one watered, the planting would come to naught. (A. T. Robertson)

Again, Paul will expand on this in Chapter Twelve.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:4-7.

but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor.

Then Paul says something that, at first, may seem a bit out of place. He has just spoken about the unity of purpose in the Lord’s servants, that no one is any better, or worthy of more honor than another based on their type of service. But now he points out that there is a part of all this, in which each individual servant stands on his own: his reward.

We could bask in the knowledge and promise that the faithful worker will receive his or her crowns in heaven. But I’d like to close this session with just a couple of other points.

1. Note that the reward is based not on results or level of success, but on labor. Just as only the Lord knows the content of any individual heart, so only He knows what has or will come from any servant’s labor. This cannot be judged by earthly standards; only heavenly standards will do. Thus it may be that the super preacher who packs in thousands upon thousands every week may receive as a reward just a tiny fraction of that which the nondescript pastor who faithfully ministers to a tiny congregation for forty years receives.
2. Note the tense of that word, “receives.” I purposely did not use the future tense. Oh, surely we will receive our heavenly reward, but one of my favorite passages, later in this letter, is one in which the apostle Paul says he is already receiving his reward.

Read 1 Corinthians 9:16-18.

Here is another of those passages from God’s word that the world will never understand. The faithful servant of our Lord—who serves not because he is forced to, or does so grudgingly, but out of love for His Lord is compelled to—knows a measure of reward in the here and now, for in fact his eternity has already begun.

Session 28: Following the Blueprints

1 Corinthians 3:9-10

Preface

Every day, for the last twenty-seven years, I have been reminded of the importance of having a solid, firm foundation for one's house. In the garage the slab is broken in one large area, and one can tell by striking it that there is a void beneath that area. One corner of the pavement in front of our garage has been settling ever since it was poured in the mid-seventies. The workshop floor also has several large cracks in it.

The brickwork around our living room fireplace tends to move up and down with the seasons: sometimes there is a crack in the top line of mortar, sometimes the crack is closed. There are several doors that betray the shift as well: one season they will close properly, the next season they may not even latch—or may refuse to open at all. There are times when we wonder why the house didn't slide into the pond years ago.

Our passage today is all about working and building, and just like v9 all by itself, it is all about God. The passage, vv9-11, is bookended with deity: It begins with God (*theos*), and ends with Jesus Christ.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:9-11.

v9

For we are God's fellow workers;

As I pointed out last week, the original Greek makes it clear that the emphasis in v9 is on God by placing Theos at the beginning of each phrase: "God's we are co-workers; God's cultivation, God's construction you are." So in the original text, "God" is the first word of the sentence.

fellow workers = *synergoi* (soon-er-goy') = from a presumed compound of <G4862> (*sun*) and the base of <G2041> (*ergon*); a co-laborer, i.e. coadjutor :- companion in labour, (fellow-) helper (-labourer, -worker), labourer together with, workfellow; **we get the word "synergy" from this, which means the same thing: to work together.**

There are two ways to read this, and since there are respectable scholars on both sides, one should not be dogmatic about it. The first interpretation is illustrated most explicitly by the KJV: "For we are labourers together with God." That is, the "fellow" or "together" refers to a partnership with God in their work. Thus the possessive "God's" in this interpretation should be read much as we might say, "I work with Harry, so he is my co-worker."

And in a sense this can be true, so long as we never forget who is in charge. If we serve through the auspices and force of the indwelling Spirit—who is God—then we are working with Him.

The translation that best represents the other way to interpret this is the most recent NIV (and just as in v6, a good interpretation but not the best literal translation).

NIV (2011): For we are co-workers in God's service

Not "co-laborers with God," but "co-laborers who both together belong to God" (Fee). Here the possessive would be read as truly possessive: "God is the Master who owns us, and we are fellow workers under Him."

I believe the argument for the latter, based on the context of the passage, makes the most sense. The emphasis in this extended passage is on the essential sovereignty of God, with Paul making the point that he and Apollos are simply servants (*diakonoi*) working under Him. So it would seem out of place for Paul to turn around and now say after that that he is a co-worker with God.

Then Paul turns from Apollos and himself to offer two more metaphors that bolster his point that God is the one in charge of it all.

you are God's field,

field = *georgion* = neuter of a (presumed) derivative of <G1092> (*georgos*); cultivable, i.e. a farm
:- husbandry.

There is a logical, illustrative flow from v6 to this clause in v9:

v6: I planted, Apollos watered

v7: we may have done this farming, but God was causing the crop to grow

vv8-9a: Apollos and I worked together, under God, toward the same goal

v9b: you, Corinthians, are the farm land, the tillage, the crop on and for which we labored

[you are] God's building.

Paul then switches to a different metaphor that, not coincidentally, sets up the next paragraph.

building = *oikodome* = feminine (abstract) of a compound of <G3624> (*oikos*) and the base of <G1430> (*doma*); architecture, i.e. (concrete) a structure; figurative confirmation :- building, edify (-ication, -ing).

It can be a healthy mental exercise to consider this word as either verb (activity of building) or noun (a structure)—which it can be. Through the servant-apostles God is building (verb) a church in Corinth. Very true. But it is clear from the context that Paul uses *oikodome* here as a noun—a structure. Note in vv16-17 where the church (plural “you”) is referred to as “a temple of God.”

We could look at a number of Pauline texts that tie into this, but I think the best is by the apostle Peter.

Read 1 Peter 2:4-5.

Here is a beautiful picture of one aspect of the individual Christian's intimate relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Jesus was a living stone rejected by men who became the cornerstone—the first stone in the foundation against which every other stone is aligned—of “a spiritual house for a holy priesthood”—i.e., the church. Then each of us, “as living stones” are added to this spiritual house, comprising the walls of the church, each one of us aligned with the cornerstone, and each one of us acceptable to God because of Jesus Christ.

v10

And now Paul launches into his metaphor of a building. And we need to keep clear in our minds the components of this metaphorical structure:

- The building is the church;
- Paul himself is the builder who lays the foundation for the church;
- and the foundation of the church is Jesus Christ.

According to the grace of God which was given to me,

Again we begin with God. It is His grace that enables Paul to be “a wise master builder.” So if we, initially, think the author is a little too self-congratulatory, he can just point us back to the beginning of the sentence: It is all by God's grace. Verse 15:10 could easily be a parenthetical expansion of this opening phrase.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:10.

There is the healthy perspective, a healthy balance between the flesh and the Spirit: God through His grace made me, he enables my work. By this empowerment I work hard in His service—yet still, it is all because of God's grace.

like a wise master builder I laid a foundation,

By this Paul means he set in place the foundation of the Corinthian church.

Note: Some commentators like to point out that *sophos*, translated “wise” can—and does here—mean “expert” or “skilled,” and so it is translated in the earlier NIV and the ESV. But, again, that ignores the Corinthian context. Paul is still carefully choosing words that address the church’s infatuation with the Greek “wisdom” culture, and here is just one more of his little jabs. If we think he has moved on from that topic, just look below in this chapter.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:18-20.

What is this foundation?

David Garland: The foundation is the gospel, and its footings are anchored firmly in the message of Christ crucified.

The only foundation that will never crack or shift or fall is the gospel of Christ Jesus. Not programs or detailed systems of outreach; not a beautiful, expensively appointed building; not charismatic personalities behind the pulpit, but the gospel of Christ crucified as found in God’s word. That is a foundation that will never fail.

and another is building on it.

Paul laid the foundation, but eventually he moved on and others took up the building of the church. People and leaders come and go, but the construction never ends. The church is never “finished.”

But each man must be careful how he builds on it.

Now, that is the positive application—but not necessarily what Paul refers to. He is probably not referring to Apollos, or even Peter; the evidence that follows indicates that he refers to the Corinthians themselves, and that he is concerned about some of the divisive, “un-Spiritual” things they are trying to build on top of the foundation of Christ. He is warning them here—and goes into greater detail in the following verses—of the consequences of persisting on their present course. Referring to being careful how one builds on this foundation, David Garland writes,

They must use fit materials and follow the plans of the architect (who is God, not Paul) and the building code.

Here is perhaps our best take-away from this passage: Even in a healthy, Bible-teaching church that acknowledges Jesus Christ as Master and Lord, we must always be diligent to build rightly on the foundation.

Let’s return to 1 Peter.

Read 1 Peter 5:8-9.

If Satan can cause one person to turn away from Christ, he has made a nice meal for himself. Just think what a sumptuous feast it is for him when he can destroy a whole church by means of false doctrine, by gradually sifting into the church worldly “wisdom” that eventually overwhelms the gospel of Christ. That’s what was happening in Corinth.

The devil is a good liberal; just like his human disciples he is patient. When he loses a battle he does not give up, but keeps coming back again and again, wearing down his opponent until he has victory. And even if he wins a few battles, he is never satisfied: He never stops until he has won the war.

As we build up the church from its solid foundation, we must always—not just in our personal lives, but in the church’s life—test the spirits, test that which is taught, test every idea to make sure that it is not of this world, not of the flesh, but only from the gospel of Christ.

For only those building materials will stand.

Session 29: “Building Materials,” part one

1 Corinthians 3:11-15

Preface

In the paragraph beginning with v10 and ending with v15 the apostle Paul is building something: a church. He begins by laying the foundation, and that sure foundation is nothing less than Jesus Christ.

Whether he realized it or not, the prophet Isaiah began this construction by setting in place the cornerstone of the foundation.

Read Isaiah 28:16.

Jesus referred to this prophecy on a number of occasions, but it was the apostle Peter who explicitly identified Jesus as the prophesied cornerstone when he was put on trial after healing a lame beggar.

When they had placed them in the center, they began to inquire, “By what power, or in what name, have you done this?” Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers and elders of the people, if we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, as to how this man has been made well, let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by this name this man stands here before you in good health. He is the stone which was rejected by you, the builders, but which became the chief corner stone. And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.”
(Acts 4:7-12)

Now Paul extends the metaphor with Christ Jesus becoming the entire foundation on which a/the church—specifically here, the Corinthian church—is to be built. In v10 Paul relates that, while there in person, he set in place this foundation by bringing the authentic gospel of Christ to Corinth. But then he had to leave Corinth, so others would have to continue the construction on their own. And based on reports he has received, the construction job for this new church is not going so well. The foundation may be strong, but the superstructure is dangerously shaky—and the apostle fears its collapse.

He warns them at the end of v10 that “each man must be careful how he builds on” the foundation of Christ.

v11

Verse 11 seems out of place: the end of v10 speaks of building on the foundation, and is continued in v12ff.

The message of vv10-11 seems to track better if we reorder the text—without changing a word—by inserting v11 as a parenthetical clarification within v10. It also flows better into our passage for today.

According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation (for no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ) and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. Now if any man builds on the foundation...
(1 Corinthians 3:10-12a reordered)

Wherever it is situated, the message of v11 is important: The church, every church, must have Jesus Christ as its foundation.

v12

The proper, solid foundation has been laid. It is now time to select the building materials to raise the church.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:12-15.

Note: Let's be clear about the imagery. In this paragraph, vv10-15, Paul is specifically applying his analogy to the church—not the building, but the community of believers in Corinth who comprise the church. Thus we can easily apply the counsel in this analogy to any local church. But it does no violence to the passage to extend it as well to the life of each individual believer. Not just the church, but the life of every believer must have as its foundation Jesus Christ and His gospel. And just as we select proper building materials for constructing and maintaining the church, we are also to select proper materials for building up our own life in Christ. That is, the analogy is not limited to what we do for the church, but can be applied to what we as individuals do to construct and strengthen our relationship with our Lord.

Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw,

We should not get sidetracked by trying to allegorize the materials Paul lists; his point is more simple than that: some things last and some do not; some things are imperishable (and thus more compatible with the imperishable foundation), some are perishable. His emphasis is on the people and the work they turn in for the Lord—not on the subtle differences between gold and silver, and how each represents some facet of Christian life. That's not what he is talking about.

John MacArthur: As long as believers are alive, they *are* building. They are building some sort of life, some sort of church, some sort of Christian fellowship and service. It may be a beautiful structure or a hovel, it may be by intention or neglect, but it cannot help being something... Every Christian is a builder, and every Christian builds with some sort of materials. God wants us to build only with the best materials, because only the best materials are worthy of Him, are the most effective, and will last.

The items listed by Paul are not examples of materials placed into two categories of righteous and sinful. If you were living in the first century your church would almost certainly meet in a private home built out of mud brick (which would contain straw) and small amounts of wood, all covered over with either mud or thin plaster. There wouldn't be a trace of "gold, silver," or "precious stones" in sight. There is nothing inherently "bad" in "wood, hay, straw."

The point he is making, as we will see in the next verse, is that some materials will survive fire, and some will not. There may not be anything sinful about that church built from mud and straw—but it will not pass through the fire without being burned up. At this point in the text that is all the materials represent: the ability of each to survive fire. The first three will; the last three will not. Verses 13 to 15 are the meat of this passage.

v13

each man's work will become evident;

NIV: his work will be shown for what it is,

Right off we are reminded that Paul has been speaking all along about (in the NASB) "each man's work," not about what tools or building materials he chooses to use.

v10: each man must be careful how he builds on it.

v12: if any man builds...

v13: each man's work... the quality of each man's work.

v14: If any man's work...remains...

v15: If any man's work is burned up...

When will this happen?

for the day will show it

Even without capitalizing the word "day," as do some translations, we know from the definite article—"the day"—that Paul refers to the *parousia*—the Day of the Lord, when Christ returns to gather His people home and judge them for their reward.

Sidebar: As we learned in our study of the Thessalonian letters, *parousia* is the standard word for the return of Christ during the end times, and refers to His descent from the clouds—but can also refer to the extended visitation. The *parousia* of Christ can include His descent, His gathering of the elect, the return to heaven “with all His saints,” and the moment each of us stands before Christ and the Father for our lives to be evaluated.

because it is to be revealed with fire,

In contrast to the normal pace for your humble teacher we have been moving so far at a breakneck pace through these verses, but it is now time to slow down and camp out for a while.

The Greek here is ambiguous about a subject for the verb translated “revealed.” Some (primarily older) commentators say the subject should be “work,” as in “each man’s work will be revealed with fire.” Some (primarily more recent) commentators say the subject should be “the day,” as in “the day will manifest itself with fire.” Both can be true and, frankly, I can see it either way.

The principal argument for making the subject “the day” is that if the subject is “work,” this makes the end of the verse redundant—but I disagree with that argument (more on this in a moment). Gordon Fee, who, along with David Garland, favors “the day” as the subject,” would paraphrase this verse, “For the Day of Judgment will expose every person’s workmanship, whether gospel or sophia, because that Day, when it comes, manifests itself with fire; and the fire will test the quality of each person’s work.”

This interpretation typically references Paul’s description of Christ’s return from 2 Thessalonians.

Read 2 Thessalonians 1:7-8.

The problem with this is that for the *pretribulational premillennialist*—which I am, along with most in this class and church—vv7-8 in 2 Thessalonians refer to Christ’s return in wrath and judgment, to deal with unbelievers and to establish His kingdom on earth after the Tribulation—not to either the Rapture of the church or to the judgment of Christians.

This evaluation Paul speaks of will presumably take place at the final judgment, before the “great white throne” (Revelation 20:11-12), the “judgment seat of Christ.”

Read 2 Corinthians 5:9-10.

and the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work.

I also do not see the redundancy mentioned by Garland and Fee. In the first clause Paul uses the verb “revealed.”

revealed = *apokalypso* = from <G575> (*apo*) and <G2572> (*kalupto*); to take off the cover, i.e. disclose :- reveal. ([The last book of the Bible is entitled apokalypsis.](#))

The idea here is, Let’s take the lid off so we all can take a look at what’s inside. Whereas in the second clause he uses the verb “test.”

test = *dokimazo* = from <G1384> (*dokimos*); to test (literal or figurative); by implication to approve :- allow, discern, examine, × like, (ap-) prove, try, analyze.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:27-29. (“examine” = *dokimazo*)

That is, Now that we have revealed what is inside, let’s examine it to see if it is worth keeping. These seem to be two rather different actions, so I do not see the redundancy factor.

By my reading, all of our popular translations seem to favor the “work” as subject, rather than “the day.” And that seems to make the most sense to me.

In our next session we will return to this verse and finish out the paragraph.

Session 30: "Building Materials," part two

1 Corinthians 3:11-15

Preface

Last week, in regard to the judgment of believers, I stated the following:

"This evaluation Paul speaks of will presumably take place at the final judgment, before the 'great white throne' (Revelation 20:11-12), the 'judgment seat of Christ.'" (By the way, don't miss how I hedged my bets by including the word "presumably.")

At the end of the class, a member of our class raised an important point about when this would take place—and I appreciate his doing this, for it caused me to dig deeper for the answer. His position was that Christians would not be judged before the "great white throne"—or the "Final Judgment"—but that there would be a separate time of judgment for them.

Now, I confess freely that I have a hard time keeping straight the details of the end times. For me this is one of those topics I am incapable of storing permanently in my aging brain, but must repeatedly return to my reference books, or even my own notes, to refresh my memory. Making matters more challenging is the fact that not every one agrees on these details; perfectly reputable, honorable scholars will take differing positions on some of these details. Thus it should not be surprising that the answer to the question which of us was correct is... Yes.

Since we are currently in this passage that speaks of a time of evaluation for every believer, in which each Christian's work will be judged, it is important that we sort this out before we move on. And we should not lose sight of the fact that there is, indeed, one correct answer; the Great Judge Himself knows precisely when this will take place (not the date). It is just that different groups within Christendom hold to different opinions—all backed up by Scripture, of course—about the details and the timing.

The "Classical Premillennialism" Position

When I traced back to the source on which I based my remark last week I discovered that it was Wayne Grudem's massive and laudable, *Systematic Theology*. Grudem, while respectfully including explanations for other positions, espouses what he refers to as the "Classical Premillennialism" position. For our purposes here there are principally two elements of this position that pertain:

1. Christians alive when the church age comes to an end will go through the Tribulation.
2. All "judgments" take place during the Final Judgment (great white throne, Revelation 20:11-15).

In preparing for last week's class I momentarily forgot that Grudem held this position, and simply cited his statement (p. 1140) that "there will be a great final judgment of believers and unbelievers. They will stand before the judgment seat of Christ in resurrected bodies and hear His proclamation of their eternal destiny." And then he cites the Revelation 20 passage.

The "Pretribulational Premillennialism" (or "Dispensational Premillennialism") Position

The stated position of this church in its Articles of Faith is the "Pretribulational Premillennialism" (or "Dispensational Premillennialism") position. That is, we believe, again based on Scripture, that:

1. The church will be "raptured" (i.e., removed from earth by Christ Jesus) prior to the Tribulation; this event will mark the end of the church age.
2. There will be several judgments taking place at different times, and that only the unregenerate will be judged at the Final Judgment (Rev 20).

Sidebar (excerpted from our Articles of Faith):

ARTICLE XIV: THE BLESSED HOPE

We believe that **the next great event in the fulfillment of prophecy will be the coming of the Lord in the air to receive to Himself into heaven both His own who are alive and remaining unto His coming, and also all who have fallen asleep in Jesus**, and that this event is the blessed hope set before us in the Scripture, and for this we should be

constantly looking (John 14:1-3; I Corinthians 15:51-52; Philippians 3:20; I Thessalonians 4:13-18; Titus 2:11-14).

ARTICLE XV: THE TRIBULATION

We believe **a time of great tribulation will be loosed upon the earth following the rapture of the church.** It will last for seven years and **will serve to purify Israel as a nation** and bring judgment upon the Gentiles (Daniel 9:27; Revelation 6:1-19:21).

ARTICLE XVI: THE SECOND COMING OF CHRIST

We believe **the tribulation period will be climaxed by the personal, visible return of Christ** to the earthly scene to defeat His enemies, to abolish Gentile authority, to bind Satan, **to judge Israel, and to institute the millennial kingdom**, (Deuteronomy 30:1-10; Isaiah 11:9; Ezekiel 20:33-44, 37:21-28; Matthew 24:15-25,46; Revelation 20:1-3).

ARTICLE XVII: THE MILLENNIAL PERIOD

We believe **a literal, earthly millennial period will be established upon the earth following the tribulation period.** This 1,000 year period has as its foundation in the great unconditional covenants of the Old Testament – Abrahamic (Genesis 12:1-3; 13:14-17, 15:9-18, 17:1-9), the Palestinian (Deuteronomy 30:1-10), the Davidic (2 Samuel 7:10-16; Psalm 89), and the new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34). Christ will be the king of this millennial or Davidic Kingdom with **the nation Israel occupying an exalted position within the kingdom** (Isaiah 11:1-10).

ARTICLE XVIII: THE ETERNAL STATE

We believe **Christ will deliver His millennial kingdom up to the Father** (I Corinthians 15:24), **and thereby will the eternal state begin.** All the just will be taken into eternal bliss, but all the unjust will be ushered to their just reward in the everlasting lake of fire (Revelation 20:11-15). The eternal state will be the fulfillment of God's purpose and plan which has its goal the glory of God (Ephesians 1:6,12,14; Philippians 1:23). (**emphasis added**)

Thus at this point I would conclude that, depending on the position one holds about the end times, both the class member and I were correct. However, in the context of our local body of believers, he was the one more correct. Now, just a word about that third fifty-cent word, *dispensational*. It does not really pertain to our immediate discussion, but we should include it to be thorough.

Dispensationalism

The term “dispensational” refers to the view that God's dealings with men have proceeded through “well-defined time-periods,” or dispensations (New Dictionary of Theology, 1988). This theology includes a number of other criteria, but in the context of the end times it means that, as dispensationalists, we hold to the view that there has and will remain a clear distinction between the church and Israel.

Wayne Grudem: Since [according to dispensational theology] the church is taken out of the world before the widespread conversion of the Jewish people, [they] remain a distinct group from the church... Those who hold this view argue that those prophecies of God's future blessing to Israel will yet be fulfilled among the Jewish people themselves; they are not to be “spiritualized” by finding their fulfillment in the church.

Conclusion

All that being said, we should not lose sight of the most important truth in all this. No matter when or where one believes this will take place, the fact is, it will take place. Every believer will stand before his or her Lord for an examination of the work they have turned in. Some of the works will survive the trial, and a reward will be rendered; other works will not survive, but be consumed by fire, and no reward for them will be forthcoming.

Read 2 Corinthians 5:9-10.

Yet none of this will threaten the believer's eternity with Christ.

v13

Read 1 Corinthians 3:12-13.

each man's work will become evident... and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work.

In the time remaining, and before we even finish the paragraph, I want to cut to the chase on the most important lesson we are to learn from this passage.

It is easy to lose one's way when trying to discern Paul's primary point, because he packs so much imagery into this paragraph:

- laying a foundation
- building on a foundation
- the choice of building materials
- revealing fire and testing fire
- work and wages for the work ("reward")

Where in all this imagery is the principal take-away for us?

Imagine an empty lot in the middle of a city. Now imagine that a large concrete slab has been poured on that lot. It has been perfectly poured, perfectly level, with deep footings all around. It is as strong and dependable as living granite.

Now imagine, off to the side, a large stack of lumber—everything required to frame the new building—and other stacks of materials such as nails and screws, drywall, plaster, shingles and felt—everything needed to complete the building. Last, there is a collection of tools organized near all the building materials.

We now have everything in place for erecting the new church—except for the workers. So now imagine a large group of people—men, women, youth and children—all ready to begin work.

What component in all this is the point of our passage? Is it the foundation? Yes, that is one important point, as Paul states in v11:

For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

Christ must be the foundation of every church; that is important, but it is not the lesson of the overall passage.

Is it the lumber, the framing materials? No.

Is it the other building materials? No.

Is it the tools the workers will use? No.

Is it the people themselves? No.

The fact is, we have not yet seen the most important component in this scene, and the principal lesson of the passage. What do those materials represent in v12: "gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw"? They look like building materials, but that is not what they represent. Look again at the end of v13: "...and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work" (emphasis added).

When each of us stands before the throne of Christ—whenever it is—we will not be judged for the quality of the building materials we have used, nor for the quality of tools we have used in building the church. We will be judged for the work we have turned in for Christ.

Were you earnest and sincere in the work you did in His name?

Did you work for the benefit of Christ's kingdom—or for your own benefit?

Were you serving others—or were you serving yourself?

Were you working for the glory of God—or for your own glory?

In His Sermon on the Mount Jesus gives us three examples of behavior that have an immediate, but not eternal value.

Read Matthew 6:2, 5, 16.

In v1 Jesus summarizes His point: Read v1. That is the negative side. In his letter to the Colossians Paul gives us the positive.

Read Colossians 3:23-24.

Whatever we do *for the Lord* will survive the future testing by fire, and be rewarded.

Session 31: “Building Materials,” part three

1 Corinthians 3:10-15

Preface

Our recent forced hiatus was not just unnaturally long, but textually inconvenient: it occurred in the middle of an important paragraph—a paragraph about the quality of each individual believer’s work in the kingdom of God (v13). With this lengthy interruption in mind, in our last session we cut to the punchline for the paragraph as a whole—but we did not complete our examination of the details of the rest of the paragraph: vv14-15. I want to begin this week with a brief review of what we have covered so far in this passage, then we will continue into the final two verses.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:10-13.

Review

In v10 Paul states that he—by the grace of God—came to Corinth and laid a foundation for the church. He acknowledges that the work in and of the church did not end with that; other preachers, other leaders would follow, but also there would be the work of every person in the church that would be added to the foundation.

Just what was this foundation? Christ Jesus. He is the only foundation for the church and for the individual believer’s life.

Then, in v12, Paul lists six different items that seem, at first, to be building materials chosen by each builder—as if the studs and walls and roof beams of this metaphorical building would consist of “gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, [or] straw”. But in our last session we learned that in v13 Paul is clear that what he is referring to is not the building materials, nor the tools used for the construction, but the quality of the work—and not the overall quality of the church, or the collective work of the body, but “each man’s work.”

v13

In our last session we used v13 to establish the foundational lesson of this important paragraph. Now I would like to dissect v13 for the particulars.

each man’s work will become evident... the quality of each man’s work.

each man’s^{nasb}, **each one’s**^{esv,nkjv}, **every man’s**^{kjv} = *hekastos* = as if a superlative of *hekas* (afar);
each or every :- any, both, each (one), every (man, one, woman), particularly.

Each person’s “work” (service, workmanship, quality of labor, “of what sort each man’s work is”) will be evaluated. It won’t matter who your preacher was, who your pew mates were, or who your spouse was; each person will have to answer for him or her self.

each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it

There is a, perhaps intentional, frightening aspect to this—if not frightening, at least sobering, intimidating. This may have been the reason behind Paul’s choice of words. If we are OK with our Lord evaluating our service in His name, my guess is we would like that evaluation to be conducted quietly, in private—perhaps in a back room of the heavenly throne room, to which He escorts each believer in turn.

But that’s not how Paul describes it.

First he says that our work will become “evident.”

evident = *phaneros* (fan-er-os') = from <G5316> (*phaino*); shining, i.e. apparent (literal or figurative); neuter (as adverb) publicly, externally :- abroad, + appear, known, manifest, open [+ -ly], outward ([+ -ly]).

Do you get the idea that this interview will not be conducted in a private back room? Then Paul adds to this that the day will “show” it.

show = *deloo* (day-lah'-oh) = from <G1212> (*delos*); to make plain (by words); explain :- declare, shew, signify; **"make it clear."**

I believe what Paul is saying with this word *deloo*—especially when followed by *apokalyptō* ("revealed")—is that this moment of judgment for each Christian will be not just openly public, but will be, as W. Mundle puts it, "God's final active revelation." In fact this circles back to the OT Septuagint, where *deloo* "is principally a designation for the divine revelation," and "[in which] it is not possible to differentiate precisely between *deloo* and other synonymous words such as *apokalyptō*."

It could very well be that the apostle wanted to slap the Corinthians—and us—up-side the head with this. He is not talking about salvation—about the same type of judgment that every unbeliever will face—but the fact that every one of us will be called forward to account for our lives in Christ. For every believer is not only called by Christ, but he or she is specifically given personal gifts with which to serve. All is a gift; all is of grace. So the Lord is not out of line to bring us forward and ask, "All right, what did you do with the gifts you received from Me?"

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.

The means by which this judgment will proceed will be "fire."

Sidebar: In Catholicism, v13 is foundational to its concept of "purgatory."

What is purgatory? Purgatory is a state of purification after death. The souls in purgatory possess the divine life and know that they are saved; but they long to see God. They cannot help themselves, but can be helped by the prayers and sacrifices of the faithful on earth and the souls in heaven.

from Life in Christ: Instructions in the Catholic Faith, 1958.

I'll not take the time here to rebut this nonsense, only to point out that the judgment "fire" referred to in our passage is not punitive, nor is it for the purification or refinement of the soul, but to "disclose the quality of work of Christians." The venerable commentary of Jamieson, Fausset and Brown puts it this way:

The *fire* (probably *figurative* here, as the *gold, hay*, etc.) is not *purgatory* (as Rome teaches, that is, *purificatory* and *punitive*), but *probatory*, not restricted to those dying in "venial sin"; the supposed *intermediate class* between those entering heaven at once, and those dying in mortal sin who go to hell, but *universal*, testing the godly and ungodly alike (2Co_5:10; compare Mar_9:49). This fire is not till the *last* day, the supposed fire of purgatory begins *at death*. The fire of Paul is to try the *works*, the fire of purgatory the *persons*, of men. Paul's fire causes "loss" to the sufferers; Rome's purgatory, great gain, namely, heaven at last to those purged by it, if only it were true. Thus this passage, quoted by Rome for, is altogether against, purgatory. "It was not this doctrine that gave rise to prayers for the dead; but the practice of praying for the dead [which crept in from the affectionate but mistaken solicitude of survivors] gave rise to the doctrine" [Whately].

No one can say what this moment will literally, physically be like for the believer or those in attendance, for whatever the process it will be supernatural and divine. But the context has a clear eschatological association; it is associated with the fire of the end times, the parousia, the return of Christ in judgment. The imagery of fire and great heat is prominent in this climactic, earth-shattering event.

Read 2 Thessalonians 1:6-7.

Read 2 Peter 3:10-13.

Read Isaiah 66:15-16.

Obviously not all these passages pertain to the judgment of believers, but they do illustrate how the imagery of fire is so prevalent during the end times.

v14

In vv14-15 the apostle gives us the details of this fiery process. In these two verses Paul describes the verdicts and consequences of this trial by fire.

If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward.

A number of years ago, when we were in the process of selecting the components for our new kitchen, part of that was choosing new cabinets. At one store I looked closely inside a number of the cabinet drawers; the corner joins seemed sloppy, with gaps here and there in the joints. At another store the drawer corners were neatly and precisely dovetailed. Not surprisingly, it was the latter store that got our business. They were “rewarded” for their fine workmanship, and the other store was not.

- The “it” in this sentence (“which he has built on it”) refers back to the foundation (v12: “if any man builds on the foundation...”), which is Jesus Christ.
- “Remains” refers to the survival of work that has passed through the testing fire.
- Note that when it comes to the evaluation of our work, there will be no graded system of A through F, or percentages. It will be “pass/fail”; no gray areas in-between. If the work is consumed by the fire, it fails the test; if it is not consumed, it passes, and a reward will be granted.

Just what will be this “reward”? What form will it take? First we must understand the word translated “reward” in all our versions. Even though all our common translations use the word reward, I think it is an unfortunate rendering. To American ears “reward” means to receive something over and above what one normally would for an act or service that is considered over and above the norm. But that is not what the word means.

reward = *misthos* = apparently a primary word; pay for service (literal or figurative), good or bad :- hire, reward, wages.

Only the *Young's Literal Translation* captures it:

if of any one the work doth remain that he built on it, a wage he shall receive;

Read Matthew 20:8-9. (same word, *misthos*)

Perhaps the word “reward” has been favored here and in other passages to emphasize the fact that this does not represent working for one’s salvation. The reward or wages spoken of here are not for our salvation, nor are they something due us, but they are indeed over and above our salvation. This leaves the question, however, What form will this reward take? Cash? A nicer apartment? Crowns?

Let’s quickly look at two passages for a glimpse into what the Lord may have in mind for our reward or wages. The first is from Christ’s familiar parable about the talents, and what the master granted to the two slaves who showed a profit from what was entrusted to them.

Read Matthew 25:20-21.

It may come as a surprise to you that our reward in heaven may include more responsibilities—i.e., more work! Now let’s hear how the apostle Paul describes his anticipated reward.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20.

For Paul, his anticipated crown would be the blamelessness of the Thessalonian Christians when Christ returns. That is what he was looking forward to: not an eternity of sipping iced

tea on a sunny beach, but an eternity that includes those to whom he preached. That would be his reward.

v15

If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

Remember: While there is true destruction and loss when the verdict is thumbs-down, it all applies to the “work”—not the individual or his salvation. Ultimately what our reward, or wage, will be is the praise of our Savior. In that moment of judgment, the loss of that praise will be loss indeed.

One important lesson from this paragraph is that our heart’s desire should be to always turn in earnest, quality work for the Lord—not to gain or retain our salvation, but to please and bring praise to our Savior. For when we live that way, He is so gracious as to one day share some of that praise with us. And that will be our wage for work well-done.

Session 32: A Holy Temple, part one

1 Corinthians 3:16-17

Preface

One of the things I am coming to appreciate about this letter to the Corinthians is how it has given me a new and deeper understanding of “the church.” How it is to operate, its critical importance in God’s economy, its necessity in the life of every believer. I have certainly read and studied, even taught other NT letters to first century churches, but through this one the Lord has been particularly instructive about the vital, essential role the church plays in God’s plan for man.

I confess that there have been times in my earlier life when you might have heard me utter such foolishness as, “I don’t need to belong to a church. All of nature is my church.” Well, we all have periods of stupidity in our lives, somewhere. Happily for most of us, by God’s grace and longsuffering He keeps us alive long enough to learn from our transient stupidity—to grow out of it and grow up in Him.

But the passage before us in this session does not speak of the practical importance of the church; it does not speak—at least directly—of how we as individuals are better together than apart, how we are to encourage each other as part of a corporate body, how we are to share our lives with each other.

This passage, vv16-17 of Chapter Three, speaks of the holiness of our God, and the holiness of the corporate church that worships Him. The full wonder of these two verses is meant to cause the believer to reconsider, to reevaluate the purpose of our gathering together. Quite frankly, it is meant to take our breath away.

v16

In the paragraph we have just concluded, the counsel—indeed, even end-times prophecy—is directed toward individuals in the church.

- v10: each man (one)
- v11: no man (one)
- v13: each man’s work
- vv14 & 15: any man’s work

On the surface of most of our translations we might think that in the next paragraph, which begins with v16, Paul is continuing that focus on the individual.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:16-17.

Most of us are familiar with what Paul does address to the individual, later in this letter, on the same topic.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:17-20.

But the two “you”s in v16 of our current text are plural; Paul is speaking of the church as a whole. The NIV tries to suggest this.

Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you? (1 Corinthians 3:16 NIV)

Realizing this change in focus, from the individual to the community, has the benefit of smoothing the transition from the previous paragraph to this one. In vv10-15, although he addresses the individual, it is for the purpose of building up the church as a whole with sound construction. Thus v16 continues this by referring to the church now “built” in vv10-15 as “a temple of God.”

Do you not know that...

We prize this book in our hands for its holiness, for it being the very words of God. But we also prize it for its frank humanity. Not just that the characters written about, such as King David, or Moses, or Noah, are revealed warts and all, but at times even some of the individuals that were the Holy Spirit's amanuensis.

I had always read the first few words of v16—"Do you not know that..."—as little more than just another rhetorical flourish by the apostle Paul. But I can see Gordon Fee's point that there is probably more than that going on here. I believe we have evidence here and elsewhere in the letter that Paul was truly exercised over the conduct of the Corinthians, and that the opening phrase of this verse was spoken with real annoyance—even exasperation. Consider:

- In only one other of his letters, in Romans 6:3, does Paul employ that phrase—and that to set up a point that may not have occurred to the Romans: "Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death?" That's a fairly esoteric pronouncement that may have indeed been a brand new concept for the Romans
- But in this letter to the Corinthians he uses the phrase ten times—this is the first occurrence.
- For the most part Paul does this in passages where he is clearly exercised—perhaps even at his wits end with these believers. Take for example the next occurrence in Chapter Five.

Read 1 Corinthians 5:6-8.

I think it is safe to conclude that with his usage of this phrase in this letter we hear Paul's exasperation with the Corinthians—and perhaps more: This could be rather pointed sarcasm. Remember how earlier—especially in the latter half of Chapter One into Chapter Two—Paul spent so much time on the topic of "wisdom" and "foolishness" because of the Corinthians being so enamored with the Hellenistic concept of *sophia*. He could very well be saying here something like, "Are you telling me that you, who boast in being so wise, do not know this?" Jesus himself took much the same line in His conversation with Nicodemus.

Read John 3:9-10.

...you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?

This is an extraordinary statement recognizing one of the more mind-boggling, supernatural aspects of the corporate church.

The word translated "temple" does not refer to the entire temple complex—which would be hieron (hee-er-on')—but specifically to the sanctuary of the temple, or "holy of holies."

temple = *naos* (nah-os') = from a primary *naio* (to dwell); a fane, shrine, sanctuary, temple.
Compare <G2411> (*hieron*).

That is, the imagery Paul is using here of the church is not as the open courtyard of the temple complex, where at any one moment hundreds of people (even Gentiles) could be milling about, conversing, arguing, teaching. Nor is he speaking of the first inner court—the Court of Women—or the next inner court where the priests received and butchered the sacrifices. He is not even speaking of the interior holy place, where only the priests could go. The word he chooses (*naos*) refers specifically to the holiest room in the temple, where Yahweh Himself dwelt on the mercy seat—the room that only the high priest could enter, and then only once per year, to make atonement for the sins of all Israel.

So if we were to superimpose the architecture of the modern church onto that of the Jerusalem temple, we are not speaking of the parking lot, we are not speaking of the foyer; we are speaking of the sanctuary—the room in which we meet with and worship God.

But of course Paul is not speaking of architecture. He is speaking of something mystical, supernatural that takes place when the individuals of the church come together. It is apparent

now that the apostle is still on-topic; he is continuing with the thread he began at least back in the middle of Chapter Two.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:12-13.

And notice how the enigmatic statement in v9 of Chapter Three is now beginning to make more sense.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:9.

And what is that building? The temple of God!

We're not talking about framing materials, bricks and mortar, windows and a roof. We're talking about the mystical union of believers called "the church." And that church is where the Spirit of God "dwells."

dwells = *oikeo* = from <G3624> (*oikos*); to occupy a house, i.e. reside (figurative inhabit, remain, inhere); by implication to cohabit :- dwell. See also <G3625> (*oikoumene*).

I beg you not to pass lightly over this. Remember how in the book of Hebrews Christ is portrayed as filling multiple roles? He is at once the lamb killed—it is His blood that is spilled—and He is the high priest that carries in the blood. Then too, Christ is the mercy seat, upon which the blood is sprinkled (Romans 3:25).

Just so, every believer, individually, is the temple of God, and in that individual temple the Spirit of God lives; He has taken up permanent residence. That is, every believer is the sacred holy of holies; we do not have it—we are it. But at the same time we are, individually, the priest worshipping God and His Christ before the mercy seat.

Then we add to that astounding truth the truth of this verse, which says that the church corporate, because it consists of individual temples becomes, in this sacred union of souls, as it were, a super-sanctuary, a super holy of holies where the Spirit of God dwells. Verse 17 reminds us that "the temple of God is holy."

holy = *hagios* = from *hagos* (an awful thing) [compare <G53> (*hagnos*), <H2282> (*chag*)]; sacred (physical pure, moral blameless or religious, ceremony consecrated) :- (most) holy (one, thing), saint.

Every believer in Christ Jesus for his or her salvation is a holy temple in whom dwells the Spirit of God—much as the Shekhina glory of God dwelt in the Jerusalem temple—until, that is, the rebellion and sin of Israel drove It away (Ezekiel 10).

Let that sink in a for a moment: You and I are holy sanctuaries of God, for in us dwells permanently His Holy Spirit.

Now, I don't know about you, but for me that is a sobering, convicting realization. Verse 16 reminds me of the truth of 6:19, and that verse cuts into me like a knife, for it causes me to recall all the times this holy sanctuary has behaved as if it were not a holy sanctuary.

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. (1 Corinthians 6:17-20)

What is equally convicting is the truth of v16 that when all of these individual temples come together as the church, they become one, larger holy temple, or sanctuary of God. And we, as a body of believers, unified as the church, must be willing to examine and appraise our behavior in and for Christ, both as a body, and as individual members of that body—and especially in what is to be the most sacred activity of a holy temple or sanctuary: the corporate worship of God.

Session 33: A Holy Temple, part two

1 Corinthians 3:16-17

Preface

When I was a little boy growing up in Marshalltown, Iowa, the official name of our church was “Baptist Temple,” with that name emblazoned over its entrance. I always found that a bit odd; every other protestant church in town was called a “church,” not a temple. But now I realize that that name was smack on: the congregation that met in that old and imposing building was indeed “a temple of God.” The group of souls that met in that old (and now gone) building comprised a holy temple unto God.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:16-17.

I confess that earlier this week I struggled with v17. What was it talking about? Who was it talking about? and to what extent? Could a Christian destroy the temple of God? And if he did, would God actually destroy him? That wouldn't fit with the rest of Scripture, would it? Or is it talking about external forces—non-Christian individuals corrupting the church?

I had to find at least partial answers to these before I could really dig into the text. And once again I discovered that there was no consensus. This one says one thing; that one says something else; and far, far too many of them say nothing at all.

Sidebar: For example, Alexander MacLaren (1826-1910), a preacher and man of God whose work I respect, comes to his sermon on 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 and says, in essence, I know the text is talking about the church as the temple of God, but my three points will be about the individual as the temple of God.

Context

In the course of this session we will address all these questions and more. But I would say right now that, as is so often the case, the context of Chapter Three is our best guide to discerning the truth of this text. Put succinctly, the context is the building of the local church.

In vv5-9 Paul speaks of the various leaders who were instrumental in forming the church.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:6.

And he cues up, in v8, the later discussion about the workers in the church receiving their due reward.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:8.

Then Paul emphasizes, in v9, the brotherhood of the leaders, working together with each other as they all work for and under the guidance of God. In this he refers to the members of the church as “God's field.” He searches for another, suitable metaphor and comes up with “God's building.” We can hear the wheels turning in his head after he says that. “And speaking of a building, let me tell you...” So he launches into the next paragraph, vv10-15, which is about all the church—not just the leaders—coming together to build the church on the foundation Paul set in place: the gospel of Jesus Christ.

As we know very well by now, vv10-15 are all about the quality of the work each individual turns in for the church: If it is shoddy work, worth little, then it will count for nothing in The Day and will be burned up in the day of judgment; if it is work of good, lasting quality, it will not be burned up and the individual will be rewarded by the Lord.

In v16 Paul grabs the Corinthians and says quite forcefully, Don't you realize how important this is? This church you are building is a holy sanctuary in which the Lord God dwells!

v17

Now note the progression of thought here. Paul has just spoken at length about, first, the laying of the foundation for the church, then, second, the quality of the workmanship in the building of the church upon this foundation—which includes the warning that anyone who turns in shoddy work will receive no reward from the Lord. Verse 17 takes this one step further, making reference to individuals who do not stop with just turning in poor quality work, but actually work to corrupt, defile, and ultimately destroy the holy temple of God.

The KJVs use “defile” instead of “destroy” at the beginning of the verse (“If any man defile the temple of God”) but the Greek is the same word used in “God will destroy him.”

destroy = *phtheiro* = probably strengthened from *phthio* (to pine or waste); properly to shrivel or wither, i.e. to spoil (by any process) or (genitive) to ruin (especially figurative by moral influences, to deprave) :- corrupt (self), defile, destroy.

This raises a host of questions for the astute reader and student of God’s word. Right off the bat we wonder, at least, What does it mean to “destroy” the temple of God? to what extent? Who is Paul talking about? And perhaps even more troubling, What does it mean that God will “destroy” him? Let’s consider these together, for it is difficult to examine the one—the offense—without examining the other—the punishment.

How should we understand the word “destroy” (phtheiro) in this context.

The commentary by A. T. Robertson and A. Plummer, cited by Gordon Fee, summarizes it well—especially pertaining to God’s response.

R-P: *phtheiro* here...must [not] be pressed to mean annihilation [i.e., non-existence]. Nor, on the other hand, must it be watered down to mean mere physical punishment. The exact meaning is nowhere revealed in Scripture; but terrible ruin and eternal loss of some kind seems to be meant.

Also, the tense of this verb is such that it means “if anyone is, or keeps on, destroying...”

Who is it that would try to “destroy” the sanctuary of God, and be destroyed by God?

We have established that the temple, or sanctuary, of God refers to the communion of saints as the local church. In its midst dwells, just as in every individual believer, the Spirit of God. Thus it is a holy place, a sacred place, and this communion of saints is precious to God.

Read 1 Peter 2:4-5.

A few verses later Peter describes those that make up this sanctuary.

Read 1 Peter 2:9-10.

How can anything so “precious in the sight of God” be destroyed by any man? And who would be doing this? As mentioned earlier, the jury is still out on this. And I do not want to get bogged down in hashing out the fine details of the perseverance of the saints; we did that in Session 26 in our discussion of that inflammatory topic, “carnal Christians.” But we should not forget two things:

- that no man can be certain of the condition of any other man’s soul,
- and that not everyone who passes through the front door of a church building on a Sunday morning is a believer in possession of the Spirit of God.

A perfect real-life illustration of v17 was brought to my attention this week by Albert Mohler in his daily Briefing for August 21, 2018. He cites the extraordinary pace at which secularism is taking over Scotland. Last year the BBC reported that a majority of Scots now say that they are not religious. Just under a quarter, that’s 23.6%, of Scots said they are religious, while 72.4% said they were not. For example, “Last year, Humanist Society Scotland

conducted [more weddings] than any other religious group, including the Church of Scotland” (the Scottish branch of the Church of England).

Sidebar: “Humanism is not synonymous with secularity. It’s not synonymous with secularization. Secularization can take many forms, but when we talk about humanism, we’re talking about a particular form of a more secularized worldview that has specific cognitive, intellectual content, and that places it in what we might consider to be the left edge of the more secular worldviews. Because it’s not just based in something like agnosticism, it’s based in a very clear argument about the absence of God. That is, an atheism that is joined to the elevation of human beings. That’s the very issue of humanism.” (Mohler)

What makes this news pertinent to our text is the reason why Scotland has so dramatically and quickly turned secular. I quote Albert Mohler:

Mohler: Now as we’re looking at Richard Holloway, we’re looking at a man who from 1986 to 2000 was the Bishop of Edinburgh of the Scottish Episcopal Church. Between 1992 and 2000, he was the primus, he was the chief cleric. That is, the chief leader, ministerially speaking, of the Episcopal Church in Scotland. But what we read about...is Bishop Holloway’s “declension of belief.” What does that mean? It means the Bishop’s abandonment of the faith *while* he was the Bishop of Edinburgh, *while* he was the primate of the Scottish Episcopal Church.

During that period, he abandoned not only all the historic doctrines of Christianity, not only any claimed biblical inspiration or authority, but he abandoned, by any normal definition, theism, which means belief in God. So here we’re talking about a nation that has experienced a decline of belief which oddly enough...runs just about parallel to the loss of belief of one of the nation’s most important...most famous religious leaders who’s now mostly famous or infamous for being nonreligious.

Now that he has left the church, Holloway’s every work—whether spoken or written—is meant to undermine, corrupt, defile, even destroy the church. Here are just a few of his book titles.

- *Dancing On The Edge: Faith In A Post-Christian Age* (1997)
- *Godless Morality: Keeping Religion out of Ethics* (2000).
- *Doubts and Loves: What is Left of Christianity* (2000)
- *Looking in the Distance: The Human Search for Meaning* (2004)
- *Waiting For The Last Bus* (2018)

We could debate whether Holloway lost his faith, or never had it in the first place. But for this discussion that is beside the point. To all appearances, Holloway was a believer; he was the head of the church in Scotland and the bishop of Edinburgh, for crying out loud! Yet for the last twenty years he has been doing everything he can to actually destroy the church—and with great success: just look at the frantic pace with which his country is abandoning God.

The temple of God, whether in Jerusalem, Edinburgh, Scotland, or Martensdale, Iowa, is precious to God—and it is to his great peril for any man to do anything that imperils the church. Zane Pratt, dean of The Billy Graham School of Missions and Evangelism, puts it eloquently and succinctly: “You don’t mess with God’s stuff.”

We can’t say with certainty what Paul means by “God will destroy him,” but it is safe to say it will not be pleasant. We can say with confidence that Richard Holloway, in the day he stands before the judgment seat of Christ Jesus, will indeed be “destroyed.”

Fee: The theological question as to whether a true “believer” could be destroyed by God lies beyond Paul’s present concern. In any case, one must be careful not to let the “logic” of one’s system...prejudge the plain meaning of Paul’s words. That these people were members of the Corinthian community seems beyond reasonable doubt; that Paul is also serving up a genuine threat of eternal punishment seems also the plain sense of the text. The theological resolution of such tension will lie either with the concept of the visible church being composed of more than the real church, destined for God’s glory, or with the

supposition that some, who by all appearances do belong to the community of faith, have, for reasons beyond our understanding, opted out and are once again pursuing a path leading to destruction. The net result is the same in either case.

In Conclusion

Any difficulty we have in nailing down the specifics of Paul's warning should not preclude us drawing from it valuable application.

- As believers and part of the holy temple of God—not just in it, but a component of it—we must continually be on guard to protect its integrity from deceitful threats from without and from within.
- As believers and part of the holy temple of God, we must continually be examining our own behavior: Do our words and actions strengthen this sanctuary—or weaken it? Are we encouraging unity—or division? Peace—or strife?

Paul in this text has given us fair and sobering warning.

Read Ephesians 4:11-16.

Session 34: A Cosmic Possession

1 Corinthians 3:18-23

Preface

It is hard-coded in human DNA for each individual to think he or she is smarter than everyone else—not in terms of scholarship or a soaringly high IQ, but in more practical terms of everyday matters.

“The right way to mow the lawn is back and forth, then to change directions the next time you mow.”

“No, the right way to mow the lawn is in a circular fashion, always throwing the grass to the outside.”

“No, you’re both wrong: the correct way to mow the grass is to buy a goat.”

Unfortunately, this “wisdom” does not soften, but typically hardens with age. The older one gets, the more one knows the “correct” way to do just about anything. It’s just the way we are made. The impetus to consider ourselves wiser than others is congenital; like our bent toward sin, it doesn’t have to be learned.

Our text revisits the argument that the only way to be truly wise is to empty ourselves of the wisdom of this world, and be filled with the wisdom of God. As the paragraph begins, Paul seems to be simply reiterating points he has made before—which he is. But by the end of the paragraph, he will have taken what has been discussed before and turned it around to make a brand new point.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:18-23.

vv18-19a

Let no man (one) deceive himself.

In our last session we looked at the made-to-order illustration for v17, the sad tale of the Scottish bishop, Richard Holloway, who, once the leader of the church in Scotland is now bent on destroying it. To illustrate the depths to which Scotland, as a nation, has plummeted in its relationship to God, we noted how as traditional religion and faith has declined in that country, “humanism” has moved in to fill the void and take its place. Humanism is, essentially, the polar opposite of biblical faith; it replaces God as the object of worship with man—human beings—as the object of worship.

Mohler: It’s not just based in something like agnosticism, it’s based in a very clear argument about the absence of God. That is, an atheism that is joined to the elevation of human beings. That’s the very issue of humanism.

There is no greater act of self-delusion than to replace God with man on the throne of one’s life. This is the battle being waged on earth today: If we are not following and worshiping God, we are worshiping ourselves. When any man sets out to “destroy the temple of God” (v17), he is saying, “I am more important than God.” And since God cannot abide idolatry of any sort, He “will destroy him.”

Our self-deception need not be overt and dramatic—such as setting up a shrine to our magnificence in our home—for it to be an offense to God and injurious to our relationship with Him. Just one example from real-life: Every Sunday I can hear people continuing with their conversations while Scripture is being read from the platform. When we do this, we are demonstrating that we consider what we have to say is more important than what God has to say. That is a subtle form of placing ourselves before God. And, in line with the rest of v18, it is a subtle way of saying we are wiser than He.

If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age, he must become foolish, so that he may become wise.

We already know from earlier portions of this letter that the Corinthians did indeed consider themselves to be wise—and more than that, they were followers of earthly wisdom and rhetoric. Paul had already spoken against this.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:3-5.

And he will be hitting this again later in the letter.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:1-3.

Just as possessions that have become idols in our life must be discarded so as to make room for Christ, self-perceived wisdom, wisdom acquired from this world and this age, must be discarded so as to make room for the wisdom that comes with and from God. It is not enough to pray for wisdom from above; we must pray for God to purge us of the wisdom of this age, to make room for His wisdom. In the eyes of this world, by abandoning the wisdom of this age we thus become “foolish,” but that is only because their own “wisdom” has blinded them to the true wisdom of God.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-19.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:22-25.

For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God.

Note that the first sentence of v19 is the reverse of what is said earlier in the letter. There Paul stated that “the word of the cross is foolishness” to the unsaved; In v19 he states that “the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God.” Then Paul grabs a couple of OT references to make his point about the futility of human wisdom.

vv19b-20

For it is written, “He is the one who catches the wise in their craftiness”;

The first is from Job 5. Paul quotes v13 probably from the Hebrew text (rather than the Septuagint, which he often references) for v19 in this letter.

Read Job 5:12-13.

The word picture here is of a hunter setting a trap for his prey, but then getting caught in the trap himself. As David Garland puts it, “They are too clever for their own eternal good and always get trapped in their own schemes and ambitions.” The irony here is, of course, that when taken as a whole, the book of Job itself is a poster child for the folly of human wisdom getting trapped by its own ignorance, as the lamenting Job’s collection of “wise” friends dispense their advice to him freely (and at length)—only to be sharply rebuked by the Lord God at the end of the book.

Read Job 38:1-2.

While the Lord speaks directly to Job (perhaps because Job was the only one who spoke directly to the Lord), it is also true that everyone involved in these lengthy exchanges “darken[ed] counsel by words without knowledge.”

and again, “the lord knows the reasonings of the wise, that they are useless.”

The second quotation used by Paul is from Psalm 94.

Read Psalm 94:10-12.

Sidebar: Paul changes “thoughts of man” (*anthropon*) to the “thoughts (reasonings) of the wise” (*sophon*), but this does no violence to the original text, since earlier in Psalm 94 the Lord calls the humans “senseless” and “stupid ones” (v8).

v21a

So then let no one boast in men.

Paul has not yet left the topic with which he opened this letter, where he immediately addressed one of the primary failings of those in the Corinthian church with,

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? (1 Corinthians 1:11-13)

Earlier in this chapter he also returned to it.

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. (1 Corinthians 3:3-5)

And now, obviously of the opinion that he needs to keep driving the nail home, he says it again. "Let no one boast in men." There is a wonderful passage in the prophecy of Jeremiah that speaks to this.

Read Jeremiah 9:23-24.

vv21b-23

Now for the twist. Paul has just concluded his multi-chapter campaign against the Corinthians' practice of grouping around allegiance to human individuals with the direct and succinct, "So then let no one boast in men." In the second half of v21 he states the "why" for this; he then, in the concluding verses of Chapter Three, explains what he means by this "why."

For all things belong to you,

One might rightly expect the apostle to follow the previous sentence with what he did in Chapter One: "as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'" (v31) His is going to say this, in a manner of speaking, but he begins with what on the surface seems a rather odd statement: "For all things belong to you." (plural "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,

As if to say, I'm not kidding, he expands this to encompass everything there is: their church leaders, the environment and planet, life and death, the present and the future—all things that are, have been, and will be—are theirs now.

It's not often I take issue with Charles Haddon Spurgeon. Here is his response to this.

C. H. Spurgeon: Children of God, all men are yours, to serve your highest benefit. All ministers and leaders in Christ are yours to seek your souls' good. Treat them as bees do flowers, and gather honey from them all. "All things are yours."

But that is short-sighted, and just nibbles at the edge of the ramifications of this passage. This is cosmic! Paul wants us to see life as *he* sees life: through the believer's life in Christ Jesus. When one realizes who and what Christ is, and that believers are literally "in" Him, this should change one's perspective on everything. Let's trace this. Turn please to Ephesians 1.

Read Ephesians 1:9-10.

Read Colossians 1:16-20

Read Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12.

Paul invariably sees all of life in eschatological terms—through the prism of our eternal, irrevocable salvation in Christ. And I can do no better than offer what Gordon Fee has to say about this.

Fee: In the form of the cross God has planted his flag on planet Earth and marked it off as his own possession; hence the “world” is his. So also with the whole of existence (“life” and “death”), which are immediately placed into eschatological perspective (“the present and the future”). Because in Christ Jesus both “life” itself and therefore “the future” are ours, “death” is ours as well, as is “the present.” *We die, but “life” cannot be taken from us; we live the life of the future in the present age, and therefore the present has become our own possession...* This is the glorious freedom of the children of God. They are free lords of all things, not bound to the whims of chance or the exigencies of life and death. The future is no cause for panic; it is already theirs. In light of such expansive realities, how can the Corinthians say, “I am of Paul, or Apollos”? That is too narrow, too constricted a view. Apollos—and Paul, and Peter, and the whole universe—is/are yours. You do not belong to them; they belong to you, as your servants, because “you—and they—are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s. (emphasis added)

Verse 23 gives us the final, all-encompassing reason for everything that has been stated thus far. How can we say that all things belong to us? All we have to do is trace our connection to Almighty God, sovereign of the universe.

Here is Father God, and Christ Jesus, Son of God, who “belongs to” (“is”) His Father. Christ is God, and Christ is of God. So now we have the Son who belongs to the Father (Romans 6:10). Who do we belong to? Who are we of? Because of the cross, we belong to the Son (Romans 14:7-8)—we are of Christ Jesus because we are “in” Christ Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Session 35: From Field to Building to House

1 Corinthians 4:1-2

Preface

In v9 of Chapter Three, Paul writes, “We are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, God’s building.” Now, as we begin Chapter Four, we move from field and building to house.

Perhaps one of the most misunderstood jobs in this world is that of the pastor of a church. First, it is not really a “job,” but a calling. A true pastor is called by Christ, as much as Saul of Tarsus was called by Christ Jesus. A true pastor takes this role because not to would be an act of disobedience to his Lord. But it is, nonetheless, a peculiar calling:

- the pastor is hired by the church, but does not, ultimately, answer to it;
- he serves the church—but only if it is served in his service to Christ;
- the church pays his salary, but its members are to answer to him (Hebrews 13:17);
- the church can “fire” the pastor, but it cannot remove his calling.

Some pastors—far too many—let their position turn them in a wrong direction:

- their authority over the body goes to their head and they become a dictator;
- they forget—or worse, deny—the authority of Christ over them;
- instead of preaching God’s word, they preach themselves, seeking glory for themselves rather than Christ Jesus.

God’s word is very often the best commentary for itself. It is filled to overflowing with real-life illustrations of its counsel and precepts for the follower of Christ. And our passage today—1 Corinthians 4:1-2—is illustrated perfectly by the life of Joseph, son of Jacob. Let’s begin by reading the first paragraph of Chapter Four.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:1-5.

vv1-2

The statement in v1 centers on two words: “servants” and “stewards,” and the statement in v2 adds a third: “trustworthy” or “faithful.” These descriptive terms are applied to Paul and the other leaders, past and present, of the Corinthian church. The opening phrase, “Let a man regard us in this manner...,” points not to what he will be writing in this chapter, but backward to what he wrote in the previous.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:5-6.

And from the passage in our previous session, where Paul traces ownership of all thing from Father God to the church:

Read 1 Corinthians 3:21-23.

And so Paul begins Chapter Four by stating that everyone should think of these leaders in the way previously described, first as “servants.”

Sidebar: Remember, neither Paul nor the Holy Spirit had anything to do with where the chapter break falls—and this one is poorly located. Verse numbers and chapter breaks were added later simply to help organize Scripture for our use. The words are inspired; the breaks are not.

servants

hyperetes (hoop-ay-ray'-tace) = from <G5259> (*hupo*) and a derivative of *eresso* (to row); an under-oarsman, i.e. (general) subordinate (assistant, sexton, constable) :- an underling, minister, officer, servant.

Literally this word means (and originally referred to) an under- (*hypo*) oarsman or rower (*eretes*) which would refer to a lowly galley slave at the very bottom of the pecking order. But over time the word typically came to refer to a person with his own responsibilities who takes orders from a superior. Hence, most of the instances of this word in the NT are translated “officer,” as in John 7:32.

The Pharisees heard the crowd muttering these things about Him, and the chief priests and the Pharisees sent officers to seize Him.

A military officer has responsibilities of his own, over the men or women in his charge, but he ultimately follows the orders that come down to him from a superior officer. There is one more distinction between this and the other common word for servant: *duolos*. A *hyperetes* is a free man, and in some cases might receive a reward or payment for his services—just as Paul earlier described the future rewards awaiting the leaders of the church

Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor. (1 Corinthians 3:8)

Don’t miss the clarifying prepositional phrase, “of Christ.” It is true that pastors, ministers, elders and teachers serve those in the flock—but only in so much as they serve their Lord. It is when the pastor begins serving the flock instead of serving Christ that things start to go south.

We can draw illustration for each of these three qualities from just one chapter in the life of Joseph—Genesis 39—his life of service in the household of Potiphar, captain of the pharaoh’s bodyguard in Egypt. Joseph was a servant, a slave: he had been purchased by the Egyptian from the Ishmaelites (or Midianites) who had bought him from his brothers.

Read Genesis 39:3-4. (keep a finger here; we will be back)

So Joseph became an *hyperetes*, a servant with responsibilities as the overseer of the captain’s household and household staff, but he still took orders from his master, Potiphar. Just so, in the church the pastor and leaders have charge over the flock—but they take their orders not from the flock, but from the Head of the church (Ephesians 5:23): Christ Jesus.

stewards

Paul goes on to say that not only are he and his colleagues servants, but they are also “stewards”—and once again we have a clarifying prepositional phrase: stewards of what? “stewards of the mysteries of God.”

oikonomos (oy-kon-om'-os) = from <G3624> (*oikos*) and the base of <G3551> (*nomos*); a house-distributor (i.e. manager), or overseer, i.e. an employee in that capacity; by extension a fiscal agent (treasurer); figurative a preacher (of the gospel) :- chamberlain, governor, steward; “used for the chief household slave, who must give account to the master” (Garland).

Based on the definition for the word, one might have expected Paul to write that he and his fellows were stewards of the body, or stewards of the house of God. That would certainly be in-line with the illustration of Joseph.

Read Genesis 39:5-6a.

Instead of steward of the house, Paul writes, “stewards of the mysteries of God.” Now, it is true that the beneficiaries of this stewardship are the members of the house of God, but, just as with “servants,” these stewards answer not to the flock, but to the Head of the house, the Great Shepherd.

Mysterion, as used in the NT, refers to something previously hidden, but now revealed in Christ; in this context Paul would be referring to the gospel, which was the mysterious indeed,

“Christ crucified.” To put this in context for us today, the “mysteries of God” would be the fullness of God’s word, including the gospel. The pastor of the church is to be a “house-distributor” of God’s word—understanding it, knowing it, speaking it, teaching it, preaching it and, not least, living it.

The rather pointed lesson to the Corinthians is that these leaders they have been lauding, following, boasting about—“I am of Paul,” “I of Apollos,” “I of Cephas”—should not be placed on pedestals, but “be perceived as household servants of God” (Garland).

trustworthy, faithful

pistos = from <G3982> (*peitho*); object trustworthy; subject trustful :- believe (-ing, -r), faithful (-ly), sure, true; *by being faithful to his master and the master's possessions the good steward proved himself worthy of trust.*

The ancient steward found himself in a unique situation. As David Guzik points out, “In relation to the master of the house, the steward was a slave, but in relation to the other slaves, the steward was a master.” By the very nature of the job, the master had to have a trustworthy steward.

Adam Clarke: The steward... was the master’s deputy in regulating the concerns of the family, providing food for the household, seeing it served out at proper times and seasons, and in proper quantities. He received all the cash, expended what was necessary for the support of the family, and kept exact accounts, for which he was obliged at certain times to lay before the master.

And Joseph was certainly a faithful, trustworthy steward of Potiphar’s household—even in a situation in which a lesser man would have compromised his master’s trust.

Read Genesis 39:6b-9.

Don’t miss that unexpected twist at the end of v9, for it ties in perfectly with our text in 1 Corinthians. Joseph has expounded at length about his obligations to an earthly master who has placed his trust in him, but in the final analysis, if he did something to destroy that trust—and sleeping with the master’s wife would certainly do the job—he would be sinning not against Potiphar, but God.

King David said the same thing after he slept with Bathsheba and had her husband Uriah killed. Did he sin against them? No,

**For I know my transgressions,
And my sin is ever before me.
Against You, You only, I have sinned
And done what is evil in Your sight,
So that You are justified when You speak
And blameless when You judge. (Psalm 51:3-4; emphasis added)**

In human terms, the pastor and other leaders of a church must be faithful to its members, reliably ministering to them. But really that is only the temporal, visible evidence of their faithfulness to their Master. They can appear to be trustworthy to the flock, but if they are not first faithful to their Lord, it is all of the flesh.

In this passage the church leaders are portrayed as servants of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. Their first responsibility, before anything else, is to the Master and His word.

Session 36: The Best Judge

1 Corinthians 4:3-5

Preface

As I have aged I have come to have a profound respect for the military in our country—especially since it became all-volunteer. In my youth, however, when I was in the service from late 1969 to 1973 (when one was not required to volunteer), I had a far different view of and attitude about the military—as reflected in one performance evaluation in the middle of my brief career.

1 Apr 1972, for Period 1 Oct 1971 to 1 Apr 1972:

Petty officer Lampel is a barely adequate instrumentalist. He has shown little or no professional progress as an instrumentalist or Petty Officer. Hobbies and outside interests taking precedence over his service responsibilities has created this situation. Petty Officer Lampel lacks initiative and must be constantly reminded to complete his assigned tasks. The Ratee takes little pride in his appearance and shows no effort on his part to improve. He is accepted in the unit but contributes nothing to good morale.

Ironically, this contrasted with the glowing, boiler plate from President Richard Nixon in his Certificate of Appreciation I received upon my (barely) Honorable Discharge in 1973, which reads in part,

I extend to you my personal thanks and the sincere appreciation of a grateful nation for your contribution of honorable service to our country. You have helped maintain the security of the nation during a critical time in its history with a devotion to duty and a spirit of sacrifice in keeping with the proud tradition of the military service.

Well, in all honesty, the author of my periodic evaluation had a better bead on my performance than my Commander-in-Chief in Washington. But that was in regard to the military. In matters discussed in the first five verses of Chapter Four, the evaluating roles are reversed. The apostle Paul makes the point that as a servant of Christ and “steward of the mysteries of God,” the individuals with which he interacted on a daily basis were least equipped to evaluate his “performance.” Only his “Commander-in-Chief” could do that.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:1-5.

v3

As we will see later in this chapter, Paul has a reason beyond what we see on the surface for this discussion in vv3-5.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:6.

But to me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you.

I don't often say this, but for the passage before us, the NASB is truly the best translation. First, along with the rest of our popular translations—except the NIV—Paul states that “it is a very small thing” that the members of the Corinthian church evaluate his ministry. To my ears the NIV is too dismissive: “I care very little...” That injects a snarkiness that I do not believe is there. The JFB commentary says that the Greek literally means, “it amounts to a very small matter.” “...not that I despise your [examining of me], but as compared with God's, it almost comes to nothing” (JFB).

Secondly, all the other popular translations use the word “judge” for the three times the Greek *anakrino* is used, whereas the NASB uses the more accurate “examine(d)”. It's not that “judged” is so utterly wrong, but it can be misleading.

anakrino = from <G303> (*ana*) and <G2919> (*krino*); properly to scrutinize, i.e. (by implication) investigate, interrogate, determine :- ask, question, discern, examine, judge, search;
 “This word does not so much refer to a verdict that has been handed down, as to the process of ‘examining’ that leads to the verdict” (Fee).

In Chapter Two the same word was translated “appraised” or “discerned.”

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. (1 Corinthians 2:14; emphasis added)

or by any human court;

This is literally, “man’s day,” similar to when we might say, our “day in court.” But it also contrasts with v5, where Paul speaks of The Day, the day when

the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men’s hearts

in fact, I do not even examine myself.

The apostle is not saying that he holds in contempt any opinions, criticism or praise, that might come from those in the flock. It is just that human evaluation from any quarter is worth little—including his own.

Now, we must keep this in context. This is not refuting his own counsel to Timothy regarding outward sin.

Read 1 Timothy 5:20-22.

Certainly matters of sin and rebellion are to be addressed, evaluated and judged. Christ’s command still stands regarding that.

Read Matthew 18:15. (etc.)

But that is not what our text is talking about. Can any one of us know with certainty that the person next to us is being faithful to his or her calling? Can any one of us know the true condition of his or her heart? In fact, as Paul says, even we are not the best evaluator of ourselves.

v4

For I am conscious of nothing against myself,

In the self-examination of human beings we tend to gravitate to one extreme or the other. We either conclude, with Paul, that we can discover no fault in ourselves—as King David said in Psalm 19, “Who can discern his errors?” (Psalm 19:12a)—or we go to the other extreme, finding no good in ourselves and constantly berating ourselves over our failings

yet I am not by this acquitted; (justified)

What a pointed and eloquent qualifier Paul quickly adds! Human examination—even self-examination—in this regard is irrelevant. It is flawed. It is undependable. It is shaded by extraneous factors.

And, of course, we can’t help but extend this beyond our text. There is nothing in ourselves, nothing on this earth that acquits us before a righteous God. Our evaluation of ourselves in all things is not just irrelevant, but utterly futile. So where can we go for a right and true evaluation of our stewardship?

but the one who examines me is the Lord.

In v1 Paul establishes that he and his fellows are not servants of the church, but “servants of Christ.” Not only was Christ Jesus the only one equipped to evaluate their stewardship—the only one capable of reading their heart and intentions—but He was their immediate boss and supervisor. Christ Jesus was the only appropriate one to examine them.

v5

After laying the groundwork by using himself and Apollos—and, by extension, all the church leaders—as examples, Paul arrives at his reason for following this line. It is not difficult

to read between the lines of this letter and conclude that in varying degrees many in the Corinthian congregation were being critical of the apostle who founded their church.

If they are choosing sides by favoring one leader over another, which was Paul's opening issue—"each one of you says, 'I follow Paul,' or 'I follow Apollos,' or 'I follow Cephas,' or 'I follow Christ'"—then it only follows that they are being critical for one reason or another of those they do not prefer. In addition, the apostle spends a lot of ink in this letter defending himself. There has to be a reason that he felt that was necessary.

Later in this letter he will state it flat out.

Read 1 Corinthians 9:1-4. (etc.)

Here the word "examine," in v3, is the same as in our text, the Greek *anakrino*; the only exception is the NIV with "sit in judgment."

So there must surely be a little bit of the personal in the order for the Corinthians to "stop reaching a verdict before the appointed time" in v5.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:5.

Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time,

passing judgment^{nasb}, **pronounce judgment**^{esv}, **judge nothing**^{niv, kjv} = *krino* = properly to distinguish, i.e. decide (mentally or judicially); by implication to try, condemn, punish :- avenge, conclude, condemn, damn, decree, determine, esteem, go to (sue at the) law, ordain, call in question, sentence to, think.

And again, this is not a blanket statement about making no judgments about anything. Later he will expect them to be able to, among other things, judge disputes between brothers within the community (v6:5).

Gordon Fee: The kinds of "judgments" that must cease are those they are currently making about Paul and his ministry, judgments that reflect their lack of genuine eschatological perspective.

but wait until the Lord comes

As Paul stated at the end of v4, there is only one individual qualified to judge his ministry, and to examine the contents of his heart: the Lord. And there will come a day when the Lord will return to judge everyone. So he says they are to wait. And what will He—the Lord—do?

who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts;

This last is written in the form of "Semitic parallelism," and Fee warns against over-analyzing it. Paul is employing poetical form to state the same thing two ways. That same thing is that only the Lord can dig beneath the surface, where humans cannot see; only He can illumine that which has been kept in darkness: "the motives of men's hearts."

and then each man's praise will come to him from God.

Here Paul puts a positive spin on the result of such end-time "illumination," and revealing of the content of men's hearts. We know that the opposite result will pertain for many.

Application

What lessons can we draw from this to apply to ourselves? Our text includes admonition and warning, as well as encouragement. Which portions of the text are which to the individual will be determined by his or her role in the body.

To the average parishioner,

- Stop comparing your ministers to others that may be more dynamic or "charismatic." The Lord's criterion will be whether or not his servants have been

found trustworthy in their stewardship and ministering of His word. And we are to do the same: Are they faithful to God's word? That is the only question.

- Don't even try to evaluate intentions or the condition of your leaders' hearts. You won't be able to know anyway.
- The good news is that there is a judge who will know. If any of your leaders have been hiding their true intentions in the shadows, there will come a day when that is all revealed. So you don't need to worry about it.

To the pastor and other church leaders,

- Your service is, first, to the Lord, and your responsibility is to be a faithful steward of His "mysteries"—His holy word.
- The evaluation, examining, and judging of you by others will inevitably come—but it means nothing in the scope of eternity. Serve the Lord.
- However, know that that same Lord will indeed examine and judge you—and His evaluation and verdict count. Everyone will be judged, but your level of trustworthiness will be held to a higher standard.

None of this means that we are to turn a blind eye—i.e., to not examine or judge—those leaders who are obviously not being faithful to their calling, who are operating in the flesh. We are to be on-guard against those false "prophets."

Read 2 Peter 2:1-3.

And even those of us with pure motives must remember that one day we will stand before Christ's seat of judgment to be called to account for our stewardship of His word.

Read James 3:1.

Session 37: Who do You Think You Are?

1 Corinthians 4:6-7

Preface

Ever since the first chapter of this letter, the apostle Paul has been bobbing and weaving like a holy boxer, moving about, occasionally landing a blow, employing first one metaphor then another (e.g., first field, then building, then house), sometimes naming names but at other times leaving things general. Now, beginning with v6, he throws out allusions and metaphors; Paul takes a breath, rears back, then moves in for the knockout punch.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:6-7.

J. B. Phillips paraphrase:

I have used myself and Apollos above as an illustration, so that you might learn from what I have said about us not to assess man above his value in God's sight, and may thus avoid the friction that comes from exalting one teacher against another. For who makes you different from somebody else, and what have you got that was not given to you? And if anything has been given to you, why boast of it as if it were something you had achieved yourself?

v6

Now these things, brethren...

Depending on who you ask, the “these things” that opens v6 could refer to just the previous five verses, everything stated so far from the beginning of the letter, or verses 3:5 through 4:5—which is probably the preferred reference.

- In 3:5 to 3:8 he likens he and Apollos to field hands working together in “God’s field.”
- Then at the end of v8 Paul segues from the metaphor of field to the metaphor of a building through v15.
- From v16 to v23 he uses the imagery of each believer being a spiritual house or sanctuary.
- Still using himself and Apollos—and, by extension, all church leaders—Chapter Four opens with Paul moving from the sanctuary to the courtroom, in a discussion of who is qualified to examine his stewardship, and then pass judgment on it.

So it makes sense that v6 refers back to that extended passage, but probably not all the way back to the beginning of the letter.

I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes,

The NASB and KJVs help us understand here that what Paul is saying is that he has been varying (changing the outward appearance) his “figures” or metaphors, inserting himself and Apollos as Guinea pigs, as it were, to illustrate his points.

so that in us you may learn not to exceed what is written,

Sadly you may have grown accustomed to this teacher occasionally declaring that he is stumped by a particularly difficult passage. I am not comfortable doing it, and I try to avoid such conclusions, but it happens from time to time nonetheless.

What can be especially unnerving is when every commentator expounds on the difficulty of a passage to the extent that regarding this phrase—translated in the NASB, “so that in us you may learn not to exceed what is written,”—even the venerable Gordon Fee declares, “Some see [this] as so obscure that they despair of finding its meaning.” Then after citing several options for interpretation, Fee uncharacteristically concludes, “On this matter we must finally plead ignorance. Here is a case where the apostle and his readers were on a wavelength that will probably be forever beyond our ability to pick up.”

This problem with the original Greek is illustrated by the different translations at our disposal—each of which says something slightly different from the others. The Greek is, literally, “in order that you may learn in us the not beyond what is written.”

Both Garland and Fee point to the evidence that the phrase begins with the standard designation for referring to a quotation, so let us settle on their conclusion that with this phrase Paul refers to his earlier OT citations (most of which are drawn from his copy of the Septuagint)—especially those that speak to arrogance and pride. So, as the NIV has it, “Do not go beyond what is written,” essentially means, Live according to the Scripture I have quoted for you earlier. And what would that be?

1:19 — For it is written, “I WILL DESTROY THE WISDOM OF THE WISE, AND THE CLEVERNESS OF THE CLEVER I WILL SET ASIDE.” (Isaiah 29:14)

1:31 — so that, just as it is written, “LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD.” (Jeremiah 9:22-23 LXX)

2:9 — 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.” (Isaiah 64:4 LXX)

3:19-20 — 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.” (Job 5:13 and Psalm 93:11 LXX)

Although not all of these speak directly to the argument that follows in Chapter Four, as R. B. Hays writes, “The witness of Scripture places a strict limit on human pride and calls for trust in God alone.” This was the primary problem in Corinth: their pride and arrogance, and in their vaulted opinion of themselves and the eloquent “wise” in their region they were stepping outside and beyond the dictates of God’s word.

so that no one of you will become arrogant in behalf of one against the other.

If we are to keep this in context, and respect the original text, Paul here refers to himself and Apollos—Paul wrote, literally, “the one over against the other,” and note how the verse begins. So this could be rendered, as Fee does, “Then you will not be puffed up in being a follower of one of us over against the other.” (emphasis added)

As Paul’s citation from Jeremiah states, if we are going to boast, let us boast in the Lord. Not men. And this is a deliciously wry choice of words by Paul, considering the recipients of this letter.

arrogant^{nasb}, **puffed up**^{kjvs, esv}, **take pride in**^{niv} = *physioo* (foo-see-ah'-o) = from <G5449> (*phusis*) in the primary sense of blowing; to inflate, i.e. (figurative) make proud (haughty) :- puff up; full of hot air.

The Corinthians consider themselves to be *pneumatikoi*, spiritual ones, which derives from *pneuma*, which also means wind. It is as if Paul is saying, You think you are so wise, so spiritual, but in your arrogance and pride you are just blowhards full of hot air.

v7

Now, in v7, the apostle launches into one of his most direct, dramatic and accusative soliloquies in the form of three rhetorical questions put to the church that will effectively reveal their self-centered behavior. In v7 one can clearly see his bony finger punching holes in their corporate chest (and, by the way, letting out some of that hot air).

For who regards you as superior?

Every other version than the NASB translates the Greek *diakrinei* as “different” or “differ”—which is not necessarily wrong; that is what the word means, in one manner or another.

different, superior = *diakrinei* = from <G1223> (*dia*) and <G2919> (*krino*); to separate thoroughly i.e. (literal and reflexive) to withdraw from, or (by implication) oppose; figurative to discriminate (by implication decide), or (reflexive) hesitate :- contend, make (to) differ (-ence), discern, doubt, judge, be partial, stagger, waver.

But the context makes it reasonably obvious that the apostle is not just saying that the vain and prideful Corinthians are “different.” And they do not just think they are better than other Christian communities: every one of them thinks he is better than his pew mate! Why? Because they are becoming arrogant toward each other as they, each in his or her profound “wisdom,” chooses between their teachers, Paul and Apollos (v6). So the context, in my opinion, validates the NASB “superior.”

This first question points to their arrogant presumptuousness. Remember, the Corinthians are examining, judging, and choosing between—favoring one over the other—“servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God” (v1). So a good paraphrase of this first question of v7 would be, Who in the world do you think you are, anyway? What kind of self-delusion is it that allows you to put yourself in a position to judge another person’s servant? (Fee)

What do you have that you did not receive?

The second question points to the Corinthians’ ingratitude. And Paul follows it immediately with a third question that drives home his point.

And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?

The best translations for this question’s opening phrase—“And if you did receive it”—are the NKJV and ESV, which best capture the intent of the original: “but if indeed,” because the third question assumes that the answer to the second is “nothing.”

NKJV: Now if you did indeed receive it...

ESV: If then you received it...

My thoughts take me back to moments of national or personal tragedy: a devastating flood or hurricane, collapse of a building killing many, an innocent child brutally murdered, an entire family killed in an accident. Invariably at such times there will be those who shake their fists at God, demanding to know why He did or permitted such a thing. There will be those who loudly proclaim, “A loving God would not permit such a thing to happen.” Thus their point is, God is either responsible for such tragedies, or is complicit in allowing it to take place—that is, he has the power to stop it, but didn’t.

But then these same people who blame a “loving God” for every tragedy, never seem to give Him the credit when things go well! Which is it? Is God in control, or no? If He is not responsible for the pleasant things in your life, then He cannot be responsible for the unpleasant things.

The truth is, He is in control of everything; what we are, who we are, and what we have is all from Father God. And one of those gifts is grace, of which the Corinthians were sorely lacking. They were full of themselves, and instead of being humbly grateful for what God had given them, they boasted in what they had done for themselves.

Let’s close by reading the Lord’s words to Cyrus, king of Babylon, when He called upon this unbeliever to release Israel to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and the city’s walls.

Read Isaiah 45:5-7.

Session 38: Having Already Attained, part one

1 Corinthians 4:8-10

Preface

Please turn to Matthew 5.

How are we to consider ourselves? As followers of Christ, how are we to think of ourselves? This is not the equally important question, How are we to live?—that is, What choices should we be making? What actions would correspond to our faith?—but this question is, What should be our mindset? If we could turn our gaze around 180 degrees and see within our own mind and heart, what would we see? More to the point, What should we see?

Before we examine our passage in 1 Corinthians, we need to establish our “baseline”: Against what will we later measure the mindset (and, of course, behavior) of the believers in Corinth as described by the apostle Paul? I would like us to fill our minds with Christ’s ideal answer to that last question—What should we see in our mind and heart?—found in the introduction to His Sermon on the Mount, which we refer to as The Beatitudes: God’s counsel for living other-worldly. We will look at just the few Beatitudes that are pertinent to our text in 1 Corinthians.

The Beatitudes

Philo of Alexandria wrote, “Only the deity attains to blessedness; He alone is blessed. Men share in this only in so far as the divine nature penetrates the creation.” As Philo tells us, the source of true blessedness is only God Himself; we only know and experience the true joy of blessedness as we live in close communion with Him. So Christ’s bullet-point definition of blessedness becomes our baseline, our goal by which every other standard is measured—and found wanting.

v6: hunger

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”

If we are hungry and thirsty, what are we hungry and thirsty for? If we are not hungry, what then has already filled us? Jesus says, in v6, that those who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness are not just blessed; they are satisfied, or filled. It then follows that if we are not hungry for righteousness, we must be filled with something else—something that is not righteousness.

v3: poor

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

The poverty spoken of in the Beatitudes has nothing to do with any lack of funds.

Albert Barnes: To be poor in spirit is to have a humble opinion of ourselves; to be sensible that we are sinners, and have no righteousness of our own; to be willing to be saved only by the rich grace and mercy of God; to be willing to be where God places us, to bear what he lays on us, to go where he bids us, and to die when he commands; to be willing to be in his hands, and to feel that we deserve no favor from him.

To be “poor in spirit” is to understand that in ourselves we are utterly unworthy before God, deserving nothing, but that through Christ we are granted the right to stand before Him with confidence. To be poor in this world is to have an empty purse; to be spiritually poor is to have one’s heart filled with God rather than self.

Then make note what their reward is for this holy submission: “the kingdom of heaven.”

v8: pure

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”

Blessed are those who have not committed violence with either their hands or their heart. Blessed are those whose lives are marked by honesty, morality, shunning that which is evil or

self-serving. Blessed are those who tell the truth—who do not say one thing with their lips, while holding something else in their heart.

Those who are pure in heart will “see God.” This is more than just a promise of heaven; this means that even now, before heaven, the pure in heart see God as He truly is. They are able to “discern clearly” who He is, and see Him in His word.

v5: *gentle*

“Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.”

To be gentle, or meek, does not mean one is a wimp, nor does it mean one is a ninety-eight pound weakling.

Charles Swindoll: “Gentle” is strength under control. It is used of a stallion that’s been broken: still strong, all the muscle structure still in that body, but under control. With a pull of the reins that horse obeys.

v10: *persecuted*

“Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Barnes: We are not to seek persecution. We are not to provoke it by strange sentiments or conduct; by violating the laws of civil society, or by modes of speech that are unnecessarily offensive to others. But if, in the honest effort to be Christians, and to live the life of Christians, others persecute and revile us, we are to consider this as a blessing. It is an evidence that we are the children of God, and that he will defend us.

These verses from the Beatitudes give us our baseline; this should be our mindset. Now let’s read our passage. [Please turn to 1 Corinthians 4.](#)

Paul now sets out to convict the Corinthians by reciting, in a manner dripping with irony and sarcasm, how the Corinthians think of themselves—what is, apparently, in their hearts.

[Read 1 Corinthians 4:8-10.](#)

The Corinthians have much in common with the Laodiceans, as described by Christ Jesus in John’s revelation.

[Read Revelation 3:17-18.](#)

How Paul described this church at the beginning of the letter—how 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” (1:5-7)—was the truth, but instead of instilling humility, it had fed a sense of self-satisfaction and superiority in them.

v8

You are already filled, you have already become rich,

These three conditions describe one state of being, but let’s also consider them individually. First Paul says that the Corinthians are already “filled.” This is a reference to the condition of their belly, and means that they are not just essentially filled, but crammed full, i.e. gluttoned or sated. It is the picture of someone sprawled on the living room sofa, loosening his belt after the Thanksgiving feast.

Why would this be a put-down? What’s wrong with being full? To answer that we need to leave our time and step back into the Middle East of the first century. Our contemporary life-style and eating habits—especially here in the United States—bear no resemblance whatsoever to those in the time and place Paul was writing this. With some exceptions, of course, even lower income individuals and families have more than enough to eat. Our typical standard is that when we experience the slightest twinge of hunger, we immediately grab something to eat (and often more than we need), whereas the typical standard for the average

person in the first century would be to pretty much always be hungry, and meals rarely accomplished more than just meeting essential needs.

So in that time having more than enough to eat was associated with extreme wealth (“you have already become rich”), gross indulgence and licentiousness. However, like today, while those with empty bellies would ridicule the wealthy and replete, they at the same time wished they were wealthy as well.

Paul, of course, is not preoccupied with the Corinthians’ eating habits. He employs these terms (“filled,” “rich,” “kings”) as metaphors with which to address not their physical but their spiritual condition. Not only did they not “hunger and thirst for righteousness,” but what they were “already filled” with were the rhetoric and philosophies of the fallen culture in which they dwelt.

Regarding “already,” “now”

(The well-respected Gordon Fee has a habit of seeing eschatological reference everywhere he looks in Paul’s writings—primarily because he believes the apostle is preoccupied with the end-times realization of Christ’s kingdom. Nonetheless, I believe his interpretation here is measured—and correct.)

We see the eschatological reference in the structure and word choices of the first half of this sentence: “You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings without us” (emphasis added). This does not point to the end times at the expense of the here and now; here is another use of the common “now—not yet” realization of certain blessings/attributes for the follower of Christ—yet here presented with ironic sarcasm. That is, the Christian in the here and now, because of the indwelling Spirit, is “filled” in ways the world will never know or even understand, and the Christian has a measure of “wealth” the world can never obtain. But the Christian also understands that there will come a day when what he has now in Christ will then seem like slim pickings when compared to the outpouring he will receive in glory.

The Corinthians, however, are living as if they consider that what they have by means of the Spirit in the here and now has already filled them to overflowing; they already have all there is or will be. Paul is not saying (nor is Fee interpreting his rhetoric to mean) that the Corinthians literally believe they are already living in the end times—in the kingdom on the other side of Judgment Day, as did some of the Thessalonians. As Fee puts it, for the Corinthians, “already but not yet”

is one of “already” with little room for “not yet.” Having received the Spirit, they have already arrived; for them spirituality means to have been transported into a whole new sphere of existence where they are “above” the earthly, and especially “fleshly,” existence of others.

It’s not that the Corinthians believe Christ’s judgment has already occurred; their problem is that they aren’t thinking about it at all (Garland). To convince them into realizing that they are not yet filled with what they can consume of God, that they are not yet overflowing with His riches, Paul seeks to shame them from their pride, into humility and gratitude for what they do have.

D. W. Kuck: [The Corinthians] already see themselves as morally and spiritually perfected, without having to experience the bodily struggles which Paul sees as the sign of life in Christ.

This brings us to the third—and most presumptuous statement.

you have become kings without us;

First, the NASB is not the best translation here, because the word translated “kings” really refers to the activity of reigning—that is, not the state of being a king, but reigning as a king. The KJVs have it correctly, and the difference we can see by comparing the original NIV with the new NIV:

original NIV: You have become kings—and that without us!
new NIV: You have begun to reign—and that without us!

This correction fits with what we know about the role of believers during the Millennium and beyond. I can find no reference in God's word in which it says that believers will be kings (KJVs excepted); rather it says that we will be part of a kingdom, and will reign with, or under, the one King—such as what the living creatures and elders declared when the Lamb that was slain took the book of seven seals.

Read Revelation 5:9-10. (NOT KJVs)

("kings" in the KJVs is better rendered "kingdom"; as JFB says, "read, 'A kingdom.' They who cast their crowns before the throne, do not call themselves kings in the sight of the great King.")

...without us;

This does not mean "apart from our help," but "without our having share in it." Look at that: you have been granted kingly rule even before your leaders and teachers!

and indeed, I wish that you had become kings so that we also might reign with you.

Here Paul concludes, rather wistfully with a sigh, if it were true that the Corinthians really were now reigning, it would mean that the Kingdom of Christ in the end times had truly arrived, and Paul and the rest of their teachers would be reigning as well. Sadly, however, that was not the case.

Conclusion

A comparison of this verse (and v10) to the Beatitudes gives us a very clear picture of how far off-track the Corinthians had moved from the ideal. And even if we might conclude that none of us are nearly as arrogant or self-absorbed as many in the Corinthian church, we still dwell in a practically identical environment—and that society, that culture, can seep into our lives, our church, just as easily as it did in Corinth.

Let us keep returning to our baseline for living other-worldly: the truly blessed life as described by Jesus in His Beatitudes.

Session 39: Having Already Attained, part two

1 Corinthians 4:8-10

Preface

In our last session we established the Beatitudes in Matthew 5 as our baseline to reveal how far off the mark the Corinthians, as described by Paul in vv8-10, had traveled.

- In v8 we discovered that they were not hungering and thirsting for righteousness (Matthew 5:6) because they considered themselves to be already “filled.” That word translated “filled” or “full” describes someone utterly gorged, crammed full of food. So, if we were to be generous, we might think that the Corinthians were so full of God and His righteousness that they couldn’t find room for more. Even that would be misguided, but it was worse than that. What they were “already filled” with were the rhetoric and philosophies of the fallen culture in which they dwelt. And decidedly not God’s righteousness.
- We also discovered that the Corinthians considered themselves to be already rich, already having all they required, even though Christ said that the blessed were the “poor in spirit” (Matthew 5:3). To be poor in spirit is to understand that in ourselves we are utterly unworthy before God, deserving nothing, but that through Christ we are granted the right to stand before Him with confidence. To be poor in this world is to have an empty purse; to be spiritually poor is to have one’s heart filled with God rather than self.
- Finally, Paul asserts that they are behaving as reigning kings. The reward for living as one “poor in spirit” in Matthew 5:3 is “the kingdom of heaven.” Even though they do not think of themselves as “poor in spirit” (by the true definition of that phrase: utterly bereft without the riches of God) they are so full of themselves they have deemed themselves worthy of lording it over their lessers, as if they are reigning as kings.

We are now in the middle of Paul’s effort to convict the Corinthians by reciting, in a manner dripping with irony and sarcasm, how the Corinthians think of themselves—what is, apparently, in their hearts. Last week we looked at v8; in this session we will look at vv9-10. After this (vv11-13) Paul will drop the irony and sarcasm, to hold himself and the other apostles up as positive examples over against the self-righteousness of the Corinthians.

Correction: In the last session I said that in these verses Paul was doing this to “shame” the Corinthians. That was a poor choice of words, since in v14 he writes, “I do not write these things to shame you...” Thus in this session I have changed the word “shame” to “convict.”

Read 1 Corinthians 4:8-10.

v9

For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death;

At this point I can’t help but think of the prominent radio and TV preachers who espouse the so-called “prosperity gospel.” Here is what Joe Carter, in an article at The Gospel Coalition web site, has to say about this.

Carter: The prosperity gospel (also known as the “health and wealth gospel” or by its most popular brand, the “Word of Faith” movement) is a perversion of the gospel of Jesus that claims that God rewards increases in faith with increases in health and/or wealth. As Stephen Hunt explains,

In the forefront is the doctrine of the assurance of “divine” physical health and prosperity through faith. In short, this means that “health and wealth” are the automatic divine right of all Bible-believing Christians and may be procreated by faith as part of the package of salvation, since the Atonement of Christ includes not just the removal of sin, but also the removal of sickness and poverty.

Any believer who actually reads his or her Bible knows that this is sheer nonsense. God's word declares precisely the opposite. Jesus addressed this in the Beatitudes

Read Matthew 5:10-12.

Jesus went on to say, later in Matthew's gospel,

**"He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake will find it."
(Matthew 10:37-39)**

because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men.

Rich imagery lies behind the words of v9, and all of it portrays the status and condition of the apostles as dramatically different from the members of the Corinthian church, who saw themselves as wealthy, lordly, even kingly. The NIV captures some of it for us by the insertion of a few extra words.

For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men.

There are two probable interpretations of Paul's opinion that "God has exhibited us apostles last of all," and either one works well.

- The first draws from the imagery of the Roman spectacles, such as the games in the Colosseum. Held till last, as the climax of the spectacle, were those condemned to die—either as gladiators or those thrown to the beasts.
- The second (as the NIV translates/interprets it) includes this, but first draws its imagery from the Roman triumph—the grand and extravagant parade held in honor of a conquering general returning to the city. The parade would include the triumphant general and his troops, wagons full of booty from the conquered land, slaves, exotic animals, and, "last of all," (v9) at the end of the procession those captives who were condemned to die in the arena. Both the humiliating procession and their ugly death "exhibited" or "displayed" these poor souls to the cheering throng.

Whether one starts with the processional, or moves right to the arena, the result is the same: In contrast to the high-and-mighty Corinthians, Paul identifies closely with his crucified Lord, who was publicly "exhibited" in a humiliating, ugly, illegal, unmerited death. And by including "angels" (messengers) along with men who are witnessing this public spectacle, he makes the case for it being for the entire *kosmos*, the entire ordered universe.

v10

Then, in v10, Paul, returning to the more obvious irony he employed in v8, works through a bullet-list of specifics, contrasting the plight of the apostles to the self-perceived status of the Corinthians.

To appreciate Paul's continuity in this letter, we need to return to its first chapter, where he introduced this theme.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:26-29.

There it is, in v29, the reason for it all: "...so that no man may boast before God." And now Paul returns to this theme, drawing a dramatic contrast between many in the Corinthian church and the apostles—Paul, Apollos, Peter, et al.

We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are prudent in Christ;

The inclusion of “in Christ” at the end of this first set (“prudent in Christ”) can at first be a little confusing, but I think it tracks if we remember that his remark is ironical from beginning to end. By this Paul is saying, In Christ, we are fools, but you are prudent. Irony means that just the opposite is really true, so in reality, in Christ, the apostles are wise, and the Corinthians are fools.

In the eyes of the world—and especially the Corinthian culture—the apostles are fools, but their “foolishness” is God’s brand of foolishness, which is the ultimate wisdom. By contrast, in the eyes of the world, these in the Corinthian church are *phronimos* (prudent, wise, intelligent, thoughtful) because they have ingested the world’s “wisdom.” Unfortunately for them, this makes them fools in the eyes of God.

And here we should shine the light on ourselves. Are we willing to be fools for Christ? Can it be enough for us that no matter what the world thinks of us, we are wise in the Father’s eyes? The pull of peer pressure and acceptance—to “go along”—is strong; it requires someone of strong faith and reliance on the truth of God’s word to stand against it.

we are weak, but you are strong;

In the same vein Paul speaks of weakness and strength, and when we turn it around to clarify the irony, Paul is actually saying that the apostles are strong and the Corinthians are weak. Yet we must clarify this further, for Paul is “strong” not in himself, but in Christ—which is illustrated best in the familiar passage from his second (known) letter to this church.

Read 2 Corinthians 12:7-10.

Paul glories in his weakness, for into and through that weakness flows the very power of God. To the world there was no better example of utter weakness and impotence than a human being nailed to a cross. But out of Christ Jesus going through that, His “weakness” resulted in unimaginable power! Just wait around for His return and you will see power demonstrated like you have never seen before.

Some, just a small portion, of that power is ours even today when we quit trying to be strong (*ischyros*, forcible, boisterous) in ourselves, and let the power of God to flow into and through us.

you are distinguished, but we are without honor.

Finally, here again, if we set aside the irony, we are left with a worldly perception: In the eyes of the Corinthian society those Paul is addressing are indeed distinguished or honorable, and the lowly apostles without honor. But of course that is not Paul’s perspective—nor is it God’s. Paul is saying the opposite: In Christ, the apostles are distinguished and the Corinthians without honor.

Read John 15:18-19.

There were some in the Corinthian church who, apparently, were not comfortable with the society in which they lived hating them. They wanted to be liked, to be esteemed, to be accepted in that society. To that end they were compromising their faith—not to mention their relationship with God.

Let’s close with the strong exhortation from the apostle John.

Read 1 John 2:15-17.

Session 40: A True Servant's Heart, part one

1 Corinthians 4:11-13

Preface

One of our more enjoyable meals is homemade pizza—especially in the summer or early fall, when we can use our own tomatoes and onions. We make two large pizzas on baking sheets, eat half of one that first night, then freeze the rest for about three or four more meals. Our pizzas begin with Linda's homemade herbal crust, then sausage or ham, pineapple, onions, tomatoes, black olives, and topped off with slabs of provolone and mounds of mozzarella cheese. Linda insists on piling the cheese out to the very edge, which, later, presents a problem—especially if it is my night to wash the dishes.

You see, any of that delicious dough and cheese that makes contact with the edge of the pans locks on and hardens like concrete after its time in the oven. You can soak it, you can scrape it, get down on your hands and knees and plead for help from above, but it always requires arduous time and labor to clean the edges of those two pans. And as one is breaking off fingernails and cursing the kitchen gods (while the one drying that night thanks those same gods that it is not her night to wash) something that was earlier delicious and pleasing to the eye turns into an ugly, soggy and hated collection of worthless scraps good only for the garbage.

Look at v13 in our text, where Paul writes that he and the apostles have become “the scum of the world, the dregs of all things”—or as the KJVs have it, “the offscouring of all things.” Here Paul is using two Greek words used nowhere else in Scripture to say that they—the apostles—are no better than that crud scraped off the edges of our pizza pans, good only for the garbage.

For some time now in this letter, Paul has been contrasting the arrogant and presumptuous behavior of the Corinthians to the more lowly and servant-minded behavior of himself and his fellow apostles. In this he has employed irony, sarcasm and hyperbole in an effort to convict them of their errant attitude.

Although we spent two previous sessions on vv8-10, it is important that we re-read that passage so that we understand the contrast Paul is setting up here.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:8-10.

Now, in v11, Paul switches to “straight talk” (Fee). He abandons irony, sarcasm and exaggeration. If the next three verses were describing anyone else—especially someone today—it would most assuredly be hyperbole. But for Paul and his companions this represents real-life. He is dead serious.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:11-13.

v11

To this present hour...

This list of experiences is held together by the two bookends that begin and end the passage. The first bookend is “To this present hour,” and the second is, at the end of v13, “even until now.” (The NIV and ESV place it in the middle of v13 with “Up to this moment” and “and are still,” respectively.) Both of these end-caps reveal two truths: that this treatment has been going on for some time (it is nothing new) and it continues still—all of which, by the way, puts the lie to the spurious and deceitful, so-called “health and wealth gospel” that we discussed in our previous session.

we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed

Perhaps our best commentary on this passage is Paul's second known letter to the church, where he expands somewhat on his mere listing of items here. In Chapter Six of 2 Corinthians he offers a similar but expanded list. But in Chapter Eleven of that letter he is more descriptive, and makes it clear—especially when we combine these passages with the record in The Acts of the Apostles and Paul's other letters—that this is not mere hyperbole for the sake of dramatizing his remarks, but is backed up by very real life experience.

Sidebar: I'm not sure of the significance, if there is any, but I note that in the first letter Paul writes in the present tense ("we are") and includes the other apostles, whereas in the second letter he writes in the past tense ("I was," "I have") and speaks only for himself.

Read 2 Corinthians 11:27.

Do we have further evidence of Paul's being hungry and thirsty?

Read Philippians 4:12.

It is clear from this passage in Philippians that being deprived of sustenance was not just a one-time occurrence for Paul and his men. He "learned" (implied, over time, through practice) of "going hungry." He also says that they are "poorly clothed"; interesting word, *gymniteuomen* (goom-nay-too-men):

- This verb, which means to be naked, can mean literally that, as we would understand nakedness today. In the spelling of the word we see right off the word "gym," as in gymnastics or gymnasium. Greek athletes would compete literally naked, hence the logical etymology from the word meaning to do gymnastics to meaning being naked.
- But it can also mean being poorly or improperly attired. Fishermen (and other laborers) would work with just one layer of clothing on for efficiency, but that might not be appropriate while in the public eye. So when Jesus called out to the disciples from the shoreline, and Peter recognized the Lord, before he jumped into the water to go to Him, he put on his outer cloak.

So when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put his outer garment on (for he was stripped [gymnos, naked] for work), and threw himself into the sea. (John 21:7b)

The latter definition of the word fits our current passage—hence the NASB, "poorly clothed." The KJVs are literally true, but do not fit the context. The ancient Seneca referred to this as being "wretchedly clad."

[we] are roughly treated,

roughly treated^{nasb}, **brutally treated**^{niv}, **buffeted**^{kjv, esv}, **beaten**^{nkjv} = *kolaphizo* = to strike with the fist.

Paul and Silas certainly experienced this in Philippi.

Read Acts 16:22-24.

In his second letter to the Corinthians he adds more details about his beatings—and we begin to see how the KJV and ESV's "buffeted" doesn't quite capture the fullness of what Paul experienced.

Read 2 Corinthians 11:23-25.

and are homeless;

There is not a word in Scripture about Paul having a home, a domestic dwelling. Peter's home is mentioned (in Capernaum, where Jesus healed his mother-in-law), but nothing for Paul. His biography in Scripture paints a picture of someone constantly moving from one city to the next, one region to the next, always (as Blanche DuBois in *Streetcar* was known to say) having to rely on the kindness of strangers.

v12a

and we toil, working with our own hands;

I know from personal experience that there are those who have the attitude and lifestyle, “I am in ministry, so take care of me.” They expect to be supported; they claim it as a right. But the apostle Paul—even though committed to a ministry so important, so foundational to the Christian faith for the entire world—was unapologetically “bi-vocational.” There were times—not always, but often—when he worked on the side so as to help pay his own way.

Later in this letter (Chapter Nine) Paul will defend his right to be supported by others, citing (in v9) among other arguments the line from the Law, “You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing.” Please turn to Acts 20.

Elsewhere, however, he purposely found work to pay his own way. Paul had a practical trade: tent-making, which afforded him an introduction to Priscilla and Aquila in Corinth, and they gave him a place to stay. Later, while in Miletus, Paul sent for the elders and explained to them, beginning in v33,

Read Acts 20:33-35.

We can draw from this that Paul’s ultimate purpose was to illustrate whatever any group of believers required to feed their faith. If they needed a lesson in giving, he wanted them to give for his support; if that would become a stumbling block to their faith, as it was in Thessalonica, he would work to pay his own way.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:9-12.

What we learn from this is a demonstration of a true servant’s heart and behavior. Paul lived—not just spoke, but lived—for the benefit of those to whom he ministered.

So far in just the first half of these three verses we have already been given a substantive picture of a true servant, one who

- suffered hunger and thirst,
- went without proper or sufficient clothing,
- was roughly and sometimes brutally tortured for the name of Christ,
- had no personal home-base to which to retreat, and
- did manual labor to earn his keep even while serving as an evangelist.

Jesus said that He came not to be served, but to serve, and even to give His very life for others (Mark 10:45). Paul, as well as the other apostles, conducted their respective ministries as living examples of Christ’s words and His life on earth. In almost all respects, Paul’s sacrifices mirrored those of His Lord. What is easy to forget is that even though Christ is now glorified, He remains the servant, always thinking of others before Himself. What is His “work” right this minute?

- He intercedes: “...Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.” (Romans 8:34b)
- He is our Advocate: “And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” (1 John 2:1b)

Session 41: A True Servant's Heart, part two

1 Corinthians 4:11-13

Preface

What we are learning from this passage (vv11-13) is how to live as a servant—or perhaps more accurately, how we may be called upon to live when we are a servant. For not every true servant in Christ is called upon to live this way.

From my youth, when considering the life of a servant of Christ, I have thought about R. G. LeTourneau. My dad was fascinated by earth-moving machines; he could happily spend hours watching the work at a construction site as the huge machines moved earth from one place to another, as long-armed cranes hoisted beams skyward. And as a logical extension, my dad learned of and became fascinated with the life and witness of R. G. LeTourneau, the man who invented or improved many of those massive earth-moving machines. From the web site Giants for God (<http://www.giantsforgod.com/rg-letourneau/>) I quote:

RG LeTourneau is perhaps the most inspiring Christian inventor, businessman and entrepreneur the world has ever seen. A sixth grade dropout, Robert Gilmore “RG” LeTourneau went on to become the leading earth moving machinery manufacturer of his day with plants on 4 continents, more than 300 patents to his name and major contributions to road construction and heavy equipment that forever changed the world. Most importantly, his contribution to the advancement of the Gospel ranks him among the greatest of Christian Businessmen of all time. Famous for living on 10% of his income and giving 90% to the spread of the Gospel, LeTourneau exemplified what a Christian businessman should be.

So far, in just the first half of our passage, we have already been given a substantive picture of a true, sacrificial servant, one who

- suffered hunger and thirst,
- went without proper or sufficient clothing,
- was roughly and sometimes brutally tortured for the name of Christ,
- had no personal home-base to which to retreat, and
- did manual labor to earn his keep even while serving as an evangelist.

But we must not imagine that one must live the life of a miserable tramp, ill-fed and ill-clothed, to be a servant of Christ. God calls individuals from all walks of life to serve Him and His kingdom in myriad ways. The apostle Paul was called, in his time and place, to serve Christ in this way. We may be called to be His servant in this time and place in far different ways—or even, like Paul, as “a miserable tramp, ill-fed and ill-clothed.”

Read 1 Corinthians 4:11-13.

Let's pick up our study in the middle of v12.

v12b

when we are reviled, we bless;

Jesus, of course, taught His disciples to “...love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you” (Luke 6:27-28). But Paul was not the only one to teach this. Peter confirms for us, in his treatise on suffering righteously, Christ's response to being reviled.

Read 1 Peter 2:21-23.

Later, in the next chapter, Peter summarizes what our response should be to persecution, insults, and attacks.

Read 1 Peter 3:8-9.

Perhaps both Paul and Peter—at the time, on opposite sides of the persecution—were influenced by the righteous behavior of the martyr Stephen.

Read Acts 7:58-60.

When we are reviled—that is, verbally abused—we are called to respond with the precise opposite.

bless = *eulogeo* = from a compound of <G2095> (*eu*) and <G3056> (*logos*); to speak well of, i.e. (religiously) to bless (thank or invoke a benediction upon, prosper) :- bless, praise. We have the word "eulogy," transliterated from this; at a funeral someone rises "to speak well of" the deceased.

It goes without saying that this is an unnatural response for mere flesh.

when we are persecuted, we endure;

There is an interesting word-play going on here. The literal meaning of the Greek *diokomenoi*, translated "we are persecuted" is to flee because one is being pursued, chased. Hence the word came to mean the reason for having to flee; if one is being hounded to the extent that one has to flee for one's life, well, this means one is being persecuted. But, again, the original, literal meaning is "to flee."

Paul says that the apostles' response to being persecuted is they "endure." The Greek is *anekometha*, which means "to hold oneself up against," or "to put up with." So understand the word-picture: In contrast to the Corinthians, who are avoiding persecution by going along with the contemporary culture, Paul is saying that he and the other apostles, when being persecuted—pursued, chased—are not fleeing, but standing their ground and taking—putting up with—the persecution!

Isn't this pretty much what Jesus meant in His Sermon on the Mount when he said for us to turn the other cheek?

Read Matthew 5:38-40.

v13

when we are slandered, we try to conciliate;

Here, in my opinion, Paul opens a door onto his aching heart. Earlier when he mentioned being "reviled," he unlocked the door, but now, I imagine with profound sorrow, he swings wide the door to reveal how he has been affected by some of the things the Corinthians are saying about him. One can read between the lines throughout the two letters he wrote to the church to learn that these people were not just following an errant path, but were doing so purposely, arrogantly, as they criticized Paul—in letters to him and, probably, publicly ("slandered").

And even though he accepts the abuse, it had to bruise his heart. But still, faithful to the example of his Master, Paul tries to conciliate.

conciliate, entreat, answer kindly = *parakaleo* = from <G3844> (*para*) and <G2564> (*kaleo*); to call near, i.e. invite, invoke (by imploration, hortation or consolation) :- beseech, call for, (be of good) comfort, desire, (give) exhort (-ation), entreat, pray; Heinrich Meyer: "give beseeching words."

Webster's says to conciliate is to "win over; soothe the anger of; make friendly; placate; to gain by friendly acts."

Sidebar: Out of all our common translations, only the NASB adds "try to." I could find no discussion on this. My guess is that this version just states the obvious, that when one conciliates, consoles, entreats, etc., the result is ultimately up to the individual being conciliated, consoled, or entreated. Thus it is an effort without guaranteed results—an attempt only.

Frankly, this is nothing less than astonishing. Add all these up:

- Their condition, the situation in which they serve Christ: hungry and thirsty, poorly clothed, roughly treated, and homeless (v11).
- They answer curses with blessings.
- They answer persecution with acceptance and endurance.
- They answer slander with earnest conciliation.

What a contrast to the Corinthians! But even more, what a contrast to us! We need not waste time dissecting the contrasting behavior of those in Corinth; we need only turn the light of this witness around and shine it on our own behavior, the contents of our own heart.

we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now.

We are now back to where I began this passage with the pizza leavings that must be laboriously scraped off the edges of the pan then discarded. This is precisely how Paul describes himself and the other apostles.

Albert Barnes: It would not be possible to employ stronger expressions to denote the contempt and scorn with which they were everywhere regarded. The word “filth,” *perikatharmata* occurs nowhere else in the New Testament. It properly denotes filth, or that which is collected by sweeping a house, or that which is collected and cast away by purifying or cleansing anything; hence, any vile, worthless, and contemptible object. Among the Greeks the word was used to denote the victims which were offered to expiate crimes, and particularly men of ignoble rank, and of a worthless and wicked character, who were kept to be offered to the gods in a time of pestilence, to appease their anger, and to purify the nation. ([Bretschneider and Schleusner](#)). Hence, it was applied by them to people of the most vile, abject, and worthless character. But it is not certain that Paul had any reference to that sense of the word. The whole force of the expression may be met by the supposition that he uses it in the sense of that filth or dirt which is collected by the process of cleansing or scouring anything, as being vile, contemptible, worthless. So the apostles were regarded. And by the use of the word “world” here, he meant to say that they were regarded as the most vile and worthless men which the whole world could furnish; not only the refuse of Judea, but of all the nations of the earth. As if he had said “more vile and worthless people could not be found on the face of the earth.”

Note that he is not saying that that is what they truly are in their own estimation or, far more important, in the eyes of God. No, he is saying that to the rest of the world—and, sadly, in the estimation of many in the Corinth church—they are considered “as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things.”

We have to ask, then: How could Paul live this way? How could this situation not beat him down into irretrievable depression? I suggest two reasons. First, he knew that his Savior had suffered the same—and worse. Isaiah had prophesied some seven hundred years earlier what had eventually come to pass.

[Read Isaiah 53:2-9.](#)

Paul knew that his suffering was as nothing in comparison to what his Lord had suffered for him. Second, he also knew that this was no permanent condition; Paul could see over the horizon to a day in which he had hope—a day when, just like Christ Jesus, he too would be glorified.

[Read 2 Corinthians 4:16-18.](#)

Session 42: Loving Discipline

1 Corinthians 4:14-16

Preface

The accomplished church pianist or organist will supply a few measures of transition from one hymn to the next in the worship service. As the one hymn closes, he will add a measure or two modulating from the first hymn's key to the key of the next hymn. This is an artful, pleasing-to-the-ear way to transition, or segue, from one hymn to the next.

For better than a month, over the last four sessions we have been studying the paragraph just ended: vv8-13. In this paragraph Paul paints a grim picture of the life of an apostle in the first century. He compares them to slaves publicly humiliated as they are marched to their sure death in the arena; he describes them as poor, shabbily dressed, hungry and thirsty, reviled and slandered—even physically persecuted and tortured.

Not surprisingly, we as students of God's word, are nevertheless eager to escape this depressing narrative, and in v14 Paul will begin that extraction. But we need a transition—if the preceding paragraph were a musical composition, we need a few measures to modulate from its discordant minor key to the major key that follows to the end of the chapter. And Paul himself supplies an eloquent segue, or transition, from that paragraph to the next—only it is not found in this letter, but in his letter to the Philippian church.

Read Philippians 4:11-12.

Here is Paul's modulation from minor to major key, his transition from what on paper sounds like a perfectly miserable existence, to, if not the polar opposite, at least the assurance that he—and, by extension the other apostles and even us—can cope quite well with all that, thank you very much. He declares that he can live—because he has learned to live—with whatever the Lord sends his way. And then in v13 he gives the reason.

Read v13.

Now we are ready for the next hymn. And as we begin our journey through this next paragraph—which closes the first portion of his letter—I want you to keep two things in mind. First, life in the body of Christ, life in the fullness of God's economy of the church, means that every one of us is a "Paul," and every one of us is a "Corinthian." That is, we cannot rest on the false notion that, well, I am not a leader in the church, so that doesn't apply to me. Nor can we in our pride say, that doesn't apply to me because I am not as bad as the Corinthians. As the apostle uses the word "father" in this next passage, we are each of us both a "father" to be imitated, and someone in need of a "father" to imitate. Every one of us should look to those who exemplify the Christ-life, and every one of us should remember that someone out there—even if just one—looks up to us as an exemplar of the Christ-life. A sobering contemplation indeed.

Second, this paragraph is based on the imagery of family: Paul refers to himself as their "father," and the Corinthians as his "children." But when I read these sentences I am immediately reminded of something the Lord Jesus said. Didn't He warn us against doing this?

Read Matthew 23:8-10.

First, Jesus was saying something quite different; his context was one of those who flaunt their positions of authority, reveling in their titles as rabbi, father, or leader; Jesus was not referring to the more family-like situation within the church.

Second, the word Jesus used, *pater*, means father or parent, while the word Paul uses is *egennesa*, which means to procreate, one who begets; in this context we might translate this "spiritual father," for they became Paul's "children" through his bringing the gospel of Christ to them. As the KJVs put it in v15, "...for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel." Paul became the instrument through which God gave them new life.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:14-16.

v14

After his scathing rhetoric earlier in this chapter, Paul now softens his approach by changing his metaphors, stressing the family connection he has with the Corinthians. And right away we hear a different tone in his voice.

I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children.

Paul is not averse to shaming errant believers into correct behavior. In fact, later in this letter he will employ this tactic (6:5, 15:34). But here he wants to emphasize the familial connection he has with them.

By even mentioning shame, Paul tacitly acknowledges that they should have been ashamed of their behavior, but he says that that was not his reason for his earlier remarks. His reason, instead, was to “admonish” them (NASB, ESV)—a much better word than “warn” (NIV, KJVs). An admonition may include warning, but it also includes counsel and appeal; it corrects without “provoking or embittering” (Behm).

This fits perfectly with the familial imagery Paul will employ until the end of the chapter, which he begins with the next phrase, referring to them not as converts or believers or church members, but as “my beloved children.” This term is neither condescending or cynical, but honestly affectionate. This term of endearment had a long history in Judaism, so it would be perfectly natural for Paul to think of them this way. (More on this in a moment.) As evidence, just a few verses later Paul will refer to Timothy as “my beloved and faithful child in the Lord.” This is how Paul speaks of those to whom he has introduced Christ. See how he speaks of the ex-slave Onesimus to his former master, Philemon.

Read Philemon 10-16.

v15

Even as we use the rich, familial imagery Paul supplies, and from which we might (erroneously) suppose he is exalting himself, we must not lose sight of his over-arching purpose and focus.

Gordon Fee: Paul’s concern from beginning to end is the gospel... Everything has been said and done for Christ Jesus. He has “fathered” them so that they might be *in Christ Jesus*. He has sent Timothy, who is also his son *in the Lord*, so that they might learn to walk *in Christ Jesus* (v17). This is the point of everything for Paul, and the other details of the argument must never obscure for the later reader that singular passion of his. (italics in original)

With that as his foundational theme in this passage, Paul employs family terms and imagery to make his point—not to promote himself (v16: “be imitators of me”), but to instill the Christ-life in these errant Corinthians.

For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ...

The English word “pedagogue” has come to mean a teacher, as in someone who stands in front of a class or single pupil and instructs. But the Greek word—*paidagogos*—from which we get our modern word, does not really mean that. In the first century, a *paidagogos* would be a trusted slave who would conduct a boy—old enough to leave the house, but too young to do so on his own—to and from school, and was generally entrusted with the life and moral upbringing of the youth (an extension of the parent. The *paidagogoi* were very often pictured as stern but not too bright taskmasters wielding a stick or rod on their young charges. (*Young’s Literal Translation*: “child-conductors”)

...yet you would not have many fathers.

In v15 Paul is contrasting the temporary, very often bad-intentioned and possibly ignorant “child-conductors,” with the father.

David Garland: Disciplinarians are likely to berate them with shaming tactics; a loving father admonishes... Disciplinarians come and go...; the relationship with a father abides.

Paul says that you could “have countless tutors in Christ”—

Note: That is the idea here: countless, innumerable. The literal but misleading “ten thousand” in the NIV and KJVs doesn’t quite capture the idea. Modern translation: umpteen zillion, gazillion.

—you could have more *paidagogoi* than you could count, but you would have only one father.

for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.

Central to everything in the life of Paul is the gospel and Christ Jesus. And here he bookends his statement—“I became your father”—with both.

Over the years I have struggled to settle on the appropriate verb to describe the role of a spiritual “father” (or “mother”; the Greek can refer to either) in the conversion of a nonbeliever into a believer. I think “introduce” works pretty well. At a party or gathering of any kind, when one person introduces an acquaintance to another, he has no say in the relationship that may or may not follow between them. He simply makes the introduction; the rest is up to them. As their “father,” Paul introduced the Corinthians to Christ Jesus through the gospel message. Whether that took root and flowered into an enduring relationship was up to them and the Holy Spirit. (And then, of course, after the introduction takes root, the “father” becomes instructor, admonisher, encourager, and, not least, example.)

v16

Therefore I exhort you, be imitators of me.

What does he want them to imitate? His brilliant mind? His pedigree? His saintly demeanor? His unblemished holiness? No, Paul, in the previous paragraph (vv8–13), has just systematically spelled out what he wants the Corinthians to imitate from his life:

- to be willing to become a fool, a spectacle, even, if God calls them to it, unto death (vv9–10a);
- to be seen by others as weak, and without honor (v10b);
- to be willing to serve Christ hungry and thirsty, poorly clothed, roughly treated, even homeless (v11);
- to work to pay one’s own way, even while serving others (v12a);
- to answer curses with blessings;
- to answer persecution with acceptance and endurance;
- to answer slander with earnest conciliation (vv12b–13a); and
- to be willing to have others consider you “the scum of the world, the dregs of all things” the lowest of the low (13b).

The Corinthians were preoccupied with the things of this world, its philosophies, its rhetoric, its priorities; they were spending way too much time dwelling on themselves, their societal position, their reputation. To imitate their spiritual “father”—who was imitating Christ (11:1)—they must abandon all that in favor of selfless humility and denial of creature and intellectual comforts.

In this exhortation Paul was simply following the pattern of Christ Jesus. Being a disciple of Christ, a follower of Him, a “Christ-ian,” is not a part-time occupation; it is not something one pulls out only when it is convenient. Whether a first-century apostle or a twenty first-century believer, being a Christian means that we are obedient to our Lord’s will—even, if it is His will, unto death.

Read Matthew 16:24–27.

The cross represented ignominious, tortuous, public death. Nothing could be more alien to the Corinthian culture—even to those in the Corinthian church. Christ’s—and Paul’s—call is to denial of self, to servanthood, no matter where it takes us.

Let us not be like the recipients of this letter: preoccupied with self, with our standing in the community, with outward appearances, with status.

Let us, instead, be earnestly preoccupied with Christ.

Session 43: Like Father, Like Son

1 Corinthians 4:17-21

Read 1 Corinthians 4:16-17.

v17

For this reason...

Whenever we encounter the phrase, “For this reason...” we always must ask, “For what reason?” And in this instance we needn’t look far, for this points back to just the previous verse.

Therefore I exhort you, be imitators of me. (v16)

For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord,

In large part, over the centuries and millennia we have lost this fundamental meaning of being a son, a daughter, a child. Though none of us share His perfection—nor His unique “parentage”—Jesus was the ultimate example of this classic idea of sonship. And the apostle John does a splendid job of capturing this idea in Jesus.

Read John 1:18.

Sidebar: Some ancient manuscripts read *monogenes huios* (only begotten Son), but the best and most reliable manuscripts read *monogenes theos* (God only begotten).

In our culture someone is referred to as a son, or child, if he is the issue from a man having sexual union with a woman—ideally, a husband and wife. But in Scripture to be a “son” means far more.

Clearly Jesus the Christ was not a son in our sense: He was not the issue from God the Father having sexual union with a female. The idea is not just ludicrous, but blasphemous. So there must be another sense in which the earthly Jesus is the Son of God (setting aside for the moment the mystical relationships within the Trinity).

In this early verse of John’s gospel, the earthly Jesus is said to explain, to make known, to reveal Father God as no one had before—or has since. Jesus later emphasized this in a number of ways. In Chapter Fourteen Jesus goes right to the punchline.

Read John 14:7.

That is, *Do you want to know what the Father looks like? Look at Me.* Do you want to know how He behaves, how He thinks, what His personality is like? Watch and listen to Me. Finally, let’s look at something Jesus said to the increasingly antagonistic Jewish leaders regarding His equality with God.

Read John 5:19-21.

There at the end of v19 is the biblical essence of sonship: “...for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner.”

The apostle Paul could and did see young men such as Timothy and Titus as his “children in the Lord” because the Lord made Paul His instrument through which these men were converted to Christianity. Paul disciplined them, teaching them not just the ways of Christ, not just how to live for Him, but how to live for and minister to others in the Lord’s name. This made them Paul’s “sons” in this second sense: they behaved and did things “in like manner” as their spiritual “father.”

and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church.

This is how the word “remind” is used here. It doesn’t mean that Timothy will stand there and repeat everything Paul taught the Corinthians because they have forgotten. It means that his person, his behavior, the way he speaks, his love for them will remind them of the apostle.

Sidebar: Oddly enough, we have no evidence that Timothy actually showed up. The Corinthians knew Timothy; he had been there with Paul for at least some of the time Paul had been in the city. Verse 16:10 makes it clear that Timothy was probably not yet there when the letter was being read (“Now if Timothy comes...”) and he was not the one who carried the letter to them. Also, there is no specific mention of a Corinthian visit by Timothy around this time in The Acts.

Paul had confidence that if and when Timothy showed up in Corinth, he would faithfully mirror the behavior and teaching he (Paul) exhibited there and had exhibited everywhere else.

Coda to vv14-17

Even so, let us not get carried away and sidetracked by this “father” and “begetting” business. Remember that just a few short verses earlier Paul referred to himself as an “under-oarsman”—the lowest of slaves. Let us not presume—as Robert Hawker points out that surely the apostle does not—that Paul had anything to do with their regeneration.

Robert Hawker (1805): The work itself is solely the Lord’s. It is the peculiar and special office of God the Holy Ghost. And is rife of Heaven’s wonders... I shall leave the consideration of the subject to the Reader’s own judgment, under the Lord. But I confess I cannot but conclude, that it must be highly unsuitable, irreverent, and blamable, to assume the name of spiritual Father, from any supposed services, in the ministry of Christ. It is the special office of God the Spirit to beget souls from the death of sin. It is his work : and it is his sole glory. And when we hear the Lord speak of his jealousy, as we do in many parts of Scripture, it ought to be well considered, how the Lord expresseth himself: I am the Lord, that is my Name: and my glory will I not give to another: neither my praise to graven images (Isaiah 42:8).

We must never forget that God alone regenerates; God alone, justifies; God alone sanctifies. [Now let’s read the rest of our passage.](#)

[Read 1 Corinthians 4:18-21.](#)

v18

Now some have become arrogant, as though I were not coming to you.

Whether one is of the position (as Fee) that there existed in the Corinthian church an organized rebellion against Paul, or of the position (as Garland) that this was simply an instance of “when the cat is away the mice will play,” some in the church in Corinth were guilty of the sin of pride. Paul knew this because of the reports from “Cloe’s people” (1:11) and from correspondence he has received from the church. They were “arrogant”—literally, puffed up, blowhards full of hot air. (Note that it is “some”—not all.)

Based on even a cursory reading of the two letters we have that Paul wrote to the church, it is not hard to see what happened. While Paul was in their midst they were hungry for his teaching; like a mystical force, the power of God working through the apostle was strong, keeping at bay the surrounding force of the Corinthian culture. As soon as he departed, however, some of that divine power left with him, and the enveloping local culture pushed back into the lives of even those who had become Christians.

Part of their arrogance—and ignorance—was in thinking that so long as Paul was not present, they could do as they wished, or at least that there was no harm in diluting his gospel of Christ with a generous helping of Hellenist philosophy. Even if this were true, Paul would return—twice, and he would (probably) write two more letters of counsel to them (for a total of four). Paul was not about to abandon the Corinthian church to the invasive culture in which it dwelt.

v19-20

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.

A Texan would say that these Corinthians were “all hat and no cattle.” In Paul’s estimation they were all talk but no power. This is not a brand new thought, but a fresh context for a point he made earlier in Chapter Two. Here he is referring to the words they are using, but earlier he described the words he used when he first came to them (“my message and my preaching”).

Read 1 Corinthians 2:1–5.

Permit me to repeat something from our notes on this passage from Chapter Two:

On the surface our text could be interpreted to mean that the power of God was visibly manifested in Paul. But in everything Paul is saying here, he describes a process of getting himself out of the way for the “power of God” to go to work in the hearts of those in the Corinthian church.

Perhaps one of the more challenging concepts of life in Christ to apprehend, is that it is, at root, a mystical, supernatural process. The triune Godhead—works through people—invisibly, yet powerfully—for the good of others. There is a literal transfer of power from, say, the preacher to the parishioner, the teacher to the student. It isn’t the speaker’s power, but the power of God working through him—very much like what happens when the Spirit sends a bolt of lightning from the pages of familiar Scripture into the heart of the believing reader.

David Garland: Faith is based not on how entertaining, informative, or compelling the speaker is but on the power of God transforming the hearts of believers.

The apostle wasn’t interested in hearing their speech (logos), their rationale, their philosophical ramblings. He was coming to gauge the power of God in their midst—and he knew, from their level of arrogance, it would be found wanting.

v21

What do you desire? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love and a spirit of gentleness?

With Paul’s typical method of correspondence in mind—dictating to an amanuensis—I marvel at his ability to organize his thoughts and not lose track of his over-arching themes. In vv18–20 he revisited his much earlier theme of the superior power of God contrasted to mere words. And now this Chapter closes with a reference back to v15, where he contrasted “tutors” to “fathers.”

Read 1 Corinthians 4:15.

Now the apostle reuses that imagery of the “child conductor” compared to a father from v15 to conclude his thoughts before switching gears in the next chapter. A Lampel paraphrase:

How would you like me to return to you? Would you like me to come with the attitude and behavior of a non-related slave, beating you with a rod when I am displeased with your behavior? Or would you rather I came as a loving father, showing mercy with gentleness?

Sidebar: The editors of the NIV changed their original “whip” in this verse (which was a curious choice) to “rod of discipline” in the newest version of the NIV.

In Gordon Fee’s outline of this letter, this first section just closed (1:1 to 4:21) is entitled “A Church Divided—Internally and against Paul.” In this section he has addressed situations in the church brought to his attention by reports from others (e.g., “Chloe’s people”).

- He has addressed divisions in the church brought about by one group preferring one teacher, another group favoring another.
- He has labored untiringly against the pervasive influence of Greek “wisdom,” pleading with the Corinthians to reject the wisdom of the world in favor of the wisdom of God.
- He has painted a vivid picture of the servant-minded apostles that stands in stark contrast to how the Corinthians would like to see their leaders.

In the next two chapters, still addressing issues brought to his attention by others (“It is actually reported...”), Paul will move into issues of a more intimate nature in the church—ones which, even as we protest to the contrary, bear upon the integrity of the church today.

Session 44: Insidious “Tolerance,” part one

1 Corinthians 5:1-2

Preface

A friend of mine from high school days recently retired from his long-time pastorate of a church in eastern Iowa. The church’s new pastor is a woman. The name and denomination of this church are not important; today so many denominations and individual churches have adopted this church’s philosophy—which has been in place for decades—that what I am about to relate frankly leaves our church’s doctrine and practices as “the odd man out.”

The title and heading at this church’s web site seem innocuous, even encouraging:

By the grace of God, [our church] is a *diverse community* of believers and seekers, *united in following and sharing the way of Christ* with all persons through daily practices of devotion, justice, and love.

From their “Beliefs and Practices”:

Bible - [our denomination] considers the Bible to be *the inspired Word of God* and recognizes 66 books in the canon, but *beliefs vary on the inerrancy of Scripture*. *Individual congregations cover the spectrum from traditional to contemporary*.

Heaven, Hell - *Views on heaven and hell among [those in our denomination] range from belief in literal places, to trust in God to provide eternal justice or universal salvation. The church itself does not engage in “speculative theology” and lets its individual members decide for themselves.*

From their current pastor (a woman) in a recent church newsletter:

[Our church] has been known for decades as a place that welcomes a wide variety of people. For at least twenty years people have heard welcome proclaimed whether you are old or young, gay or straight, rich or poor... This welcome has been important in many ways, but has been especially important to our gay and lesbian friends. Meanwhile, many of the conversations around questions of welcome have shifted and we haven’t always kept up. Now instead of talking only about welcome to gay and lesbian people, we use abbreviations such as LGBTQ+ to talk about sexual orientation and gender identity. And while this shift has happened, many of us, especially those who aren’t in the middle of these conversations, are left scratching our heads and trying to figure out what the initials stand for, what definitions are, and what it means to be safe and welcoming. In light of this, [two other women], and I have been working together to adapt for our setting a training used at the University.

The training is called “Safe Zone” and will focus on conversation about where we have been, progress we have made in being welcoming, theological basis for welcome, how the conversations around sexual orientation and gender identity have shifted, what all those letters stand for, and how we can be aware of the needs of the LGBTQ+ community in order to be more welcoming... I hope that whether you are uncertain about what this means, whether you are a committed ally, or whether you identify as LGBTQ+, you will join us for either the Sunday morning or Monday evening session. (emphasis added in all quoted passages)

We live in a world in which many if not most of the clearly defined, sharp edges of God’s word have been systematically rounded off smooth. And this is not just some rebellious insurrection welling up from the masses in the pews, but is being handed down as prescribed “doctrine” and rules by church leadership. Paramount in this trend is what we see illustrated by the aforementioned church documents.

Many today have co-mingled the concepts of “acceptance” and “love,” rendering down the latter to an insipid and ignorant version of its biblical definition. By their usage, if one does not “accept”—i.e., affirm, celebrate—another’s beliefs and lifestyle, one does not “love.” It is clear from their documents and preaching that these churches are not “welcoming” these “diverse” individuals for the opportunity to teach them the literal truth from God’s word, to teach them a foundational, biblical walk of faith to replace their formerly errant one, but are,

instead, “accepting” them as they are with open, affirming arms, without the slightest intention of leading them toward the truth of Scripture.

But, as Solomon wrote, there is nothing new under the sun. This same thing was going on in the early, first-century church—not least in the city of Corinth—and has been going on ever since. The apostle Paul, as he opens our fifth chapter of this letter, reveals the face of true love, biblical love, godly love, for he makes clear to the Corinthian church that he will not countenance the “welcoming acceptance” of blatant sin.

Read 1 Corinthians 5:1-5.

v1

It is actually reported...

The adverb *holos*, modifying “reported,” could mean commonly or widely—that is, the whole world knows what is going on in your church! But a number of factors favor it being translated as it is in all our common versions other than the KJV: “actually.”

And just what was being reported to Paul from third parties?

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.

The word *porneia* in the Greek world simply meant “prostitution,” in the sense of going to the prostitutes and paying for sexual pleasure. The word, however, had been picked up in Hellenistic Judaism to cover every expression of extramarital sexual sin and aberration, including homosexual activity (Fee).

In this instance the form of *porneia* was that “a man has his father’s wife.” The language “father’s wife” tells us that it was not the man’s mother, but a subsequent wife of the man’s father, and the verb “has” (“to have”) tells us that this was not just a passing fancy or one-night stand, but an ongoing sexual relationship (Fee).

Though most people today would not classify it as such, to societies at the time and, more important, biblically, this was considered incest. Even with the licentiousness of the pagan world, this—having an ongoing sexual relationship with a woman who had been (or worse, was still) your father’s wife—was a bridge too far. David Guzik tells us that the ancient Roman writer and statesman Cicero said this type of incest was an incredible crime and practically unheard of. But let us not cite the questionable morals of those living in the first century Mediterranean culture; we will cite God’s word. Please turn to Leviticus 18.

In the first paragraph of Leviticus 18 the Lord (*Yahweh*) hands down to Moses the general rule that the Lord’s people are not to live by the standards of the unbelieving societies around them, but they are to follow the judgments and statutes of the “Lord your God.”

Read Leviticus 18:1-5.

Then in the next paragraph the Lord goes into the fine details of this, enumerating, it seems, every conceivable disallowed familial coupling. We will look at just the first two.

Read Leviticus 18:6-8.

To “uncover the nakedness” of someone means to reveal their nudity—especially the genitals; both words include an element of shame, disgrace, and the phrase came to mean (in many cultures, and for a long time) a euphemism for sexual intercourse. That is, the word for uncovering came in time to mean the reason for the uncovering.

Note here Paul’s focus: He cites the sin and those who have so committed the sin, but he does not dwell on the offense of the individuals, but on the reaction of the church to the offense. That is what shocks him, and it is that on which he focuses. And that is what makes this so pertinent for us today.

v2

You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead,

We can think of any number of reasons for the church's disappointing response to this situation.

- Even though this particular practice (lying with one's stepmother) was exceedingly rare in that society, it was nevertheless a society of moral and sexual license, which would have been familiar to many in the church.
- Some commentators would argue that they should have known better, that the injunction in the Jewish law should have been sufficient for them to know it was wrong. But the church in Corinth was made up of a mix of ethnic backgrounds: "Roman freedmen, indigenous Greeks, and immigrants from far and wide" (Garland)—including a strong Jewish community. The city was diverse, but it was a Roman city, imbued with Roman cultural values.
- Finally, and more pertinent to our application, David Guzik points out, "More than anything, the Corinthian Christians were probably allowing this in the name of 'tolerance.' They probably were saying to themselves, 'Look how loving we are. We are accepting this brother just as he is. Look how open-minded we are!'"

But we also cannot leave out the evidence of the other problems in the church that Paul addressed in the first four chapters. He had used before two key words found in this extended passage: He finds the Corinthians to be "arrogant" (NIV, proud)—puffed up—and, in v6, boastful, glorying in themselves. This would explain why they are not hiding this situation: they are proud of themselves for showing such tolerance and "grace" to their brother, and in their arrogance they are convinced theirs is the correct response. As a result, the situation has become known, and then the news delivered to Paul.

Remember, too, the factional disputes with which Paul opened this letter. The Corinth church was riven with ambition and jealousy, as well as arrogance and pride. James, the leader of the Jerusalem church and the brother of Jesus ties all this together for us, showing that the attitudes and behavior that were prevalent in Corinth would naturally result in their insipid response to the type of scandalous behavior revealed in our passage.

Read James 3:13-16.

Adding up all this evidence, how else could the Corinthians have responded when one in their midst was behaving in a way that made even unbelievers and pagans blanch? In their disordered state, they considered their response to be gracious, even Christ-like. But Paul's judgment was altogether different.

Session 45: Insidious “Tolerance,” part two

1 Corinthians 5:2-3

Preface

Before we press on into this passage, I think it would be a good idea to revisit the Leviticus passage we looked at in our previous session. [Just for a moment, return to Leviticus 18:8] Read verse.

First, let's give further evidence that the euphemism “uncover the nakedness,” that is used throughout this passage, refers to sexual intercourse. Two chapters on we see the same injunction as in v8, but this time a more explicit euphemism is used.

Read Leviticus 20:11.

Second, as we see here in v11, as well as in Leviticus 18:8, some might rightly ask, Why would lying with your father's wife uncover the nakedness of your father? This can be explained a couple of ways; to paraphrase that libidinous rapsallion, Bill Clinton, it depends on how you interpret the “s.” But both explanations rely on the Lord's definition of the ideal marriage.

Read Genesis 2:24-25.

There is no shame in nakedness between a husband and wife, because they are of “one flesh.” So, first, dishonoring one is dishonoring the other. If they are of one flesh, uncovering the nakedness of one is uncovering the nakedness of the other. Second, the “s” could mean possession.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:4.

Sidebar: This is one verse the editors have changed in the updated NIV.

Original: The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife.

Updated: The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife.

Still not the best literal translation, but improved from the original.

Be sure to note that this is mutual: In this situation, one partner in a marriage has no more or less control over the other partner. They have become one, and are mutually responsible for the other, and mutually “own” each other.

v2

In our last session we looked at the first portion of this verse:

You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead,

Now we add to this the continuation of his thought in the second portion.

so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst.

Here is an instance where the ESV and NIV do a slightly better job of flowing this text—though, of course, not as literal a translation.

NIV: And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this?

ESV: And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

The word translated “mourned,” or “filled with grief,” is an active verb. That is, Paul is not saying that they were to just feel bad about the sin; their mourning should include doing something about it.

Albert Barnes: [They should have been] so troubled with the existence of this wickedness, as to take the proper measures to remove the offender. Acts of discipline in the church should always commence with mourning that there is occasion for it. It should not be anger, or pride, or revenge, or party feeling, which prompt to it. It should be deep grief that there is occasion for it; and tender compassion for the offender.

Note that the NASB and KJVs (as well as the original Greek) say this in such a way that removing the man from their midst would be the logical and inevitable result of their mourning.

What a contrast to the Thessalonians! It struck me this week how different this Corinthian letter is from the one we recently studied, First Thessalonians—and, thus, how different the two churches. These were two congregations with entirely different personalities and level of spiritual maturity.

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:6-10.

At roughly the same point in his letter to the Corinthians, Paul was already berating them for their factions, and misguided quarreling.

By the way, most everyone concludes that the woman in this tawdry drama was not a Christian, because, as David Garland points out, “Paul makes no mention of what the church should do with her.” In accord with what he will write later in this chapter, the church deals with those in the flock; God will take care of the rest.

Read 1 Corinthians 5:12-13.

v3

The next paragraph, that begins with v3, is, to say the least, challenging.

Gordon Fee: Paul begins a sentence whose overall point is clear enough, but whose syntax is particularly complex, and whose concluding action (5a) and ultimate purpose (5b) are shrouded in mystery.

Read 1 Corinthians 5:3-5.

For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit,

Our first quandary is what Paul means by being “present in spirit.” Some take this to mean he is just saying, as we might use the phrase, “you are in my thoughts.” But the extraordinary, dynamic, judicial language he uses in the paragraph would seem to contradict this position. There is something far deeper going on here than that. The problem is, we can’t say for sure. But we have a clue in the last phrase of this verse (in the NASB)—and, more pointedly, in v4.

Fee takes issue with the softened language used by most modern translations:

NASB: as though I were present
NIV (orig.): as if I were present
KJVs: as though I were present
ESV: as if present

Listen to v3 in *Young’s Literal Translation*:

for I indeed, as being absent as to the body, and present as to the spirit, have already judged, as being present, him who so wrought this thing:

Now from the updated NIV, which really nails it:

For my part, even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. As one who is present with you in this way, I have already passed judgment in the name of our Lord Jesus on the one who has been doing this.

Now let's add the evidence from v4; the KJVs capture it well:

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Paul is not just saying, “you are in my thoughts,” or “think of me as if I were really there,” but somehow through the power of the Holy Spirit and the corporate church’s relationship through Christ Jesus, he is saying, not bodily but spiritually, “I will be there.” The “power of the Lord Jesus Christ” will be present, and in a similarly mystical but utterly real way, I will be present.

While we may not know precisely the full extent of what Paul meant by this, the evidence is clear that the apostle was quite serious that his spirit would be there as the church administered his judicial decree.

have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present.

Paul has already let on what his judgment is regarding this man who is at least sleeping with, if not living with his step-mother. In v2 he said that if the church were properly mourning over this situation it would have already passed judgment: the miscreant would have been “removed from your midst.”

removed = *airo* = a primary verb; to lift; by implication to take up or away; figurative to raise (the voice), keep in suspense (the mind); specially to sail away (i.e. weigh anchor); by Hebrew [compare <H5375> (*nasa'*)] to expiate sin :- away with, bear (up), carry, lift up, loose, make to doubt, put away, remove, take (away, up).

That is, send the man packing. I’m amused by what A. T. Robertson wrote: [The word means] “to lift up, to carry off. Decent self-respect should have compelled the instant expulsion of the man instead of pride in his rascality.”

So as this letter was being read to the members of the Corinthian church, they had no reason to wonder what Paul’s verdict—who had “already judged him”—would be.

Session 46: Assembling the Court

1 Corinthians 5:4-5

Preface

I would like to once again make the case for having and using multiple translations of God's word. My preparation for this week's session is a case in point.

I have used and favored as my principal translation since the early 1980s the NASB—New American Standard Bible—which is considered by most scholars to be the most literal of all the modern English Bible translations. For this reason it may not always “read” as smoothly as other translations, but it is highly prized for in-depth study.

As I have pointed out before, however, no translation is perfect, and this week I was, at least for a while, thrown off-course by three words the editors of the NASB inserted in v5 of our text. Not just reliable commentators, but the rest of our common modern translations (NIV, KJV, NKJV, ESV) interpret this differently. We will get to the particulars in a moment, but I want to use this opportunity to encourage you to have at your disposal, and to use regularly, multiple translations—not just in your study, but in your reading.

There is nothing wrong with having your favorite, the translation with which you are most familiar and comfortable. But please do not limit yourself to that version. In this instance, if I had restricted my study to the NASB, I would have come away with a skewed understanding of the relationship between Paul and the Corinthian church in this scandal—and I would have come to this class to teach an erroneous picture of what Paul was saying to the church.

In our previous session we learned that Paul, in a mystical yet powerful way—“in S/ spirit”—intended to be present with the Corinthians when they dealt with this scandal—scandal, that is, to Paul: the most scandalous aspect to the apostle was that the church did not see it as a scandal! And Paul was saying in v3, and in v4, that when the church had this letter read to them, and followed through on his instruction, he would be there with them—if not bodily, so powerfully in spirit it would be as if he were there bodily. And in vv4-5 he gets down to brass tacks.

Read 1 Corinthians 5:3-5.

vv4-5

As I mentioned last week, this is a challenging paragraph, primarily in knowing which parts of the sentence go together. For example,

ESV: When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present...

But this rightly raises the question, Why would they be assembled together not in the name of the Lord Jesus—especially for so important a task? So this phrasing (unnecessarily) speaks to the nature of their gathering.

NASB: In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus...

Here the phrasing connects “In the name of our Lord Jesus” with what Paul expects them to do by “the power of our Lord Jesus”; that is, to put the man out of the church. So we will do our best to put this in order—and we must begin, not with the beginning of v4, but with the beginning of v5, because it is here we encounter the unfortunate NASB translation. By addressing this first we will get a clearer picture of what Paul is attempting to accomplish by long distance. (Frankly, he would have benefited by having Skype at his disposal.)

The NASB opens v5 with “I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh...” Because the first three words are rendered in italics, we know that the NASB editors have inserted them. That is, the italics telegraph to the reader that these words are not in the original Greek or Aramaic, but have been inserted for clarity, because the

editors are of the opinion that they are implied by the text. Unfortunately in this instance they do not clarify, but confuse.

Until I began comparing vv4-5 to other translations (and reading the commentators), based on the NASB I heard the voice of Paul standing majestically and judicially on high, handing down his sovereign verdict on the Corinthian miscreant.

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...

The only way to read that is Paul demanding that the Corinthian church follow his dictate to put the man out, whether they like it or not. That is the effect of “I have decided”; and it is given extra strength by the inclusion of the calls to the “name of our Lord Jesus” and the “power of our Lord Jesus,” as if these were qualifying Paul—and Paul alone—to hand down this judgment. But that is not Paul’s intent, and the truer picture is captured by the other translations. We could pick any of them, but let’s use the NKJV.

Read 1 Corinthians 5:4-5. (NKJV)

So there it is. Church discipline is not to be conducted by one, or even a few, but by the church. And it all is to be conducted in the name of and the power of “our Lord Jesus Christ.” That authority is given to the church, not just its pastor, or elders, and certainly not just its founder.

Paul has already voiced his position; he has “already judged...him who has done this deed” (v3). And here in v5 he voices his position again, that the man should be delivered to Satan. But his is one voice added to the many. When the church executes this discipline, Paul, there in spirit, will cast his vote along with everyone else. He expects them to do what is right, but he is not dictating their behavior as lord of the manor.

In the name of... with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ...

The two calls to Christ Jesus are meant to bathe the entire process in the authority (“name of”) and power that comes only from above. Alternatively we could order this such that the first is for Paul, the second for the church with Paul, as Gordon Fee interprets vv3-4: “As for my part, even though not physically present, I am present with you in S/spirit, and as such I have already, by the authority of our Lord Jesus, pronounced sentence on the man who has perpetrated this deed; therefore, when you and my S/spirit are assembled together along with the power of the Lord Jesus, you are to carry out the verdict of turning him over to Satan.”

The effect of this “high Christology” is to place all proceedings “under Christ’s own divine jurisdiction” (Fee). Bottom line: Whereas, under the influence of the NASB, I saw a high pontiff declaring his verdict from the mount, backed up by the name and power of Christ, in truth Paul is ensuring that the church in its holy responsibility, along with him, proceeds under the power and auspices of Christ.

The church’s responsibility for this action is confirmed in the pronouns at the end of this chapter.

Read 1 Corinthians 5:12-13.

deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh,

Now let’s see what Paul means here by not just putting the man out of the church, but delivering “such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh.”

Sidebar: The original NIV’s “so that the sinful nature may be destroyed” is an unfortunate translation, implying that it is possible this side of glory for that regrettable aspect of the human experience to be extinguished. The updated NIV is in alignment with our other common translations with, “for the destruction of the flesh.” The original “so that” also suggests that this was Paul’s purpose for the excommunication.

We must understand that the destruction of the man's flesh is not the purpose of his excommunication, but only the result of his being put out; the purpose is his salvation "in the day of the Lord Jesus."

There are reams of discussion over what is meant by delivering the man to "Satan for the destruction of his flesh," but, while it is true that the word translated "destruction" (*olethros*) can certainly refer to death, this result would not fit with Paul's purpose in the man being ultimately saved in the day of the Lord.

Let's think of this in practical—and especially first century—terms. When a believer is removed from the Christian communion, he loses its fellowship, encouragement, and counsel; he loses its regular instruction and, most important in this instance, its reproof. To be put out of the church over egregious, unrepented sin is to lose the benefit of the body's regular rebukes over smaller offenses—which shape and form our walk in Christ.

Now, in our day, when one is put out of a local church (in the rare instance when this actually occurs), one can just stroll down the street to another congregation of similar ilk. No harm, no foul. But in the early days of the church, this would not be the case; being put out of the assembly would be akin to spiritual limbo: one would not fit in anywhere, and would be thrust back into the realm of Satan after the relative safety of the church. The church does not have a firewall against Satan's wiles, but it at least offers the protection of biblical instruction, encouragement, and the friendship and counsel of like-suffering souls. Now, losing the protection of Christ's kingdom, this man would be more vulnerable to Satan's.

This "destruction" could refer to possible sickness or injury, but probably more to the point, Paul hoped that the result of this excommunication would be this man's repentance—the "death" of his winking at sin—and his return to the church.

that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

Why? What was the apostle's ultimate goal in this verdict of the church? That when the church is literally greeted by her returning Lord, this man would be counted among them. As he does elsewhere, Paul is using eschatological language to speak of the man's salvation—salvation in the here and now, but only fully realized at the "Day of the Lord." Let's close with what Solomon says about a similar situation.

Read Proverbs 23:13-16.

Paul wanted his "inmost being," and that of the church, to rejoice when this man is rescued from the clutches of Satan, and turns back to "speak what is right."

Session 47: Out With the Old... Back to the New

1 Corinthians 5:6-8

Preface

My guess is that every one of us could attest to the spiritual reality that a little bit of sin left alone in a life will not on its own quietly fade away, but will instead deepen and spread through. I have always appreciated the remedy for this offered by Charles Swindoll: we must be diligent to “keep short accounts” with God. That is (as Barney Fife would put it) nip it in the bud—address and confess sin in our life immediately, before it has a chance to settle in as a way of life. Before it becomes “normal.”

So far in this fifth chapter of Paul’s letter he has been doing everything he can by long-distance to nip this sin in the bud in Corinth. He has made it clear to the church that instead of ignoring—or, some might conclude, even bragging about—the scandalous behavior of one in their midst, it is their responsibility to discipline this man, and put him out of the church.

Verses 1 to 5 prescribe the discipline; vv6-8 give the reason for it.

Sidebar: The passage before us today seems to be another indicator that there was indeed a sizable Jewish contingent in the Corinthian church. For this passage, vv6-8, is rich with Jewish imagery that would mean far less to Gentiles.

Read 1 Corinthians 5:6-8.

Leaven

Once again, so that we might understand Paul’s imagery we must first translate from the contemporary to the ancient. The word “leaven” (*zyme*) is not synonymous with “yeast” (as the NIV would suggest). Yeast as we know it—today, a store-bought product added to bread dough to encourage rising through fermentation—was virtually unknown in the first century.

The leaven of which Paul speaks is more akin to the starter that bakers use for such things as sourdough bread. That is, it begins as a small portion of dough held back from a new batch of (unleavened) bread dough and allowed to ferment—i.e., spoil. That fermented starter is then added to the next batch of dough, which quickly ferments the entire batch, causing the bread to rise. Prior to baking this batch, a small portion is again held back as starter for the next batch. And so on.

Not surprisingly, this process contained a possible health risk. What began as fairly benign corruption could spiral out of control as, week after week, corruption was added to corruption. It is for this reason that some scholars are of the opinion that behind the religious celebration of the Feast of Unleavened Bread was also a health provision.

Read Exodus 12:15.

By annually purging their dwellings of all leaven, and eating only unleavened bread for seven days, they would dramatically reduce the risk of old leaven reaching an unhealthy level of corruption, or contaminating other foods. Then, after the seven-day feast was concluded, from the unleavened bread they had been eating they would hold back a new starter for leavening. We see this imagery behind Paul’s second metaphorical use of leaven in v7 of our passage:

Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened.

v6

Your boasting is not good.

The word translated “boasting” (*kauchema*) in this context is synonymous with “arrogant” (*phusioo*) in v2. I don’t believe Paul is saying that they were literally boasting in (glorying in, KJVs), bragging about the man’s incestuous relationship, but, as in v2, they were so “puffed up,” so self-assured in their own vaunted spirituality, that they saw his behavior as either a trivial

offense, or even of no consequence. And why is it “not good”? It was detrimental—perhaps even fatal, if left alone—to the entire church body.

Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough?

Here is Paul’s first metaphor: the simple fact that leaven permeates the entire lump of dough into which it is placed. By nature and design, it grows and spreads. Though larger than the leaven starter, the fresh dough does not overwhelm or squelch the action of the leaven; it is the other way around, with the smaller leaven “corrupting” the entire lump of dough.

This is probably a familiar Jewish proverb (which Paul had used verbatim in his letter to the Galatians); we might say, “A bad apple spoils the whole barrel.”

Jesus had also used this same metaphor to warn his disciples off the false teachings of the Jewish leaders and the corrupting influence of the world.

Read Mark 8:11-15.

Leaven was a familiar metaphor for the corrupting qualities of impurity and sin. Just as the ignoring—or worse, acceptance—of sin in our own life causes sin to increase, the winking at sin in the church causes sin and corruption to increase there.

It can be a profitable mental exercise to sit back and imagine how not exercising discipline in the church permits sin to spread—from one person, to a family, to the church family, to the children in Sunday School, and out to the community at large.

v7

Now, in v7, Paul uses a second metaphor with leaven—and once again (3:16-17) the apostle pleads with them to be who they are.

Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened.

Now he uses the leaven to represent the leftovers of the old life that must be thoroughly “clean[ed] out” (KJVs, purge out). For the Jews in the congregation this would have immediately taken them back to the familiar Jewish ritual associated with Passover; every crumb of leavened bread was removed in a ceremonial search of each dwelling on the morning when the Passover lambs were sacrificed (Garland).

To all, Jew and Gentile, the call is to get rid of the remnants of the old life and live as “a new lump”—just as in fact they are. Don’t miss the importance of that last phrase, “just as you are unleavened.”

David Garland: This second metaphor shows how Paul couples the imperative [do this] to the indicative [you are]: Remove the old leaven so that you can start over as unleavened bread, *because that is what you are*. The imperative to cleanse out the old leaven is predicated on the indicative: they *are* unleavened. In other words, Paul tells them to be what they are, to live like Christians. Who they are is revealed in what they do. What they do comes from who they are. Turning a blind eye to such odious sin committed by one of their number betrays a shamelessness that contradicts who they are as the people of God. Their identity as those who have been “washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ” (6:11), as unleavened bread, should inform their behavior. Their behavior will then inform the outsiders of their identity as God’s people. (emphasis added)

Paul fleshes out the imperative (“Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump”) more fully in his letter to the Ephesians.

Read Ephesians 4:17-24.

Paul is calling on the Corinthians to behave and live as he described them in the opening verses of this letter:

...the church of God which is at Corinth... 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. (1 Corinthians 1:2)

For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed.

Staying with the imagery of the Jewish Passover, Paul now gives the reason why the believers in Corinth are a “new lump” and “unleavened.” Just as the sacrifice of the lamb and the use of its blood during the first Passover led to the Jews being “unleavened,” our Lamb has been sacrificed, His blood shed once for all. On this basis (His shed blood) we are accounted as a new unleavened lump.

v8

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.

Paul closes his thought by extending the metaphor even further, restating his previous admonition to “remove [the man] from [their] midst” and to behave as they truly are: a new unleavened lump. But now he does it in metaphorical terms, associating the Feast of Passover with all of the Christian life.

To put it succinctly, this last sentence is a call to holiness—for the believers in Corinth to live, individually, as the saints they are in Christ, and for them to zealously guard the integrity of their communion, the church. Even though it has been presented in a metaphorical, almost parable-like manner, this injunction could not be more important for us today.

- We are to guard the integrity of our personal walk with Christ, to live each day as what we truly are: saints redeemed by the blood of the Lamb.
- We are to guard the integrity of our corporate body, the church, to preserve it spotless and pure.

To close, let us return to the Ephesians passage about husbands and wives, and read again about how they represent the picture of Christ and His church.

Read Ephesians 5:25-27.

Christ cleansed (past tense) the church, sanctifying her with His own blood. It is now our responsibility to keep her “holy and blameless” until she is presented to her Savior and Lord on the Day of His return.

Session 48: Cleaning House

1 Corinthians 5:9-13

Preface

In vv1-5 of Chapter Five, Paul addresses head-on the scandalous situation in the Corinthian church regarding the man who is sleeping with, and probably living with, his step-mother—considered incest, not just by the Lord God, but by even the pagan society in which the church dwells. Paul states unequivocally that the man should be removed from the communion of the church.

In vv6-8, the apostle gives the reasoning behind his injunction: leaven, representing “malice and wickedness,” if left alone will corrupt that which is unleavened, representing “sincerity and truth.” In Christ, because of His sacrifice, the church is indeed unleavened; to remain so they must guard their purity by removing the “leaven” of sin—that is, the sexually immoral behavior of the man.

Now, in vv9-13, Paul, based on the correspondence he has received from the church, must “clarify” what he means by not associating with immoral people such as the incestuous church member.

Sidebar: I place “clarify” in scare quotes because many scholars are of the opinion that this was less an honest misunderstanding than a cynical means by which to argue the point. More than one commentator has posited that the Corinthians were reluctant to discipline the man because he was a prominent—influential or wealthy—member of the church.

Sidebar: With the evidence at our disposal we can assume at least three, and possibly four, letters from Paul to the church in Corinth—only two of which are extant and in the canon. The correspondence can be plausibly reconstructed thus:

1. Paul visits Corinth the first time (Acts 18), then departs.
2. The Corinthians (possibly) write him a letter seeking clarification on a few subjects; this letter probably included questions regarding sexual immorality.
3. In Paul’s first letter to them, to which he refers in v9 (not extant; written while he was in Ephesus), he tells them “not to associate with immoral people.”
4. They either misinterpret or reject his admonition, sending him (by way of Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus, 16:15-17) a second letter which would seem to be, based on the evidence in his reply, in places argumentative, even combative.
5. Paul answers this letter with a second letter to them—the epistle we know as First Corinthians.

Read 1 Corinthians 5:9-13.

v9

I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people;

associate with, company with = *synanamignysthai* = from <G4862> (*sun*) and a compound of <G303> (*ana*) and <G3396> (*mignumi*); to mix up together, i.e. (figurative) associate with :- (have, keep) company (with). *That is, more than just occasionally spending time with someone, but being identified with someone as part of the same group. If I wear a red fez that identifies me as a Shriner, then others will assume I subscribe to the philosophies and dictates of that group. At the same time, if they are familiar with my character, they will assume that my character and way of life is acceptable to the Shriners—because I am “in company with” the Shriners.*

immoral people, sexually immoral people, fornicators^{kiv}, whoremongers^{yt} = *pornos* = from *pernemi* (to sell; akin to the base of <G4097> (*piprasko*)); a (male) prostitute (as venal), i.e. (by analogy) a debauchee (libertine) :- fornicator, whoremonger. *In original secular Greek and early OT, this word group generally referred to prostitution, but in later Jewish*

rabbinical language, as well as usage in the NT epistles, referred not just to prostitution, but any kind of extra-marital sexual intercourse—including incest.

Paul's use of these two words reveals why it is so important for the church today to stand firm against this society's insistence—coming predominantly from the left—on eliminating the right of religious institutions to define their membership. If a church can be legally forced to include individuals whose very lives stand against biblical principles, then the church is doomed as a distinct oasis of righteousness in a desert of moral ambiguity.

This war is being waged not just in the courts, but through an incessant media campaign that is impossible to avoid. As we saw in the sad illustration of my old school chum's church in eastern Iowa, this philosophy of moral ambiguity is being eagerly embraced by many churches and even entire denominations.

- God's word says that women are not "to teach or exercise authority over a man" (1 Timothy 2:12), yet there are many churches today that have women pastors.
- God's word says that homosexuality is an abomination that, in the Mosaic Law, was punishable by death (Leviticus 20:13). Today there are churches that cater specifically to gay people, and many that welcome them.
- Many churches today do not hold their membership to a specific belief system, welcoming all whether or not they are in agreement with biblical truth.

All this renders the church impotent—exactly their goal.

vv10-11

Whether through ignorance, sheer obstinacy, or honest misunderstanding, the Corinthians wanted Paul to clarify what he meant for them not to "associate with immoral people." And in his answer he moves well beyond just the sexually immoral transgressor.

I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world...for then you would have to go out of the world.

Let's look first at his answer before we address his adding in of the other types of ne'er-do-wells. When you think about it, it is a bit of a stretch to believe that the recipients of his previous letter innocently misunderstood what Paul wrote about this. Even if they came back with remarks implied by what he writes here—that to be obedient to this they would have to leave this world all together—then what were they doing "boasting" about their association with the immoral man who was in their midst? No, the logical conclusion is that they knew exactly what he meant and were just being difficult.

Sidebar: It is possible the apostle is employing some dark humor here. In a number of ancient writings this phrase "go out of [or leave] this world" is a reference to death. He might be saying, If you think that you must avoid all the sexually immoral, you will have to die and go to heaven to do so. (David Garland)

Shortly before His arrest, Jesus prayed to His Father regarding His disciples,

"I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one." (John 17:14-15)

After Jesus rid the man called Legion of the many demons that possessed him, he was, not surprisingly, grateful. He asked if he might accompany Jesus, but the Lord replied, Go hide in a cave for the rest of your life. No, He said,

"Return to your house and describe what great things God has done for you." So he went away, proclaiming throughout the whole city what great things Jesus had done for him. (Luke 8:39)

We are not called to be hermits in a cave, to be isolated monks, separated from the world. We are to be in this world—just not of it.

But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person... —not even to eat with such a one.

In v11 Paul reminds the Corinthians of what he did say. Gordon Fee summarizes this nicely.

*Fee: Paul is not advocating that only the sinless can be members of the Christian community; rather, he is concerned about those who persist in the very activities from which they have been freed through the sacrifice of the Paschal Lamb (v7)... Because in Christ all things are new by the Spirit (2 Corinthians 5:14-17), those who belong to Christ must put off their former way of life (Colossians 3:5-11). Those who persist in that former way of life, *not meaning those who simply struggle with former sins*, essentially do not belong to this new community. By their own actions they have opted out; the community must distance itself from such people for its own sake. (emphasis added)*

This break in association with the unrepentant offender was to be extended even to the sharing of meals; this certainly applied to the Lord's Supper (since they would not be in attendance to partake of that privilege), but could also extend to more social meals. "Eating together connoted more than friendliness in ancient culture; it created a social bond. When Christians ate together, it reinforced and confirmed the solidarity established by their shared confession of faith in Christ" (Garland).

v10: or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters,

v11: or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler

There are a number of "vice lists" in God's word; none are exhaustive. When we examine the brief list included here, we discover that it is not random; Paul is not just adding a few other vices to keep company with "sexual immorality."

If we combine those listed in v10 with those listed in v11, and remove the duplicates, we end up with the following list:

- sexually immoral
- the covetous and swindlers,
- idolaters,
- revilers, and
- drunkards.

What I want to point out is that each of these both fit into the context of this letter—either hearkening back to a topic already addressed, or setting up a topic to come—and tie back to transgressions mentioned in the Law that warranted exclusion from the community.

We will not take the time in class to examine each one of these in detail, but I have prepared a chart that shows these connections. [See the hand-out at the end of these notes.](#)

The first column connects each of these vices to passages in this letter to the Corinthians, and the second column connects each back to a passage from the Law in Deuteronomy. And note: in each case in the Law, the penalty is not just excommunication, but death.

In addition, the case can be made for each of these added vices having a connection to the topic at hand: sexual immorality. For example, idolatry and fornication are associated with each other in Jewish thinking, and drunkenness and greed are associated with licentiousness in Greco-Roman thinking (Gowers in Garland).

vv12-13

In these last two verses, Paul wraps up not just this passage, but this section. I seldom bring out the structural details of any given passage, preferring to concentrate on what is being said, rather than the order in which it is said. But here I think pointing out the structure helps. These last two verses are presented in a quatrain (stanza or poem of four lines) of balanced pairs (AB/AB), the last line of which borrows from Deuteronomy 17:7, which is cited in the handout. Let's address these as pairs, rather than as verses.

12a: For what have I to do with judging outsiders?

13a: But those who are outside, God judges.

Referring back to the church's "misunderstanding" of his previous letter, Paul poses a rhetorical question, the answer to which is obviously "nothing." It is not within the church's purview or responsibility to judge those outside its communion. Why? God will handle that, thank you very much. In his own time—not least on The Day—the Lord God will judge the "quick and the dead."

12b: Do you not judge those who are within the church?

13b: remove the wicked man from among yourselves.

Capping this paragraph with a concise summation, Paul states what the church's purview is: those within the church. Even if the offender is just a Christian in name only (v11, "any so-called brother"), the church must deal with him. Then in no uncertain terms Paul restates the verdict: *Put him out of the church!*

1 Corinthians 5:9-13

Vice	1 Corinthians	The Law
(sexual) immorality <i>a (male) prostitute (as venal), i.e. (by analogy) a debauchee (libertine) :- fornicator, whoremonger.</i>	Chapter Five	Deuteronomy 22:20-22, 30 "But if this charge is true, that the girl was not found a virgin, then they shall bring out the girl to the doorway of her father's house, and the men of her city shall stone her to death because she has committed an act of folly in Israel by playing the harlot in her father's house; thus you shall purge the evil from among you. If a man is found lying with a married woman, then both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman, and the woman; thus you shall purge the evil from Israel." "A man shall not take his father's wife so that he will not uncover his father's skirt."
covetous & swindlers <i>greedy and rapacious racketeers</i>	6:1-11 <i>suing in pagan courts</i>	Deuteronomy 24:7 "If a man is caught kidnapping any of his countrymen of the sons of Israel, and he deals with him violently or sells him, then that thief shall die; so you shall purge the evil from among you."
idolaters <i>an image- (servant or) worshipper (literal or figurative) :- idolater.</i>	Chapters Eight to Ten	Deuteronomy 17:2-7 "If there is found in your midst, in any of your towns, which the Lord your God is giving you, a man or a woman who does what is evil in the sight of the Lord your God, by transgressing His covenant, and has gone and served other gods and worshiped them, or the sun or the moon or any of the heavenly host, which I have not commanded, and if it is told you and you have heard of it, then you shall inquire thoroughly. Behold, if it is true and the thing certain that this detestable thing has been done in Israel, then you shall bring out that man or that woman who has done this evil deed to your gates, that is, the man or the woman, and you shall stone them to death."
reviler <i>malicious false witness causing dissension</i>	1:18 to 4:21	Deuteronomy 19:15-19 "A single witness shall not rise up against a man on account of any iniquity or any sin which he has committed; on the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed. If a malicious witness rises up against a man to accuse him of wrongdoing, then both the men who have the dispute shall stand before the Lord, before the priests and the judges who will be in office in those days. The judges shall investigate thoroughly, and if the witness is a false witness and he has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him just as he had intended to do to his brother. Thus you shall purge the evil from among you."
drunkard <i>a sot; associated with idolatrous feasts</i>	10:7; 11:21	Deuteronomy 21:20-21 "They shall say to the elders of his city, 'This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey us, he is a glutton and a drunkard.' Then all the men of his city shall stone him to death; so you shall remove the evil from your midst, and all Israel will hear of it and fear."

Session 49: Trivialities

1 Corinthians 6:1-3

Preface

The next issue of *Reflections by the Pond*, to be published on Tuesday (January 15), is all about how many believers have made God so small in their lives, reducing Him to something we keep in our back pocket, just in case of emergencies. He has been reduced, in so many Christians' lives, to someone we call upon only after all else has failed. Instead of being acknowledged by us as Lord over every aspect of our life, someone with whom we commune with on a steady basis, He has become little more than a spiritual 911 call—or worse, just a Get out of Jail Free card.

In a similar—and, of course, far superior way—Paul is and has been making the same case regarding the church, especially since Chapter Three, where he spoke of how the church is built up from the foundation of Jesus Christ. Just as I make the case about believers making the Lord God too small, the apostle is making the case that believers are making the church too small. They are thinking of it, in turn, as a social club, a diner, even a bar (11:20-22, 33-34).

Paul sees the church through eschatological eyes; his position is that the church should be organized and behave—and its individual members live out their lives—in light of the role it and they will play after the return of Christ. That is, knowing how important and powerful it will be, the church corporate should thus live now; knowing the role individual Christians will play in the End Times, each believer should thus live now.

- The Lord God is more powerful and majestic (yet at the same time more intimately personal) than we typically acknowledge.
- The church is given far more responsibilities by her Lord, both now and in the future, than she typically employs.
- Individual believers, through their relationship in Christ and the ministry of the Holy Spirit, possess far more strength and spiritual insight than they typically ever put to use.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:1-3

v1

The first word of Chapter Six in the Greek is “Dare” (as in the KJVs), which emphasizes Paul’s indignation over this situation. I seldom appreciate the very loose (and sometimes overly flippant) paraphrase by Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, but on this verse I believe he captures the true flavor of Paul’s outrage.

And how dare you take each other to court! When you think you have been wronged, does it make any sense to go before a court that knows nothing of God’s ways instead of a family of Christians?

Does any one of you, when he has a case against his neighbor,

Taken by itself, the NASB “neighbor” is a little presumptuous, since the Greek (*heteros*) just means some one else, someone different. But we learn from vv5-6 that what Paul is referring to is a dispute between two Christian brothers

v6: ...but brother goes to law with brother, and that before unbelievers?

The apostle is truly horrified by this prospect.

dare to go to law before the unrighteous and not before the saints?

In a moment Paul will make his argument for why disputes between Christians are to be adjudicated within the church, rather than before civil authorities. Before we examine that, however, I would like to suggest another reason for keeping it within the family, so to speak—which gets back to what we have discussed previously.

This fallen world in which the church dwells is always looking for evidence to bring against it—any sign of weakness, any sign of trouble brewing, any sign of hypocrisy. The more

often the church addresses and settles disputes between its citizens, the fewer the opportunities for the world to demean it. But, of course, the more substantial reason is given by the apostle.

before the unrighteous

Christians and Jews alike referred to themselves as “the righteous,” so they would naturally call anyone outside the faith as “unrighteous.” The word used here (*adikos*) means “unjust”—or unjustified, as opposed to the justified in Christ. But the word can also mean dishonest, wicked, treacherous.

the unrighteous = *hoi adikoi* = from <G1> (*a*) (as a negative particle) and <G1349> (*dike*); unjust; by extension wicked; by implication treacherous; specially heathen :- unjust, unrighteous.

Paul could have used the word he did in Chapter Five: *exo*, translated “outsiders.”

Read 1 Corinthians 5:12-13.

By choosing to use the word *adikoi* here, Paul may be saying that not only are the civil judges on the “other side of the door” of the church, but that they cannot be trusted to render an honest verdict. We will see in a moment that there is a far more important reason why Christians are not to permit civil authorities to settle their disputes with each other.

saints = *hagios* = sacred (physical pure, moral blameless or religious, ceremony consecrated) :- (most) holy (one, thing), saint.

v2

Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world?

Read Daniel 7:21-22.

Read Daniel 7:25-27.

The “He” that begins v25 refers to the Antichrist. The phrase “time, times, and half a time” refers to the second three-and-a-half years of the Tribulation, called the Great Tribulation. Verse 27 makes clear that all kingdoms will be handed over to “the saints of the Highest One”—that is, Christ Jesus.

Read Revelation 2:25-28.

The details of these passages remain vague about the literal roles Christians will play during the End Times—some even claim that the Daniel prophecy refers not to saints, but to angels. Nevertheless, God’s word makes clear that the saints will be given roles of responsibility, and Paul insists on seeing the church from the perspective of the End Times; he sees the church (as well as individual believers) as an eschatological entity possessing an eternal importance that is sadly missed by most that are in the church. Our idea of the church—both local and universal—is far too small, too casual, too unimportant.

If the world is judged by you, are you not competent to constitute the smallest law courts?

While the NASB in the second question of v2 is a perfectly good literal translation, it doesn’t help us in seeing Paul’s overarching point. The other popular translations focus not on the “court,” but the legal action itself. Thus the ESV captures well the alternate interpretation shared by our other popular versions:

And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases?

Notice how the emphasis on “trivial cases” rather than “smallest law courts” ties in to vv7-8, below.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:7-8.

In other words, Paul is not stopping with his injunction against taking their disputes to civil courts; he is just as exercised over their disputes in the first place!

Gordon Fee: [He is] trying to shame them for having lawsuits at all. Such matters are “trivial”; they add up to zero in light of the coming eschatological judgment. People who do such are simply after the wrong things; they altogether miss the meaning of their present existence as the people of God, people who live in the present by the values of the future. (we will return to that last line)

v3

Do you not know that we will judge angels?

There are a number of different interpretations for this statement that believers will judge angels—some of them fanciful. God’s word nowhere states that Christians will pass judgment and/or punishment on “good” angels.

judge = *krino* = properly to distinguish, i.e. decide (mentally or judicially); by implication to try, condemn, punish :- avenge, conclude, condemn, damn, decree, determine, esteem, judge, go to (sue at the) law, ordain, call in question, sentence to, think.

There is general agreement that this speaks of the redeemed judging the fallen, evil angels that aligned themselves with Satan.

Read Jude 6.

Read 2 Peter 2:4, 9-10.

David Guzik offers a fascinating perspective on this.

Guzik: The destiny of redeemed men and women, to one day be higher than the angels, and to even sit in judgment of them, must have been a source of great annoyance to a certain high angel in heaven. He did not want to service an inferior creature now, and did not want to have that inferior creature one day be raised up higher than even he. So, he has rebelled against God, and is determined to keep as much of humanity as possible from even sitting in judgment of himself. We can imagine the perverse, proud pleasure Satan takes over every soul that goes to hell: “They won’t sit in judgment over me!”

How much more matters of this life?

Our common translations make this a separate sentence, but grammatically it flows together as one: “Do you not know that we will judge angels, not to mention everyday affairs?” (Fee) The phrase translated “matters of this life,” or “things that pertain to this life,” is just one word in the Greek.

biotikos = from a derivative of <G980> (*bioo*); relating to the present existence :- of (pertaining to, things that pertain to) this life.

There is nothing typically pejorative in the word, but Paul uses it here to reinforce his position that the believers in Corinth are disputing over trivialities. Of course they (and we) must deal with the “matters of this life,” but as people who belong to a different age, these things are not to become so significant that they result in disputes, even lawsuits, among believers.

Conclusion

Flesh being what it is, disputes between believers will arise, and when they do, they should remain in the church. But let us conclude by returning for a moment to that last line from Fee’s quote: We are to be “people who live in the present by the values of the future.” I

can't think of a better, more succinct definition for a Christian. Fee is not proposing an original thought; this is precisely the point Paul is making in this passage, in this letter—indeed, in every letter of his in the canon. It is the point Jesus made in his prayer in John 17.

Read John 17:13-19.

This is what is meant by living “in Christ” (4:17); living, speaking, and walking “by the Spirit” (12:3, Galatians 5:16-25). In Christ we are a new creation, a new type of being, with an extraordinary, supernatural future ahead of us. And as Paul has repeatedly said, we are to live as who we are.

Session 50: Finding the Right Judge

1 Corinthians 6:4-6

Preface

It occurs to me that we are presently studying a passage from God's word, similar to others, that could be used by the secular world to paint Christians as some sort of separatist freaks. There are, of course, sects that are—that lift out certain passages and use them as the basis for a separatist lifestyle. They use, for example, the familiar passage from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians about their not being "unequally yoked together with unbelievers" in which he paraphrases from Revelation 18 and Isaiah 52.

Read 2 Corinthians 6:14-18.

But our current passage—the first half of Chapter Six—is not a call for believers to never have any contact with unbelievers, nor is Paul saying that Christians are to never use the secular courts (i.e., courts established by the state). Elsewhere (Romans 13:3-4), he makes the case for the state to handle criminal cases. (Guzik) For example, if I murder someone, though a believer, my case would rightly be handled by the civil courts. But if I, a believer, somehow wrong another believer (e.g., slander, petty theft, dissension) to the point that the one wronged wishes to take action against me, that should be handled within the church, rather than the civil courts.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:3-6.

v4

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?

A quick survey of our popular translations reveals that not everyone agrees on how to interpret this verse. There are, essentially, two camps: one makes it a statement (presumably ironic), the other makes it a question; the first implies that the objects ("men of little account") are from within the church, while the second implies that the objects are from without.

Camp One (statement): Original NIV, KJV.

NIV: Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church!

Camp Two (question): 2011 NIV, NASB, NKJV, ESV.

ESV: So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church?

There are arguments to be made for both interpretations (older commentators favor the statement that suggests those within the church, while most modern commentators favor the question pointing to those without), but I am persuaded by this: The only way the statement interpretation makes sense is if it is delivered—and received—ironically; that is, Paul is stating with irony that instead of taking their disputes to the secular law courts, they should be appointing "no-accounts" in the church as judges to settle these matters.

While either interpretation can be made to work, a better fit seems to be the question interpretation which refers to those outside the church, which flows more smoothly out of vv1-3, where he takes the Corinthians to task for airing their dirty laundry in the secular courts, following it with (v4), "So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church?" (ESV)

v5

I say this to your shame.

In Chapter Four Paul said that his purpose was not to shame the Corinthians.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:14.

Now, however, in this setting he comes right out with it: “I say this to your shame”—that is, their behavior has brought shame upon them. And he follows this with a quick jab to their pride:

Is it so, that there is not among you one wise man who will be able to decide between his brethren,

We have established that the Corinthians were impressed with their own “wisdom,” as well as the Hellenist “wisdom” of the Greco-Roman community in which the church dwelt. From 1:17 to the end of Chapter Two, Paul addresses their misplaced devotion to human wisdom, and their pride in their own. And in that extended rebuke, he touches on something that speaks to this situation in Chapter Six.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:22-29; 2:4-5.

More on this in a moment.

Here in v5 the apostle employs irony and sarcasm to rebuke the church. A Lampel paraphrase: *You think you are so smart, so wise—yet for simple disagreements between two of your Christian brothers, you can't find even one person wise enough to adjudicate? Shame on you.*

v6

Paul tops this off, in v6, with a strong statement—or question, depending on the translation (NASB, ESV); the meaning is the same—an exclamation of incredulity.

but brother goes to law with brother, and that before unbelievers?

“goes to law” translates the verb *krinein*, which means “to hale before a court”—that is, one Christian brother hauls another Christian brother into court to accuse him before a civil judge.

Don't miss the importance of Paul's decision to refer to them as “brothers.”

David Garland: The following verses reveal that Paul is not upset simply because they aired their dirty linen before unbelievers but that they resorted to lawsuits at all. Brother Christians are pitted against brother Christians, adopting a cutthroat, adversarial relationship rather than one based on love and selflessness. The church appears to be infested with enmity between members, and he deliberately chooses an image from the family [*adelphos*] to remind them of their brotherhood... Paul uses the image of brothers slinging accusations against one another to shame them for impiously violating their brotherhood.

Here is their most egregious offense: behaving like adversaries, rather than brothers.

Conclusion

Now I want to return to those passages in Chapters One and Two. [Look at vv1:24-25.](#)

but to those who are the 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.

Let us not lose sight of the reasoning behind all this—the overarching theme of this first half of Chapter Six: The church is not to be literally separate, isolated from the rest of society; the church is to be distinctive from society. We are to be different, with a higher standard of behavior, answering to a Judge higher than any other on earth. Compared to the sovereign Lord who will judge us, the members of the US Supreme Court are no better than first-year law students.

This does not mean that we are free to disregard civil laws; it means that Christians have an extra responsibility, an extra burden to keep not just civil laws, but God's laws—that is, the precepts, standards, and ways from His written word. And this is what renders the church and each of its component parts—the individual believer—distinctive.

We might wonder: What is the basis for Paul's jaw-dropping incredulity over someone (or perhaps more than just one) suing a Christian brother in civil court? Why is he so exercised over this—not just expressing disagreement and correction, but one can almost here him banging his head against the wall in frustration over their stupid behavior?

In Chapter Two Paul paints a picture of people who are to be—indeed, who are—distinctive: different from the world around them. He first applies this to himself, offering his own behavior and manner of speaking as an example, in vv4-5:

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.

Then in the following paragraph he demonstrates how this same basis for speaking and living is to be a decisive force in their midst.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:6-8.

How did they obtain this “wisdom in a mystery”? From where did they obtain the ability to comprehend it?

Read 1 Corinthians 2:10.

The Corinthians are in possession of God's Holy Spirit, who, in turn, is in possession of “even the depths of God.” We—you and I, everyone who has placed his or her trust in Christ Jesus—have within us a direct, unbreakable connection to the mind, the power, the wisdom of very God! And then the apostle learns, as he rhetorically seeks confirmation in v1 of Chapter Six, “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?” No wonder he is banging his head against the wall! What are you, stupid!?

- Every believer in Christ possesses the Holy Spirit, who, in turn, knows the mind of very God.
- Every believer has as his Father, very God who never turns away the prayers of his children.
- Every believer stands now and will stand one day before the righteous Judge of all creation.
- Every believer, in Christ, will one day have a hand in judging the entire world—even angels.

With all that, how can we even think of relying on the unsaved to judge our family disputes?

Session 51: Going Against the Grain

1 Corinthians 6:7-8

Preface

In our last session, on vv4-6, we made the point that Christians are not to be separate, isolated, from the fallen society in which they dwell, but are to be—in their philosophy, their motives, their behavior, their convictions—distinctive from that society. They are to stand out, as Jesus described it in His Sermon on the Mount, as “salt” and “light”:

“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.” (Matthew 5:16)

That is easy to say, perhaps easy to personally resolve—but not always easy to live. You might say, “Well, I am a Christian; that makes me different; that makes me distinctive.” No, kemo sabe (as Tonto would say), it’s not that easy. Some parts of the Christian life are: “Love the Lord” (Psalm 31:23), “Hate evil” (Psalm 97:10), pay your taxes (Luke 20:22-25).

Some aspects of the righteous, obedient Christian life can be more difficult, because they cut straight across the grain of the flesh—our natural tendencies, our acquired taste for the things of this earth, and our inbred reflex of self-defense. It is in our nature to want what we want and to want it when we want it. And whenever someone takes from us something we want, it is in our nature to strike out, to strike back and take back.

But then, the Christian life isn’t about our nature; it is, by God’s grace, in spite of our nature. This is why there is such a thing as our ongoing sanctification; we must learn to live by the Spirit, we must learn how to walk with Christ, we must learn to live as a Christian. And for that, this world cannot be our teacher.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:7-8.

v7

In our last session we concluded that Paul was not just exercised over the Corinthians taking their disputes to the civil courts, but that in the church they were behaving like adversaries, rather than brothers. Here, in this paragraph, he takes the thought one step further.

Actually, then, it is already a defeat for you, that you have lawsuits with one another.

defeat, failure = *hettema* (hay'-tay-mah) = from <G2274> (*hettao*); a deterioration, i.e. (object) failure or (subject) loss :- diminishing, fault; **defeat in the sense of suffering great loss (Fee).**

A. T. Robertson points out that in classical Greek, *nike* (nee'-kay) was victory and *hetta* defeat. In the Septuagint version of Isaiah 31:8 *hetta* is used to express the utter defeat of the Assyrians in battle.

NKJV: “...already an utter failure for you...”

That is, It makes no difference if you win your case, if you win the argument or the debate in the church; you have already lost, because you were more concerned about your pride, your standing, than the well-being of a brother in Christ.

Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded?

Now we know for sure that we are in another universe. This is not the counsel from this world, this society; it is as foreign to it as day is foreign to night. This world teaches us to defend our rights—in fact, to demand (civil) rights that do not even exist (e.g., abortion, same-sex marriage). When attacked we are to retaliate (except if you are Israel, that is). But the apostle says that it is better to accept the wrong, to let ourselves be defrauded (cheated).

be wronged, suffer wrong = *adikeo* = from <G94> (*adikos*); to be unjust, i.e. (active) do wrong (moral, socially or physical) :- hurt, injure, be an offender, be unjust, (do, suffer, take) wrong. This is the verb for the noun translated "unrighteous" or "ungodly" in v1; it covers the whole range of activity that injures or does injustice to another person (Fee)—i.e., this is what the unrighteous do.

defrauded, cheated = *apostereo* = from <G575> (*apo*) and *stereo* (to deprive); to despoil :- defraud, destitute, kept back by fraud. This word suggests that some kind of property or business dealing is the problem. (Fee)

Here the apostle addresses, specifically, Christian brothers bringing lawsuits against each other. But he addressed the broader subject earlier in his letter to the Thessalonians. And he will again in his letter to the Romans. Let's look at that passage.

Read Romans 12:16-21.

Some have posited that Paul gets this idea from Jewish tradition or even the Greeks. But for the source of this manner of living Paul needed to go no further than the message he brought to the Corinthians: "Christ crucified" (1:23). The disciple Peter didn't understand this principle. He rejected it out of hand when the Savior explained that He, Jesus, must accept being wronged.

Read Matthew 16:21-22.

Jesus' response to Peter was swift and harsh.

Read Matthew 16:23.

Then Jesus explained further: "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me." (Matthew 16:24) Christ Jesus Himself is the source for Paul's pointed question, "Why not rather be wronged?"

v8

If your version of the Bible shows a paragraph break at v9, as does mine (NASB), it is unfortunate; it would make more sense to have the break (if at all) with v8, rather than v9. For there is a change of focus with v8—not obvious in the English—that flows into v9.

The key to understanding to whom Paul is speaking is found in the verb tenses of the Greek—keeping in mind that all of it is directed toward everyone in the church, the church at large, and even us today. Within that, however, he alternates between the plaintiff and defendant. The defendant is the one being "sued" for damages by the plaintiff upon whom the damages have been inflicted.

The verbs in v7—"be wronged," "be defrauded"—are middle/passive; that is, the verse could be translated, Why not rather allow yourself to be wronged? Why not rather allow yourself to be defrauded? Not clear in English is that even though the words are the same in v8 ("wrong and defraud"), they now switch to the active tense. This means that Paul has switched from speaking to the plaintiff (the one wronged) to the defendant (the one who did the wrong). We could outline it thus:

v7: Paul addresses the plaintiff

v8: Paul addresses the defendant

v9: Paul continues addressing the defendant

But, as I have pointed out, all this is also directed toward the church membership (I doubt that this is an isolated case). Perhaps it will help if I put on my director's cap and block this out as a scene in a play. Paul stands center stage, on the raised platform in the church building. He faces the congregation. Before him the litigants stand on the steps going up to the platform; this sets them above the audience, but lower than Paul. Then, of course, the seated audience is the church's real congregation. As Paul speaks in v7, he turns to the plaintiff, down

and to his left, but he also speaks from time to time over his head to the congregation (“...it is already a defeat for all of you, that you have lawsuits...”). In v8, Paul turns to his right to speak to the defendant, but also to the congregation (“...you all [‘yourselves’ (plural ‘you’)] wrong and defraud...”).

Sidebar: Of course (as always, it seems) not all agree. Of my two primary commentators helping me with this study, one says that v8 is addressed to the one who has done the defrauding, while the other says that v8 is still being addressed to the one who has been defrauded and is bringing suit.

On the contrary, you yourselves wrong and defraud. You do this even to your brethren.

The opening word or phrase of v8 (called an adversative) changes with each translation. I think the Young’s Literal Translation captures it best (mirrored closely in the ESV):

YLT: but ye—ye do injustice, and ye defraud, and these—brethren!
ESV: But you yourselves wrong and defraud—even your own brothers!

It seems clear in this extended passage (vv1-11) that Paul is not just saying, “Now, brothers, play nice. It would be better if you did not behave this way.” His point is that this is shameful behavior that cannot be permitted in the church.

Believe it or not, in v9 Paul will take this even a step further (note the crescendo in this passage), suggesting that the behavior of persistently threatening each other with lawsuits threatens their inheritance in the eternal kingdom of God. We will look at this in our next session.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:9-10.

It is bad enough what this inflicts on the integrity of the body: contention, strife, factions. But perhaps worse is the violence this inflicts on the witness of the church to the surrounding community. If there is little or no distinction between the church and the fallen, secular world, then what is the point? What good is it? It is then little better than just another social club.

J. Murphy-O’Conner (1979): A united community in which love dominates is the existential affirmation of the truth of the gospel. A community which contains within itself the divisions which characterize the “world” has no power to transform its environment, because the contradiction between theory and practice is too evident (Romans 2:23-24).

The church is to be set apart—sanctified, holy—from the ways of this world. It is to represent Christ and His ways to a world badly in need of Him. It is to look different from all the rest.

Read Colossians 3:12-15.

Session 52: In Name Only, part one

1 Corinthians 6:9-11

Preface

[Please turn to Galatians 5.](#)

A critical part of understanding our passage in 1 Corinthians (vv9-11) is determining who the apostle Paul refers to when he states that “the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

- In v1 he used this same word (plural noun, *adikoi*) to refer to those outside the church—i.e., nonbelievers (“...not before the saints”).
- In vv7-8 he used the verb form of the same word, “wronged” (*adikeo*), to refer to what one brother was doing to another. That is, one brother in the church is behaving like the “unrighteous” in his actions toward another brother.

So we need to ask ourselves, Just who in this scenario is not going to be inheriting the kingdom of God?

In Galatians 5 we have a setting with similarities to the one in 1 Corinthians 6. Paul offers this counsel for different reasons—different problems within the Galatian church—but here he makes the same statement about the kingdom of God. However here he includes an additional verb that is extremely helpful in understanding who he speaks of.

Sidebar: In both passages it is clear his reference is to the future kingdom of God, since he includes the word “inherit.” In other words, he speaks of the promise of heaven for believers, and their participation in Christ’s eschatological kingdom.

[Read Galatians 5:16-17.](#)

Here is the classic and ongoing battle between the flesh—i.e., the fleshly nature with which we are born—and the Holy Spirit, indwelling everyone who has placed their trust in Christ Jesus. When we combine this with other passages, such as Paul’s heart-rending treatise on this internal battle in Romans 7—not to mention our own experience—we can conclude that during our time on earth all Christians will suffer this conflict—some more than others, but all in one way or another. Depending on our progress in sanctification, depending on our level of spiritual maturity, there will be times when the Spirit wins, and times when the flesh wins.

Some today have been taught that when one becomes a Christian the flesh no longer holds any power over them. And it is easy to see how one could lift out verses such as v24 to make that case.

[Read Galatians 5:24.](#)

But then, if v24 means that, that from the moment we obtain the Holy Spirit at conversion the battle against the flesh is forever won, then why v25?

[Read v25.](#)

Why must Paul encourage us to “walk by the Spirit,” and warn against becoming “boastful, challenging one another, envying one another” if the battle is over? Because it is not over—and will not be this side of heaven.

Sidebar: [Read v18.](#)

Vincent: We might have expected, from what precedes, “under the flesh.” But the law and the flesh are in the same category. Circumcision was a requirement of the law, and was a work of the flesh. The ordinances of the law were ordinances of the flesh; the law was weak through the flesh.

After laying out the nature of the conflict, Paul offers a list of unrighteous behaviors that exemplify the “desires of the flesh” (vv19-21a), followed by a contrasting list of righteous behaviors that exemplify the fruit of “walk[ing] by the Spirit” (vv22-23).

Tucked in between, at the end of v21 after the long list of sinful behaviors, we have essentially the same statement Paul makes in 1 Corinthians 6:

...of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Notice that to the Galatians instead of just saying “the unrighteous,” as he does to the Corinthians, he writes, “...those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” “Such things” clearly refers back to the “deeds of the flesh” just listed, but what does “practice” mean?

practice nasb,nkjv, **do** kjv,esv, **live (like this)** niv = *prasso* = a primary verb; to “practice”, i.e. perform repeatedly or habitually (thus differing from <G4160> (*poieo*), which properly refers to a single act); by implication to execute, accomplish, etc.; specially to collect (dues), fare (personally) :- commit, deeds, do, exact, keep, require, use arts.

I would next like to read an account, written by someone who was there, that is a perfect, contemporary illustration of the situation described in 1 Corinthians 6, and also illustrates the difference between sinning, and practicing a life of sin.

a pastor: I vividly remember a case where a brother in the church was suing another brother over a piece of equipment he had borrowed and broken. The one brother was wealthy, the other poor (thus why he had to borrow the equipment). When the borrower could not fully pay for the damages, he asked for time to make it right. The first brother wanted the whole amount right away or he was going to sue him for it. The head of the church board and I spent hours going between these two men but the wealthy brother would not relent. Finally, I and my fellow church leader offered to pay the amount on behalf of the poorer brother. We emptied our pockets before him, down to the last penny we had on us, thinking that might shame him. His response was, “If you can’t come up with the full amount tonight, I am suing tomorrow.” The church leader guaranteed the rest on the spot and wrote a check for it (a considerable amount).

Because every follower of Christ will do battle with his or her fleshly nature, and some times lose the skirmish, every follower of Christ will, at times, sin. But our gracious God has set up a system for dealing with such a situation: confession.

Read 1 John 1:8-9.

Let’s select just one from Paul’s long list of “deeds of the flesh”: outbursts of anger. Is there among us anyone who has not committed this sin? Then what keeps any of us from being included with those “who practice such things [and] will not inherit the kingdom of God”? Answer: Confession—and the concomitant forgiveness of God.

Well, you say, a flash of anger isn’t so bad. There are much worse sins. True—but beside the point. King David committed adultery and murder, among other unrighteous acts, in the episode with Bathsheba. Yet a gracious God forgave him those sins—because David confessed them and sought the mercy of God. We might say today, he “owned” the transgressions; he admitted that he did them, and stood before a holy God without excuse.

We see this in the behavior of the poor brother in the story above; he admitted that he was guilty of breaking the borrowed equipment and sought a way to repay the damages. Even though the offense has been committed, this is how the indwelling Holy Spirit gives us ultimate victory over sin: When we sin against a holy God, His Spirit (if we are His child) convicts us and encourages us to confess the sin. If we don’t, we are miserable; if we do, our gracious God forgives us, and the sin is expunged from the record (Micah 7:18-20, Psalm 103:10-12).

None of this means, of course, that there may not be consequences to our sin, or that the Lord will not discipline us as a loving Father. But it does mean that our transgression will not be accounted to us.

But then, you ask, what if we do it again—and again? Isn't that "practicing" sin? It should always be cause for concern when there is a persistent temptation that finds us easy prey repeatedly. But this is still different from what Paul means by "practice such things." Look at how Christ instructed Peter.

Read Matthew 18:21-22.

Confession of the sinner is not stated, but is implied in this passage. Peter's question to the Lord keys off the procedure Jesus has just outlined for church discipline in vv15-20. We can infer from v15 that the sinner confesses his wrong when it states, "if he listens to you."

"If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother."

If Jesus says that brothers are to not set a limit on forgiveness, would Father God forgive less?

Returning to our example of "outbursts of anger," if that is my predilection, and the offense with which I most often struggle, it will probably occur more than once. The critical measure of my relationship to Christ is found in what happens next.

Every one of us has some point of weakness, some temptation that Satan knows is his best bet for disrupting our fellowship with God. So long as we are on this earth the struggle between Spirit and flesh will persist in one form or another. What we do about it will reveal whether we will or will not "inherit the kingdom of God." And the difference is played out in the story of the two parishioners.

- The poor man admitted his offense against his church brother—damage to the borrowed equipment—and expressed his determination to make right the cost of the damage; he was just unable to do it in full immediately.
- The wealthy man, by contrast, was insisting on full compensation immediately. Absent that, he would immediately file suit in civil court for the damages.

Both men were guilty of an offense against a supposed brother; both men were guilty of sin. But only one was at risk of not inheriting the kingdom of God—not because of his sin, nor even his immediate response to it, but because his response revealed a dramatic—and persistent—absence of "the fruit of the Spirit" (vv22-23). He refused to forgive the offense and exhibited a decided lack of "patience, kindness...gentleness."

Sidebar: Let's be clear: No one can say with certainty what is in someone else's heart; no one can declare with certainty whether someone else is a child of God in Christ. Neither do our actions determine whether we will inherit the kingdom of God; only our relationship with Christ determines that. But our actions, especially when observed over time, can reveal whether we are walking by the Spirit or walking by the flesh. In our example it is clear that the wealthy man was not walking by the Spirit. We can only make an educated guess about his relationship with Christ.

What happens next after someone sins is the critical piece of evidence. When Nathan called King David on his sin with Bathsheba, when he pointed a bony finger at the king and declared, "You are the man!" (2 Samuel 12:7), David offered no excuse, no rationale, no denial. His first response was, "I have sinned against the Lord" (2 Samuel 12:13). And the Lord forgave his sin—but there was a price to be paid: God took the life of the child from Bathsheba.

So let's get down to it: what is the difference? What constitutes "practic[ing]" unrighteousness in this context? When we sin against God, what do we do next?

Charles Haddon Spurgeon is reported to have said, "The grace that does not change my life will not save my soul." The flesh would have us shrug off sin as nothing to worry about—in

fact, the flesh would have us not call it sin at all! But the indwelling Spirit in a believer will convict him to repent and confess each time he sins. When that Spirit is absent, it is far easier—indeed, it is perfectly natural to continue sinning.

Regarding the Greek behind the word “practice”:

- “The tense of the verb (present) indicates a habitual continuation in fleshly sins rather than an isolated lapse, and the point is that those who continually practice such sins give evidence of having never received God’s Spirit.” (Boice)
- Practice “represents a present participle, ‘people doing such things’, and it carries the implication that they do them constantly.” (Morris)
- “The verb *prassontes* [practice] referring to habitual practice rather than an isolated lapse.” (Stott)

That is, the word “practice” refers to a sinful way of life—a way of life that gives evidence to “the deeds of the flesh” itemized (as a subset) in vv19-21. It is a self-serving, unrepentant life that, probably, does not know Christ or His Spirit.

This prepares us for our passage in 1 Corinthians in our next session.

Session 53: In Name Only, part two

1 Corinthians 6:9-11

Preface

In our last session we examined Galatians 5:21, where Paul writes that “those who practice [the deeds of the flesh] will not inherit the kingdom of God.” We used this passage to gain insight into what he writes to the Corinthians in Chapter Six—specifically, what are the parameters that define those who “will not inherit the kingdom of God”?

Since Paul is addressing members of the church in Corinth, and has referred to them as brothers in Christ, is he saying that there are Christians who will not inherit the kingdom of God? When he offers a list of unrighteous behaviors that includes such things as thievery, greed and drunkenness, does this mean that if at any time in our life we were guilty of such behavior, we will not be included in Christ’s eternal kingdom?

We concluded in our last session that because he included the word “practice” in Galatians 5, Paul defined the unrighteous as those who repeatedly, habitually demonstrate such behavior. More to the point, the word “practice” refers to a sinful way of life—a way of life that gives evidence to “the deeds of the flesh” rather than a life walking by the Spirit, giving evidence to the work of God in a life. It is a self-serving, unrepentant life that, probably, does not know Christ or His Spirit.

Now we are ready to consider our passage in First Corinthians.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:9-11.

v9a

...the unrighteous...

It is also a great help to understanding Paul’s meaning that he employs the same word, translated “unrighteous” in v9 that he did in v1 when he was referring to those outside the church (“...and not before the saints”).

unrighteous = *adikos* = from <G1> (a) (as a negative particle) and <G1349> (*dike*); unjust; by extension wicked; by implication treacherous; specially heathen :- unjust, unrighteous.

Even so, placing this verse in context, v8, leading into v9 seamlessly, at least seems to bring “the unrighteous” back into the church.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:8-9a.

So how do we reconcile this—if, indeed, it requires reconciling? I do not believe it does; I believe this passage (vv9-11) is Paul’s way of “putting the fear of God,” as it were, in the Corinthian church. This is how he means to slap up-side the head certain individuals in that church—not just the litigious brethren. Let’s put together the evidence.

We know that the apostle Paul subscribes to the security (or perseverance) of believers, as he wrote to the Romans regarding Israel.

Read Romans 11:28-29.

If God has called you, and has placed the Holy Spirit within you, that’s it. That security will not be revoked. The writer to the Hebrews concurred.

Read Hebrews 7:23-25. (forever = completely = uttermost = eis)

All of this is a work of God, a work of His grace. It has nothing to do with us.

Read Philippians 2:12-13.

That is, Christ Himself is the one who guarantees the inheritance of every believer. If you belong to Him, no matter what travails you pass through, He will see you through to the end.

So we know that Paul cannot mean in this passage that the Corinthians should beware lest their behavior will cause them to lose their salvation. Nevertheless, the package of vv8-9 comprises a stern warning.

will not inherit the kingdom of God.

The word “inherit” tells us that the context is eschatological; that is, Paul speaks of the kingdom that will be inaugurated when Christ returns to rule over the entire earth, culminating in “a new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21:1). Thus it is the apostle’s favorite way of referring to the eternal salvation Christians have in Christ. The “unrighteous” will be found guilty when they die, or at the final judgment of Christ, and they will have no part in His kingdom.

vv9b-10

The apostle helpfully defines for us what he means by the unrighteous. He offers a subset of behaviors that, when unrepentantly “practiced,” reveal an unrighteous state.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:9b-10.

I want to spend just a few moments defining these—especially since they vary in the multitude of translations we use. And I will try to walk a fine line that is both clear and not overly graphic. Nonetheless, we need to understand what is being said here. In this list Paul repeats some he listed in Chapter Five, but adds some more. The first set of five (four in some translations that group together the last two) explicitly or tangentially concern sexual sin.

fornicators, sexually immoral = *pornoi* = any kind of extra-marital sexual intercourse, including incest. This is the standard catch-all word for any sexual sin.

idolaters = *eidololatries* = In Romans 1:22-25 Paul associates idolatry and immorality—the first a sin of the mind against God, the second a sin of the flesh. W. E. Vine adds that “an idolater is a slave to the depraved ideas his idols represent, and thereby, to divers lusts.”

adulterers = *moichos* = Lange: “...that inordinate indulgence of the sexual passion which violated alike the Divine ordinance of marriage, and the rights of the married parties.”

effeminate, male prostitutes = *malakoi*
homosexuals, sodomites = *arsenokoites*

Out of all the descriptions I read for these words, Dr. Peter Lange offers what I believe to be the description best suited to mixed company: “The former denotes those who allowed themselves to be used as women (*qui muliebria patiuntur*); the latter, such as used the former in this unnatural way” (i.e., passive and active).

[**NOTE:** The difference between ancient and modern perceptions of societal homosexuality is fascinating. In the ancient world this practice had less to do with sexual proclivities than with status and power. Because of the nature of the topic I have chosen not to include that discussion in the class or notes proper. I have prepared a separate handout—with text taken from an end note in David Garland’s commentary—that illuminates this. The information is not profane or prurient, but it is detailed. If you find this topic sufficiently unpleasant, please disregard the handout (last page of this session).]

The next five behaviors are not necessarily related to sexual sin (although they could be), and are sufficiently general in nature—which might just make a few of us a little uncomfortable.

thieves = *kleptes* = from <G2813> (*klepto*); a stealer (literal or figurative) :- thief. Compare <G3027> (*leistes*).

covetous, greedy = *pleonektes* = This word, along with at least one more in this list plays right into the situation in the Corinthian church: from <G4119> (*pleion*) and <G2192> (*echo*); holding (desiring) more, i.e. eager for gain (avaricious, hence a defrauder) :- covetous. Look at v8: "...you yourselves wrong and defraud."

drunkards = *methysos* = a sot.

revilers, slanderers = *loidoros* = from *loidos* (mischief); abusive, i.e. a blackguard :- railer, reviler.

swindlers, extortioners = *harpax* = This word, too, has ties to the situation in Corinth: from <G726> (*harpazo*); rapacious :- extortion, ravaging.

harpazo = from a derivative of <G138> (*haireomai*); to seize (in various applications) :- catch (away, up), pluck, pull, take (by force).

A. T. Robertson makes a good point, that the foregoing list represents "a solemn roll call of the damned, even if some of their names are on the church roll in Corinth whether officers or ordinary members."

Every church of even moderate size includes individuals that are "Christians" in name only. They may not be guilty of gross duplicity; they may be even fooling themselves—they may truly believe they are Christians. This ignorance may be exacerbated by their societal environment (as it was in the Corinth church); by listening to the lies of the unsaved community, and by those lies seeping into the church itself, they believe themselves to be "spiritual"—hence, a Christian. But since they are not in possession of the Spirit of God, they are not truly s/Spiritual.

So our effort to determine those of whom Paul speaks—those who are included in the "unrighteous"—cannot include the factor of church membership. The criteria must exclude only those who are truly followers of Christ and in possession of His Spirit. And we simply cannot say with certainty that everyone in the pews on a Sunday morning is righteous in Christ.

That being said, as Garland writes, "The ten sins in this list reflect the behavior of those outside the church, the *adikoi* (unrighteous) who are guilty of open rebellion against God and destined for judgment." That is a pretty good term: "open rebellion." A believer in possession of God's Spirit cannot for long be in a state of rebellion against God. Some would say that a Christian can never be in a state of rebellion, but for most of us, our own history—as well as the character studies in God's word—proves that untrue. The Christian can, for a time, whether minutes or months, rebel against His Lord. But if he or she truly belongs to Him, Christ Jesus will always bring him or her back—some times rather painfully, limping and scarred, but back.

...[none of these] will inherit the kingdom of God.

Paul closes the list by restating that those who persist in such sins, those who make this a way of life, will not inherit the kingdom.

v11

Such were some of you;

Interesting phrase this, when you think about it. I suppose one can make the case that, as Paul says "some," not everyone in the church was once guilty of at least one of these behaviors. But it is also true that everyone in the church, was, at one time, unsanctified and unjustified, and on their way to hell.

but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified

Verse 11 brings welcome relief to the tension we have felt in this passage up till now. The apostle has not been saying that the eternal kingdom life of every believer in the Corinth church is in jeopardy. No, they had been

- **washed**

This may be an allusion to baptism, but Paul is primarily concerned with the “spiritual transformation made possible through Christ and effected by the Spirit” (Fee). Their old life had been scrubbed away, rendering them

- **sanctified**

They were now set apart for Christ, holy, and different from the unsaved world because they had been

- **justified**

The believers in the Corinth church had a right legal standing before a holy God; they had been declared righteous by Him.

How was this accomplished?

in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.

Conclusion

The indwelling Holy Spirit is key to all this. Without Him, we remain as those described in the list of evil behaviors, and we have no means by which to extricate ourselves from such a lifestyle. We are lost. Period.

With Him, however, we are not lost. But because we remain in flesh, and the conflict between the flesh and the Spirit remains, we can, from time to time, behave as if we are not children of God and fellow heirs with Christ Jesus. Even so, the Spirit is the key.

Read Ephesians 1:13-14. (a most precious verse)

Some of us, also from time to time, may wonder if we are truly believers. We know painfully well the ongoing struggle we have with the flesh—the old sin nature. Would I behave this way if I were a Christian? Shouldn't it be easier to live a righteous life? Maybe I am not a Christian. The fact that such introspection occurs is one possible sign that indeed you are.

Those in whom the Spirit dwells cannot forever be in a state and condition of rebellion and sin. Christ will not let them. At some point the believer will be driven to his knees in confession and repentance. He will cry out to his Savior and Lord, pleading for forgiveness and the restoration of the sweet communion he had once enjoyed—as King David put it in Psalm 51, “Restore to me the joy of Your salvation.”

Short of conversion, the one without the Spirit cannot and will not do this. He will continue “practicing” (Galatians 5:21) their unrighteousness.

In this passage, the apostle Paul is once again prodding the Corinthians to “become what they are”—to stop behaving as the unrighteous that are without the Spirit, and start behaving as those who do have the Spirit. Because they do! And that is to be the lesson for us: For Christ's sake and the sake of His kingdom we are to live as if He is our Lord. Because He is.

I can do no better than to conclude this lesson with, first, Gordon Fee's, then second, John MacArthur's respective summations.

Fee: For Paul there is to be the closest possible relationship between the experience of grace and one's behavior that evidences that experience of grace. Paul himself is as concerned as anyone that the latter (right behavior) should not be perceived as coming first or as leading to the former (the experience of grace). But those who concern themselves with grace without equal concern for behavior have missed Paul's own theological urgencies by several furlongs. It is precisely for these reasons that the warning texts in Paul must be taken with real seriousness. Security in Christ there is, to be sure, but it is a false security that would justify sinners who have never taken seriously “but such

were some of you.” That is to whitewash the sinner without regeneration or transformation; Paul simply would not understand such theology.

What is most often missing in such theologies is the central ingredient in Paul: the transforming work of the Spirit. And in his case that is not simply to be understood as theological jargon. It is rather predicated on the Spirit’s coming into the world, signifying the turning of the ages, so that the realities of the future are already at work in *power* in the present age. **The Corinthian problem was not with their experience of the Spirit, but with their misunderstanding of what it meant to be Spirit people.** Our problems are usually of another kind. The Spirit belongs to the creed and to our theology, but is all too often left there, so that the Spirit’s genuinely transforming and empowering work is often left until the Eschaton [end times; return of Christ], rather than experienced in the process of arriving there. (bold emphasis added)

John MacArthur: Paul’s purpose here is not to give a list of sins that will indicate one has lost his salvation. There are no such sins. He is rather giving a catalog of sinners who are typical of the unsaved. Persons whose lives are totally characterized by such sins are not saved and [are] therefore unrighteous, unjustified. They shall not inherit the kingdom of God, because they are not right with God. They are outside the kingdom, the sphere of salvation.

The application to believers is clear. “Why, then,” Paul asks the Corinthians, “do you keep living like the unsaved, the unrighteous? Why do you keep falling into the ways of your old life, the life from which Christ has saved you? Why are you following the old standards, and having the old selfish, ungodly motives? You are to be separated from the world’s ways, not following them. And specifically, why are you taking your problems to the world’s courts?”

A believer is a new creation, with a new inner personhood made after God’s own person, and there is no longer unbroken unrighteousness. But the flesh can become dominant in the disobedient Christian, so that he may take on the *appearance* of an unbeliever...

A transformed life should produce transformed living. Paul is saying very strongly that it was unacceptable that some believers were behaving like those outside the kingdom. They were acting like their former selves. They were not saved *for* that, but *from* that. (emphasis added)

1 Corinthians 6:9

Pederasty was the most common male homosexual act in the ancient world (Schrage 1991: 432). That is because sexual propriety was judged according to social values: “The ancients did not classify kinds of sexual desire or behaviour according to the sameness or difference of the sexes of the persons who engaged in a sexual act; rather, they evaluated sexual acts according to the degree to which such acts either violated or conformed to the norms of conduct deemed appropriate to individual sexual actors by reason of their gender, age, and social status” (Halperin, OCD 720; cf. Dover 1978: 277). A person’s rank and status determined what was considered acceptable or unacceptable. On one side were free males; on the other side were women and slaves. A free male was free to choose women, men, or boys as sexual objects without the majority taking offense as long as he did not demean his status as a free male. A free male could not “indulge in passive acts of love like a woman or a slave” without incurring a stigma (Stegemann 1993:164). But he could use boys, slaves, or persons of no account with impunity as long as he remained “on top.” “Phallic insertion functioned as a marker of male precedence; it also expressed social domination and seniority... Any sexual relation that involved the penetration of a social inferior (whether inferior in age, gender, or status) qualified as sexually normal for a male, irrespective of the penetrated person’s anatomical sex, whereas to be sexually penetrated was always potentially shaming, especially for a free male of citizen status [e.g., Tacitus, *Annales* 11.36]” (Halperin, OCD721). Homosexual acts between free males were regarded with contempt because one partner would have to take on the passive role (insertivity) suited only to women and slaves (Veyne 1987: 204). We see this cultural attitude manifested in Petronius’s novel, *Satyricon* (91-100). Two close friends, Encolpius and Ascyltus, fight over the sexual favors of their slave boy, Giton; but they never engage in any homosexual act between themselves.

It should be noted also that “neither sexual desire nor sexual pleasure represented an acceptable motive for a boy’s compliance with the sexual demands of his lover” (Halperin, OCD 721). The younger partner was not to be motivated by, or express, passionate sexual desire for his senior lover, lest he compromise his own future status as a man. As a result, sexually receptive or effeminate males were ridiculed. Society would have considered same-sex sexual acts between two men of equal standing to be shameful. What some in modern society find acceptable—male same-sex eroticism between equals in a committed relationship—would have been condemned in ancient society. Dover (1978:104) contends that penetration was not regarded as an expression of love but “as an aggressive act demonstrating the superiority of the active to the passive partner.” J. Davidson (1997:169-82) challenges this interpretation as anachronistic but imposes his own biases on the evidence and does not win the argument. Paul differed from his society’s sexual mores in condemning all same-sex sexual acts. (David Garland, *1 Corinthians*)



Session 54: Whither the Body?

1 Corinthians 6:12

Preface

I initially approached this next extended passage—vv12-20—with fear and trepidation; considering the general makeup of our local, Sunday Morning class, just how much practical application could be drawn from a text about going to prostitutes? But, as usual, I was consoled and encouraged by digging into the text and discovering the over-arching theme and purpose of this passage. For, at its root, the text is not about how wrong it is to visit prostitutes—I think we can all agree on that point up front—or even how wrong and detrimental to our walk with Christ is any sexual immorality (*porneia*).

So whether you have been happily and faithfully married for one hundred years or a young upstart with all cylinders surging in overdrive; whether you are a young woman rejoicing in her first child or have been a widow for many years; no matter your age, sex, or marital status, this passage has relevance, because no matter how old and decrepit your body may be, you still have one. We all have a body, and this passage is about how we are to think of it. Precisely, it is about the proper balance between our physical self (*soma*) and our S/spiritual self (because of the indwelling *pneuma*)—and even more specifically, to whom that body belongs.

Paul is, of course, preaching against sexual immorality in the individual believer and the church—in this context, specifically visiting prostitutes. But there is more here than just that.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:12-20.

Before we dig into vv12 I need to point something out that is not apparent in some of our translations. It is no secret that I prefer the NASB translation for my study, and it may seem like I far too often take issue with the NIV or ESV. But in this instance those two are the ones that help us understand what is being said—and, more importantly, by whom—in these two verses. If you are using the NASB, KJV or NKJV you will not see this on the page.

ESV v12: “**All things are lawful for me,**” but not all things are helpful. “**All things are lawful for me,**” but I will not be dominated by anything.

ESV v13: “**Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food**”—and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. (emphasis added)

In fact the updated NIV takes this one step further—and rightly so, in my opinion—by including in the clause of v13 “...and God will destroy them both.”

NIV (updated): You say, “Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both.” The body, however, is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.

The reason why this makes sense we will see later.

The consensus is that the three clauses inside quotation marks (punctuation that has not been inserted in the more literal other three translations) were considered theological “slogans” common and easily recognizable to the church in Corinth. The source of these slogans is debatable; it is possible they have their beginning in a stated Pauline position, but then the church (or individuals therein) removed or forgot Paul’s clarifying “in Christ” perspective, and adopted the slogans—through the influence, once again of the secular culture—as absolutes employed far beyond Paul’s original application.

This is how they are presented here: Paul is not repeating these to back up his present arguments, but repeating philosophies that have become spurious doctrine to the Corinthians so as to refute them.

Something else that sets this passage apart from what has transpired up till now is that Paul is not explicitly tying his remarks to a known or reported situation in the church.

- In Chapter Five he directly took issue with a member of the church committing incest with his father’s wife (5:1-5).

- Earlier in this chapter he addressed the situation where two brothers were taking their dispute to civil courts instead of dealing with it within the church (6:1-8).

Here, as Gordon Fee puts it, “He does not begin by attacking their illicit behavior directly; rather, he confronts the theology on which that behavior is predicated.”

v12

All things are lawful for me...

In an earlier passage from this same letter we can find an instance where Paul states something similar—but states also the qualifier that has now been left out of the slogan adopted by the church.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:21-23.

The more the Corinthians believe they are “spiritual,” the more they slide away from the gospel of Christ. Whatever we have, whatever we are, whatever lies before us for eternity is because of Christ—because we belong to Him.

lawful, permissible^{niv} = *exestin* = third person singular presumed indicative of a compound of <G1537> (*ek*) and <G1510> (*eimi*); so also *exon*, *ex-on'*; neuter presumed participle of the same (with or without some form of <G1510> (*eimi*) expressed); impersonal it is right (through the figurative idea of being out in public) :- be lawful, let, × may (-est). **Fee:** “right to determine, hence authority”

When the Corinthians (and believers today) subscribe to the slogan, “All things are lawful for me,” they are saying that they claim the right to act as they please, without restraint. What this self-imposed “right” is based on, at least for the Corinthians, we will see in our next session.

Sidebar: As is so often the case, there are scholars and interpreters that disagree with the notion that Paul is quoting spurious slogans so as to refute them. But this verse offers an easy basis for refuting their position: It is simply not true that “All things are lawful” for the follower of Christ—at least not in an absolute sense.

but not all things are profitable.

profitable^{nasb}, **helpful**^{esv,nkjv}, **beneficial**^{niv}, **expedient**^{kjv} = *symphero* = from <G4862> (*sun*) and <G5342> (*phero*) (including its alternate); to bear together (contribute), i.e. (literal) to collect, or (figurative) to conduce; especially (neuter participle as noun) advantage :- be better for, bring together, be expedient (for), be good, (be) profit (-able for).

Paul’s use of this word translated “profitable,” or “beneficial” in the NIV already broaches a larger topic beyond going to prostitutes. His use of it here probably means “to one’s own benefit”—i.e., “not everything is for my good.” Later in this letter Paul will use the same word to refer to that which benefits someone else (10:23). And his larger theme is that the Christian’s life is not to be focused on whether or not I have the right to anything, or the right to do anything, but whether it benefits my life in Christ and, by extension, whether my conduct is ultimately helpful to those around me.

I have the right to eat anything I want—but is it good for me? I have the right to speak my mind on any subject I choose, but will that be edifying for my brother or sister in Christ?

All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything.

In the second sentence of the verse Paul adds another perspective to the same slogan.

mastered^{nasb, niv}, **brought under the power**^{kjvs}, **dominated**^{esv} = *exousiazō* = from <G1849> (*exousia*); to control :- exercise authority upon, bring under the (have) power of.

In the Greek there is a play on words going on here with the word translated “lawful” that is not easy to translate into English. M. R. Vincent’s attempt is “all things are in my power, but I shall not be brought under the power of any.”

The alcoholic can accurately say, “I have the right to drink this scotch.” But who in that situation is really the master? The alcoholic may think he is the master, in charge of his life, but in truth he is the one being mastered by the drink.

This is a helpful if simple application of this statement, but I believe there is more going on here than that. It is hard to know precisely what Paul is getting at here; what is he referring to when he uses this verb *exousiazō*—and more to the point, what is on his mind?

To state it succinctly, I think Paul has sex on his mind. Even though the next verse seems to go off on a different topic—namely, food—he is still just laying the groundwork for what will come later in this paragraph regarding being with a prostitute, and what will come in Chapter Seven regarding marriage. And the verb *exousiazō* helps us make this connection.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:3-4.

This is the only other place where Paul uses this same verb; here in the NASB it is translated “have authority over.” From its use in our passage in Chapter Six we might say that “The wife does not have power over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have power over his own body, but the wife does.” In fact that’s just how the KJV translates the verse (it just says “hath not” instead of “does not have.”)

But what does this have to do with visiting a prostitute?

Read Genesis 2:22-25.

Now back to v12 in Chapter Six.

All things are lawful for me,

Paul’s treatment of the body in our extended passage is primarily on a spiritual, supernatural level, regarding the believer’s relationship to Christ his Lord. That is his ultimate point. But the paragraph opens with these more temporal references regarding limitations to what is lawful for me to do in the here and now, and referencing food and the stomach.

At the time of this letter, Corinth was a Roman city, but its background was Greek, and the two cultures were blended in the cosmopolitan city. One of the “lawful things” in the Corinthian society was visiting a prostitute. For the pagans in that city, especially in its Grecian past, it was actually part of the worship of Aphrodite on the Acrocorinth—by both sexes (there were both female and male temple prostitutes). But religion aside, it was simply a culturally accepted practice for men, married or not, to go to prostitutes. It was “lawful.”

but I will not be mastered by anything.

We will address the mystical relationship between our bodies and Christ later in this passage, but on a temporal level, in a marriage who holds power over the husband’s body? Answer: the wife. Over the wife’s body? Answer: the husband.

From Genesis, later repeated not just in the epistles but by Jesus Himself, we understand that man and woman come together to become one. This union of man and woman forms a mystical bond—a bond that pictures the bond between Christ and His church, Christ and every believer. When Israel rebelled against Yahweh and worshiped other gods, God referred to it as “adultery” (e.g., Jeremiah 13:27).

To paraphrase the slogan, the Corinthians were saying, “Hey, I’m now a ‘spiritual’ being. The body is nothing—it’s just sex. For the physical body, everything is lawful for me.” But in the economy of God for man, sex is more than that; it is reserved for the marital state, and there it becomes something deep and profound.

Sex outside marriage perverts God’s eloquent and sublime plan for man and woman. In v16 Paul nails it with,

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.”

The one who visits a prostitute has just handed over to a harlot, power and authority over his own body. He has been “mastered” by a whore.

Session 55: Whither the Body? part two

1 Corinthians 6:13-14

Preface

The passage before us—vv13-14 and, as before, the thrust of this entire paragraph—has been and remains a healthy reminder for your humble teacher. For you see, if I err in how I perceive my association to God it is to come down too heavily on the “spiritual” (that is, more mystical) side of that association, rather than the physical side. It is far more comfortable for me to think of myself as a spiritual being communing with God by means of His Holy Spirit, than as a physical being belonging to Him. I am certainly not an ascetic (treating the body with rigorous self-denial, abstinence, even punishment); it is just more natural and comfortable for me to think in spiritual, rather than physical terms.

But the apostle Paul in this passage—again, the extended passage—is making the point that the body does indeed have a role to play in this association and relationship with God. Influenced by the eloquent and charismatic Greek philosophers of their day, as well as the Corinthian culture and society, there were some in the church who thought of the body as essentially a throw-away. Considering themselves to now be “spiritual” beings, they saw the body as something necessary for living, but as unimportant, even dispensable in their relationship with God in Christ.

This is why they could spout such slogans as “All things are permissible for me.” By their lights, since they were now “spiritual,” whatever they did with their body—food, drink, sex—didn’t matter, because at death the body would decay and disintegrate. The body, for them was no longer important—a non-issue. We might respond to this with, “I consider myself to be spiritual, and I don’t think of the body this way. So why did they? Besides, what about the resurrection of believers?”

In Chapter Fifteen of this letter we will be addressing in detail the issue of both Christ’s and believers’ resurrection. But it is clear from Chapter Fifteen that there was a vocal and persuasive group in the Corinth church that denied the resurrection of believers.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:12.

How did this come about? Where did they get this idea?

Gordon Fee: ...it reflects the conflict between them and Paul over what it means to be *pneumatikos* (“a Spirit person”). In their view, by the reception of the Spirit, and especially the gift of tongues, [they believed] they had already entered the true “spirituality” that is to be; [Remember when Paul was tweaking their nose in Chapter Four about them thinking too much of themselves? “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” (1 Corinthians 4:8).] [they believed they] already had begun a form of angelic existence in which the body was unnecessary and unwanted, and would finally be discarded altogether. Thus for them life in the Spirit meant a final ridding oneself of the body, not because it was evil but because it was inferior and beneath them; the idea that the body would be raised would have been anathema [detestable, cursed].

Knowing this helps us understand what is going on in Chapter Six—especially why he seems to jump to the topics of food in v13 and resurrection in v14. Do not fear; the apostle knows where he is going with this.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:12-14.

v13

Food is for the stomach and the stomach is for food, but God will do away with both of them.

Verse 13, like the two sentences in v12, begins by stating the slogan—i.e., the Corinthian’s rationale for their philosophical position. They were saying, We have a body and it requires food. But this is just a bodily function necessary for the here and now. All of this is passing

away—in fact, we have already risen above this, and now dwell on a “spiritual” plane. What I do with the body means nothing.

Paul cites this slogan about food because, to put it in hipster terms, he’s hip to their jive. He understands there is far more to this than just food; in fact, there is far more to this—disturbingly so—than their citing this to excuse their illicit sexual behavior. The Corinthians have detached the body from the spirit and mind. Paul, in this extended passage, is here to put them back together.

I think it is easy for us to imagine why and how the Corinthians have arrived at this skewed perspective on the body and spirit, for the same process is going on all around us. When Paul was with them he taught them from the fundamentals of the gospel, and it all made sense to them. Then after he left, the teaching and philosophies of their environment started to make sense to them as well. If both made sense, but were in conflict with each other, how do they reconcile the difference?

In politics (as in a marriage) it can sometimes work to compromise; neither side gets all they want, but the result, while not perfect, is workable. So the Corinthians applied this process to the conflict between their faith and the world: If both make sense, let’s just blend the best of each into one. They took the indwelling Holy Spirit from the gospel, but they enhanced that with the Grecian philosophies of “spirituality.” This led to a reevaluation of resurrection; if they were already spiritual beings, risen above the foibles and weight of the flesh, then they must have already risen above the need for resurrection. They were already on too lofty a plane to require that. Whatever the body required—food, drink, sex—was now of no consequence for them.

...but God will do away with both of them.

This corrupt and worthless body would disintegrate at death, so what happened to it had no bearing on their spiritual condition, or their eternity.

Paul is about to set them straight. They were making three fundamental mistakes:

1. The gospel cannot be compromised with the world’s philosophies. If there is conflict, the gospel of Christ must win. Period.
2. There *will* be a resurrection of the believer’s current body.
3. Even prior to death and the resurrection, the body is holy and sanctified, belonging to and for the use of Christ in the here and now.

The apostle will spend the rest of this paragraph correcting these misconceptions. And he begins by refuting this business about the body (and use thereof) being of no consequence.

Yet the body is not for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body.

Paul does not care about the issue of food and the belly; he only cares about how the Corinthians are using arguments such as this to rationalize destructive sexual immorality in their lives. His immediate response mirrors the structure of their slogan:

slogan: Food is for the stomach and the stomach is for food...

response: the body...is for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body.

As such, his immediate response to their slogan is not fully formed; it does not stand well on its own—just what does that mean, “the Lord is for the body”?—but it simply cues up the explanation that follows.

The Corinthians had adopted the philosophy that not only was it better to be spiritual than physical, but they had detached the two, claiming the body was too insignificant to even bother with. I have often cited the fact that the Son of God came to earth not as a ball of glowing energy, but as flesh, because glowing energy could not be nailed to a cross. In not just the resurrection, but in His very birth (incarnation = in flesh) God affirms the importance of the body.

We can also return to creation, and the Garden of Eden. God placed the man and woman in charge of everything; they were “the pinnacle of His creation” (Grudem). Were they made by Him as glowing balls of energy? No, they were made physical, flesh and blood. The relationship Christ has with His church is illustrated not just by the spiritual and emotional union of husband and wife, but by the physical union, the “oneness” of the husband and wife.

After He created the physicality of creation, including man, God declared it “very good” (Genesis 1:31). From Jesus we know that God is spirit (John 4:24), yet when the Godhead created man and woman “in Our image,” they made them as physical, fleshly beings.

Read Genesis 1:26-27.

Even before we consider the importance of the bodily resurrection of believers, we can see that, for His reasons, their bodies are important to God’s economy of salvation, sanctification, and eternity.

v14

Now God has not only raised the Lord, but will also raise us up through His power.

When we read what the Lord has in store for the eternity of our resurrected bodies, it is clear that the new heaven and new earth, and new Jerusalem, will be for physical bodies. Why would the Lord bother resurrecting our bodies if it were not?

Read Revelation 21:21-27.

Read Revelation 22:1-4.

In this extended passage, one thing Paul is trying to accomplish is to pull the Corinthians back to a sanctified life in the here and now. That is, If you are so “spiritual,” why aren’t you living that way? He is trying to get them to understand that the body is not just important for eternity, but in the here and now—both of which these Corinthians were rejecting!

We will be digging into this further as we proceed through the passage, but I want to close with a look at the here-and-now aspects of this. Paul brings up the issue of the resurrection which, chronologically, deals with the end times. But his emphasis is not on that, but on the here and now—how we are to be living now, in light of this future resurrection. Notice the verb tenses.

v15: your bodies are members of Christ... Shall I make them members of a prostitute?

v18: Flee immorality. (now)

v19: your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit

v20: Glorify God in your body. (now)

Let’s close with what Paul has to say about this in his letter to the Romans. Note how he, here as well, ties together the believer’s (future) resurrection with his behavior in the here and now.

Read Romans 6:1-14.

Session 56: Ultimate Lordship, part one

1 Corinthians 6:15-20

Preface

Exactly three chapters earlier (3:16-17), Paul was making a similar point as regards the church—the collective of believers—that he makes here regarding the individual believer.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:16-17.

The “you” in 3:16 is plural, and in that context Paul is speaking of the church being a temple in which the Spirit of God dwells. Now, in this final paragraph of Chapter Six, he speaks of the individual—specifically, the body of the individual—as a temple of God’s Holy Spirit.

In vv12-14—indeed, from v9—the apostle has been setting the stage for the direct, powerful, and even astonishing argument he makes in vv15-20. To a people, many of whom were born and raised in the Corinthian society and culture, what Paul says in this passage would truly come as a shock. To him, and to God, the act of lying with a prostitute was not a harmless payment-for-services-rendered transaction, but represented a cosmic conflict between competing lords. As David Garland puts it,

Hiring a prostitute for sex essentially denies Christ’s ultimate sovereignty by filching what belongs to Christ and handing it over to one who belongs to Satan.

And as I said when we began this paragraph, we can all draw application from this. We cannot say, Well, since I’ve never visited a prostitute, I’m OK. This has nothing to do with me. No, the point being made here is applicable to any number of situations where we might compromise the lordship of Christ in our lives.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:15-20.

v15

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?

Paul’s use of this rhetorical device—“Do you not know...”—a total of ten times in this letter, but only once more, in one other letter (Romans 6:16), is an indicator of his level of exasperation with the Corinthians. Here he uses it to reinforce the point that not just the church, but each individual in the church are members of Christ.

The more I study God’s word the more amazed I am by God’s creative economy for the salvation of man in and through Christ Jesus, for it is utterly unique in the history of man and the countless gods he has worshiped. In its structure, its complexity, its poetry, it is genius—of course: He is God!

We in the church so casually throw around the phrase “body of Christ,” but rarely think it through—especially the circuitous genius of it. And here the apostle is helping us sort it out, using sexual immorality—specifically, visiting a prostitute—as the means.

Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? May it never be!

Paul is employing colorful imagery here to illustrate the absurdity of this notion. Among our common translations only the NASB captures the fullness of the word *airo*.

take away^{nasb}, **take** = *airo* = a primary verb; to lift; by implication to take up or away; figurative to raise (the voice), keep in suspense (the mind); specially to sail away (i.e. weigh anchor); by Hebrew [compare <H5375> (*nasa'*)] to expiate sin :- away with, bear (up), carry, lift up, loose, make to doubt, put away, remove, take (away, up).

Two other uses of this same word illustrate the difference between “take” and “take away.” First the familiar scene with John the Baptist.

Read John 1:29.

Then how the apostle John described Jesus in his first epistle.

Read 1 John 3:5.

If I just “take” something, I probably keep it for myself. But where it came to taking our sins, Christ Jesus did not keep them for Himself, He took them away—“as far as the east is from the west...” (Psalm 103:12). But there is still more to Paul’s imagery here in this context. Consider this: Today it is relatively common to “take away members” of a deceased person to be given to a living person—vital organs, skin grafts, etc. But Paul turns this around to show the absurdity of the situation in Corinth. What if I had my right arm removed and had it “joined” to (v17) a cadaver! How ridiculous; what a waste. But that is what Paul is saying. When we visit a prostitute, we are taking a living member of Christ’s body—our body—and joining it to someone who is in the process of dying—a prostitute serving not Christ, but Satan—and, more to Paul’s reference of resurrection, one whose body will not be “raised incorruptible” (1 Corinthians 15:52).

And here is revealed one of those marvelous mysteries of God’s plan. Based on the evidence we have been compiling in the last few sessions we understand the beauty and cosmic wonder of the marital union of man and woman, and its illustration of the church in relation to Christ Jesus. And Paul underscores this with graphic clarity in v16.

v16

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.”

In describing what a man does with a prostitute, Paul uses the same Greek term Jesus did in the gospel of Matthew when He quoted the familiar Genesis passage.

Read Matthew 19:4-6. (“one flesh” = “one body with her”)

joins = kollao = from kolla (“glue”); to glue, i.e. (passive or reflexive) to stick (figurative) :- cleave, join (self), keep company.

Warren Wiersbe: Sex outside of marriage is like a man robbing a bank: he gets something, but it is not his and he will one day pay for it. Sex within marriage can be like a person putting money into a bank: there is safety, security, and he will collect dividends.

I have emphasized how God utilizes sexual immorality to illustrate Israel’s worshiping of idols instead of Him only, calling it “adultery.” I have also emphasized how the mystical bond between husband and wife, making them “one flesh,” is used to illustrate our bond with Christ—as both the corporate church, and the individual within the church. But there is another aspect to this—another way of looking at it. And we see this in v17.

v17

But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him.

To contrast the situation in vv15-16, the same verb, *kollao*, is used to describe the believer’s healthy union with Christ. Here the verb could be translated—as it is in the Septuagint (e.g., Deuteronomy 10:20)—“cling to,” or “hold fast” (Garland). The key to understanding this verse is the word “spirit.”

Some of the Corinthians were saying that the body was of no importance because they were now “spiritual” beings. As the following verses prove, in v17 Paul is not dismissing the importance of the body, but saying that there is a higher relationship for the body: with Christ by the Spirit. As the union of husband and wife is higher than any other human relationship, so the union of believer with Christ is higher than the marital union. It is not physical or sexual, but S/spiritual. And implicit in this verse is the utter horror of thinking one so united with Christ could, with the same body and spirit, join with a prostitute.

Unthinkable.

v18

Flee [sexual] immorality.

present imperative verb = "keep running from," a long-term way of doing something, a command to keep on doing something as one's general habit or lifestyle, do it every time it is necessary.

It is the standard go-to passage to illustrate this command, but even though it is familiar to most of us, we must read it again, for it is the perfect picture of what we are commanded to do here. We know the story: Joseph is sold to the pharaoh's captain of the bodyguard, shows himself worthy and ends up running his entire household. But he is a good-looking guy, and Potiphar's wife has the hots for this young Hebrew. One day the house is empty but for Joseph and his master's wife, and she makes her move.

Read Genesis 39:10-12.

There is the obvious illustration at the end of v12: "...he...fled, and went outside." But I want to make sure we see two other important components to this story.

Read v10.

Joseph not only refused to "lie beside her," he refused to even be in the same room with her. The best plan for not having to flee temptation is to never let yourself be found near a tempting situation in the first place. But now notice the important reason Joseph refused to give in to such temptation.

Read v9.

There are few temptations more tempting than sexual temptations—for either sex. Put yourself in Joseph's shoes: a good-looking young man, red blood coursing through his veins—a prime candidate. And what would it have cost him? Sure, if his master found out he'd be in trouble, but his wife probably wouldn't tell, and meanwhile Joseph would have a good thing going on. Except that it would be a sin against his God—and that was enough for him to stop the libidinous wife cold in her tracks. And this is what takes us back to 1 Corinthians. This is the tie-in.

Verse 17 says, "The one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him." Joseph didn't have a wife to be faithful to, but he had a God to be faithful to. And the Christian has an even greater incentive than Joseph; as Paul reminds us in v19, "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?"

When we whittle this down to the essentials, what Paul is really talking about is lordship: the right of God to be our Lord, and our submission to Him as Lord.

Session 57: Ultimate Lordship, part two

1 Corinthians 6:15-20

Preface

In the course of this discussion in Chapter Six, I have said more than once that God's word draws a correlation between idolatry and sexual immorality. On the surface we might wonder, What does worshiping an idol have to do with sexual immorality? Throughout Scripture the two invariably go together. While Moses was on the mountain receiving the Ten Commandments, the children of Israel made a golden calf and began worshiping it.

Read Exodus 32:6.

That Hebrew word translated "play" (*sabaq*) can also be translated "caress," as it is in Genesis 26, where it says that King Abimelech looked out a window and saw that "Isaac was caressing his wife Rebekah." The prophet Hosea gives us a strong and colorful picture of how the two go together.

Read Hosea 4:11-14.

Finally, in His message to Pergamum, recorded in The Revelation, Christ associates the two.

Read Revelation 2:14.

In our passage today the apostle Paul closes out his rebuttal to those Corinthians who were claiming that, being "spiritual," to them the physical body—and whatever one did with that body—was of no consequence.

Paul's argument is this: The sin of sexual immorality is a unique sin against our own body—which is at the same time a unique sin against God (cf. Genesis 39:9), since He owns our body.

v18

In our last session we examined the opening command of v18: "Flee (sexual) immorality." I could not find any passages in God's word that counsel to debate or argue with sin, to calmly explain to the tempter what a naughty boy he is and persuade him that righteousness is far more profitable than sin.

John MacArthur: When we are in danger of such immorality, we should not argue or debate or explain, and we certainly should not try to rationalize. We are not to consider it a spiritual challenge to be met but a spiritual trap to be escaped. We should get away as fast as we can.

The closest I could find to counsel not to flee when faced with immorality was that familiar passage in Ephesians.

Read Ephesians 6:12-13.

I take from this that the only time we should not flee is when we have strapped on the girdle of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the boots of the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the word of God. Even then, it does not tell us to initiate battle, but to "stand firm." Absent any of that armor, we are to run for our lives, as Joseph did (Genesis 39:12).

Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body.

The rest of v18 is, as the commentators agree, “a notorious crux” (“a difficult problem; a puzzling thing”). Fee reports that, according to one scholar, “as many as 20 or 30 solutions have been offered.” So let’s work our way through the first twenty of those... just kidding.

Note: Keep in mind that this word translated “body,” in this context, means just that. Paul is not spiritualizing the flesh; he is not referring to the person’s soul or the entirety of his or her being. He is talking about the body itself—as Garland puts it, “the corporeality of human life, its physical aspect; the locus where we experience life, death, sickness and sexuality.” That is, the physical body: that organization of flesh one sees in the mirror.

The human mind can be an odd thing. It is natural to us, after reading something like this, for our mind to start compiling a list of potential sins, wondering if what Paul says is correct that “every other sin...is outside the body.” At the same time we begin mentally compiling ways that sexual sin is indeed “against [our] own body.”

But that’s not Paul’s point. Let’s stick with his train of thought, rather than our own.

- In v13 he wrote that “the body is not for immorality, but for the Lord.”
- In v15 he states that the body of every Christian is a “member of Christ.” He goes on to express horror that any believer would even consider removing their body from Christ to join it to a prostitute.
- Why this sin is uniquely “against the body” is stated in v16: “...do you not know that the one who joins himself to a prostitute is one body with her?”
- In contrast to that, Paul states in v17, “the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him.” By mentioning “one spirit” he has not left the physicality of the body; he hasn’t changed topics. Because in v19 he ties the two—body and spirit—together.

v19

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God,

This idea of the physical body as a temple, or sanctuary, is not something God invented for man. It began with Christ Jesus.

Read John 2:18-22.

If the earthly Jesus’ body was a temple, then for Whom was it a temple? John, later in his gospel, tells us.

Read John 14:10-11.

D. A. Carson: The Father and the incarnate Son enjoy unique mutual indwelling. Therefore it is the human body of Jesus that uniquely manifests the Father, and becomes the focal point of the manifestation of God to man, the living abode of God on earth, the fulfillment of all the temple meant, and the center of all true worship... In this “temple” the ultimate sacrifice would take place; within three days of death and burial, Jesus Christ, the true temple, would rise from the dead.

So there the pattern is set for the physical body to be a temple of God—for Jesus, the Father; for believers, the Holy Spirit. As a temple of God, Jesus would rise bodily from the dead within three days; believers will rise bodily from the dead at His return.

and that you are not your own?

In practical terms, what does it mean that our “body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in [us], whom [we] have from God”? It means that our body does not belong to us. Laterally,

horizontally, the believer's body belongs to his or her spouse—if one has a spouse. Vertically, eternally, the believer's body belongs to the God who dwells within.

Now we begin to see the full ramifications, the true insidious depth of sexual sin. Here is how Fee expresses it:

In fornicating with a prostitute a man removes his body (which is a temple of the Spirit, purchased by God and destined for resurrection) from union with Christ and makes it a member of her body, thereby putting it under her “mastery” (v12b; cf. 7:4). Every other sin is apart from (i.e., not “in”) the body in this singular sense... Thus the unique nature of sexual sin is not so much that one sins against one's own self, but that one sins against one's own body, as *viewed in terms of its place in redemptive history*.

In that simple phrase, “you are not your own,” is the fullness of lordship defined. Lordship is not just preferring one over another or publicly declaring partisanship (as if joining a political party); it not just obedience—it is that and far more. Lordship is turning over every aspect of one's life—body, mind, spirit, and soul; choices, actions, dreams, and aspirations—to its rightful owner.

Read Romans 14:5-9.

Lordship is far more than mere allegiance; it is ownership.

v20

For you have been bought with a price:

In v20 Paul unabashedly—and tellingly—uses the language of the slave market. In our minds we can dress up our relationship with God in the finery of voluntary servanthood—as if we graciously serve Him out of our adoration and worship. That can be true, but it is thin. It can take many years for this truth to reach maturity in our lives, but we must serve Him because He bought us—lock, stock and barrel. That makes us not voluntary servants or employees, but purchased, obligated, slaves. We serve and obey Him not because He has been kind to us, but because He is our Lord and Master.

Read Galatians 2:20.

In this passage before us, Paul clearly has in mind the cross, and the shed blood of Christ. So the same point is made by the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders in their praise of the Lamb in The Revelation.

Read Revelation 5:9.

therefore glorify God in your body.

Sidebar: The KJVs have after “body,” “and in your spirit, which are God's,” text taken from the Textus Receptus manuscript. Fee suggests that this may have been added as the result of early Christian liturgy. Garland writes, “The shorter reading has the strongest manuscript support from early witnesses and has a more forceful rhetorical punch [i.e., Paul's point is about the body, not the spirit]. A scribe would have been more prone to add the longer reading than to drop it. This longer reading garbles Paul's point, which places emphasis on the Christian's body.”

Please turn to the first chapter of Philippians.

The Corinthians, considering themselves now “spiritual” beings, wanted to dispense with the body. Their gospel had been infused with the philosophies of the Hellenist culture, and the corrosive philosophies of the Corinthian society. Instead of standing firm on the true gospel of Christ, they found themselves slipping and sliding into a number of spurious doctrines—one of which was that what they did with the physical body (such as sex with prostitutes) meant

nothing. Being “spiritual,” they had now risen above the body (they believed) into a state that, in truth, they would not realize until the return of Christ.

But the apostle Paul, even though he was walking by the Holy Spirit, and was probably more “spiritual” than any of the Corinthians would ever be, could still say about the body, as he did in his letter to the Philippians,

**What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice, for I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and hope, that I will not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.
(Philippians 1:18-20; emphasis added)**

Session 58: An Idea Gone Bad

1 Corinthians 7:1

Preface

There are (at least) two very good reasons to approach Chapter Seven of Paul's letter with fear and trembling—and with sober humility:

- Portions of it are challenging to understand and interpret—especially when we, regrettably, have been and continue to be daily schooled in our modern, fallen, culture. This is a portion of Scripture in which it is easy to respond, in places, with “Oh, surely he does not mean that.”
- The one teaching this portion of Scripture is painfully aware that because of circumstances or life decisions they may have made in the past, some in the class might be uncomfortable hearing what is declared here. When this is the situation, the teacher can only gather his courage, and (paraphrasing 2 Timothy 4:2) “teach the word.”

There is one more point we should address before pressing into the text. In Chapter Seven the apostle Paul employs a manner of delineating various positions that (as best I could determine) is not expressed in this way anywhere else. Before we proceed into this chapter we need to clarify what Paul means when he writes, “Not I, but the Lord,” and “I say, not the Lord,” and “I give an opinion...”

Read vv10, 12, 25.

Some have interpreted v10 to mean “not I, but the Lord [is telling me]...” and vv12 and 25 to mean something like, “since I haven't heard anything from the Lord, I'll offer a best guess.” But that is not how these are to be read.

The contrast is not between authoritative revelation and guess, but explicit command stated by Jesus and authoritative apostolic command or counsel. This situation is similar to the erroneous position taken by some sects that the only authoritative text in the Bible are those words printed in red—which is nonsense. The Bible is God's word from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22. In these passages Paul, in answering the questions sent to him by the church in Corinth, is referencing either something Jesus had earlier stated (“not I, but the Lord”), or his authority as someone called by Jesus Christ not just as an apostle, but to render trustworthy judgment (v25: “as one who by the mercy of the Lord is trustworthy”).

Chapter Seven Organization

The overarching counsel of Chapter Seven—Paul's repeated answer to situations in and out of marriage, divorce, widowhood—is to remain in the status one was at the time of one's call. We see this clearly if we examine the structure of the chapter.

vv1-7 to the married: stay married with full conjugal rights

vv8-9 to the “unmarried” and widows: it is good to remain unmarried

vv10-11 to the married (both partners believers): remain married

vv12-16 to those with an unbelieving spouse: remain married

vv25-38 to “virgins”: it is good to remain unmarried

vv39-40 to married women and widows: the married are bound to marriage; if widowed, it is good to remain that way.

Situated in the middle of all this is the interlude of vv17-24, which expresses Paul's point directly—except that, curiously, the examples he cites in the interlude have nothing to do with the settings in the rest of the chapter: circumcision and slavery. But the point is made explicitly three times in the interlude.

v17: ...as God has called each, in this manner let him walk.

v20: Each man must remain in that condition in which he was called.

v24: Brethren, each one is to remain with God in that condition in which he was called.

As we will see, Paul understands there can be exceptions and extenuating circumstances. But throughout he sees this as the “ideal.”

The Corinthian Position

Throughout this study we have repeatedly made the point that from what we are learning about the church in Corinth, there are many in this world today that would feel very much at home there—and vice versa. When we think again about what the Corinthians were doing and thinking that would lead Paul to answer as he does in this letter, we realize that much of their belief system would be right at home in our world today—in this sense: They were taking snippets of theology and running wild with them. And here we have a case in point. Let’s look at something Jesus taught, answering a cynical “what if” posed by a group of Sadducees regarding marriage after the resurrection (in which they did not believe).

Read Luke 20:34-38.

The gospel of Luke was written after First Corinthians, so the Corinthian church would not have had this teaching in writing. But comparing what Paul writes in Chapter Seven to this that Jesus said, it is not hard to imagine that the Corinthians had heard a version of this teaching of Jesus from someone and, combined with the Hellenistic spiritualism by which they were surrounded, had run with it, combining the two, and thus thoroughly missing the point Jesus was making. To wit, after the resurrection you won’t be thinking about marriage; as Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message* paraphrase, “[You] will have better things to think about, if you can believe it. All ecstasies and intimacies then will be with God” (Luke 20:36).

The evidence would seem to indicate that there were men and women of the Corinth church who considered themselves to be so advanced spiritually they had already “realized the ‘resurrection from the dead’ by being ‘in spirit’ and [were] thus already as the angels, neither marrying nor giving in marriage” (Fee).

In this chapter the apostle addresses marriage-related questions as they are treated nowhere else in Scripture.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:1-4.

v1

Now concerning the things about which you wrote,

Chapter Seven begins a new section of this letter; from here to 16:12 Paul offers responses to questions or issues the church had sent him in a letter. There are two things we should keep in mind about this:

1. From here on out we actually have not more, but fewer details about the “conversation” being conducted between Paul and the church. Because much of what he has addressed up to this point was obtained by him secondhand, it was necessary in this letter (First Corinthians) for him to tell them (and us) what he was referring to. So we had a clearer indication of the context and reason for his counsel. But from now on it is no longer necessary for him to write down the reason for his response, because they already know it. Hence we, as readers today, have less data than we did in the earlier portion of the letter. So we must be cautious about our assumptions, and be wary of inferring too much from the context.
2. We should not assume that this letter from the church, to which Paul is now responding, was a friendly letter, in which the membership was simply seeking clarification on a few points of doctrine. There is evidence scattered throughout First Corinthians that their letter to him was actually more combative, taking exception to what he had taught or written before.

...it is good for a man not to touch a woman.

The consensus among modern scholars is that the second part of this verse is not a declarative statement representing Paul’s position (the traditional view), but is rather his

setting up this new discussion by quoting back to them something—another maxim or “slogan,” as it were—they (probably) stated in their letter to him. This is reflected in how the ESV and the most recent NIV present the verse, placing it in quotes:

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.”

These two translations also accurately expand the euphemism “touch a woman” in the original text to “have sexual relations.”

In this the Corinthians were not espousing the biblical/Pauline command to abstain from sex outside of marriage, but a more ascetic lifestyle in which even sexual relations within marriage were discouraged. We will see (in the rest of Chapter Seven) that, taken at face value, the maxim, “It is good [beneficial, preferable] for a man not to touch [have sexual relations with] a woman,” was not wholly disagreeable to the apostle. In fact his own celibate life reflected it. But as we will see, Paul considered celibacy to be a charisma—a divine gifting, a gift which one either has or does not have from above. If it was not one’s gift, then one should be married—just as, we are discovering, it would have been better if some Catholic priests had gotten married and found some other work; they clearly did not have the charisma of celibacy.

Some of the Corinthians were using this slogan to justify such things as “spiritual marriages” (i.e., non-sexual marriages), divorce, or not getting married at all. Just as many do today, they were taking one idea and pumping it so full of air that it was turned into a perversion of what God intended. All we need do is compare this slogan to God’s ideal design for man and woman in the Garden.

Read Genesis 2:18.

The Hebrew word translated “good” here, *tob*, is the same word God used to describe His own creation, only here it is in the negative: it is not good for man to be alone. And what follows is the first marriage—and the pattern for all to follow.

Read Genesis 2:23-25.

Note how marriage and sex within that marriage are part of God’s “good” creation. This is not a picture that would support what the Corinthians were saying and believing. And the rest of this chapter is Paul’s rebuttal to their ascetic position on sexuality.

Session 59: A Reciprocal Union

1 Corinthians 7:2-5a

Preface

Back in the early eighties, when, Linda and I returned to the church, and I was being disciplined by my good friend, he and I would meet weekly in his office for Bible study. We would select a book of the Bible and work our way through it together, and we would typically select a handy study guide to help keep us on-track. In 1985 we studied First Corinthians, and our booklet was a so-called “inductive” study published by Harold Shaw Publishers.

One of the characteristics of an inductive study is that one limits oneself to the book being studied; that is, as we studied First Corinthians we were supposed to remain in First Corinthians, referencing no other passages.

The passage before us today, as well as our previous session, demonstrate the weakness of such a method. For example, consider just the first two verses of Chapter Seven.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:1-2.

If we looked nowhere else, we could logically conclude that

- the apostle Paul (hence God Himself) believes the ideal for any and every man is to never have sexual relations with a woman;
- but since there is sin in this fallen world, with its inherent temptations, this would be one reason—and probably the predominant reason—for some individuals to marry.

From this, one could easily conclude that marriage is little more than a safety valve for those who are unable to control their insatiable sexual urges. From what Paul just wrote in Chapter Six (v16), we would know that having sex with a prostitute means that “the two become one flesh,” but, since we are not permitted to reference the passage in Genesis 2:24, we would not know that the original text being quoted refers to a husband and wife—and we would not know that before sin and sexual immorality even existed in the garden paradise, God inaugurated the institution of marriage.

Limiting ourselves to Paul’s narrow counsel regarding marriage in First Corinthians, we would not know of the proverb, “He who finds a wife finds a good thing / And obtains favor from the Lord” (Proverbs 18:22), nor would we be privy to how Paul in his letter to the Ephesians shows how believer’s marriage is the beautiful earthly picture of Christ’s union with His church, or how the writer to the Hebrews says that marriage is to be held “in honor among all.”

Read Hebrews 13:4.

That word translated “honor” or “honorable” (*timios*) means precious. Those who are in a marriage, as well as society at large (“among all”), are to consider their union to be a precious thing—the same word Peter used to describe the blood of Christ.

Read 1 Peter 1:17-19.

Thus, God’s word as a whole both teaches and illustrates in the lives of the saints (e.g., Priscilla and Aquila, working together in ministry) that marriage is a good and honorable state for man and woman, and not just as a release valve, or stop-gap against sexual immorality.

In our last session we learned that Paul is now, until almost the end of this epistle, responding to queries and issues brought to his attention in a letter directly from the church in Corinth. Somewhere in this letter they stated a maxim that was informing their belief system: “it is good for a man not to touch [i.e., have sexual intercourse with] a woman.” Although celibate himself, Paul spends much of this chapter rebutting that slogan.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:1-5.

v2

If we care to read or listen to the news or commentary on events, every day we hear individuals with an agenda misquoting and lifting someone's words out of context, thus leaving out the critical why someone said what they did, and distorting their meaning. The apostle Paul has gotten a bad rap from many commentators who have said, for just one example, "that Paul regarded marriage as a necessary evil due to the weakness of the flesh" (Lietzmann in Garland).

We can't lose sight of the why Paul writes what he has: he is rebutting those who claim that is a good and righteous thing that even married couples abstain from sexual relations. Look at the beginning of v5: "Stop depriving one another"!

But because of immoralities,

Only the NASB renders this literally (it is in the plural: sexual immoralities), which seems to point back to the last paragraph of Chapter Six and the issue of visiting prostitutes.

On the surface this situation in Corinth may seem rather odd. Here we have people, supposedly Christians, who considered themselves so "spiritual," so advanced on a spiritual plane, that the body had become immaterial—to the point that they were espousing the elimination of sexual relations even within marriage ("it is good for a man not to touch a woman"). If that were so, why were they frequenting prostitutes? Let me suggest a few possibilities.

- If only one of the marriage partners subscribed to this philosophy (e.g., the so-called "eschatological women," women who thought "of themselves as having already realized the 'resurrection from the dead' by being 'in spirit' and thus already as the angels" [Fee]) then the other partner might be inclined to find release elsewhere.
- Even if both subscribed to it, they could draw a distinction between a "pure," spiritual marriage and satisfying the flesh with a prostitute. After all, the body was nothing, and it was just sex.
- Oddly enough, however, this could also be explained by the tendency to find satisfaction in another place even when we have determined it is "good" to prohibit it in one place. For example, just the other evening, in an old rerun of a Tonight Show episode, Johnny Carson's guest was Robert Blake (Baretta) who, as always, made a point of holding an unlit cigarette in his hand because he had quit smoking. But in this episode he admitted that after quitting smoking cigarettes he chewed tobacco for several years. Then, discovering that this could cause mouth cancer, he stopped that practice, only to periodically unravel a cigarette so as to chew on the tobacco. Deciding that smoking was bad for him, he chewed plug tobacco; deciding that was bad for him, he began chewing the tobacco in cigarettes. Here is how David Garland applies this phenomenon to the situation in Corinth:

Garland: Paul takes for granted that the only rightful place for sexual intercourse is within marriage and that those who marry are sexually active. For them to attempt precipitously to suppress awakened sexual desires will only expose them to a sexual undertow that will tug them into a sea of temptation, where they will ultimately drown.

each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband.

The solution to all these problems, as Paul sees it, is that everyone who is married is to enjoy sexual pleasures within that marriage. In v1, the word "touch" was a euphemism for sex; in v2, the word "have" is another common Greek euphemism for sex. And just in case that is insufficiently clear, he fleshes this out, as it were, in v3.

v3

The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband.

Note the mutuality in this passage. Not only is it not true that Paul was a “woman hater,” or was of the opinion that marriage was only good for the prevention of fornication and adultery, but he saw marriage as a precious thing; his was God’s view, that marriage was an inseparable bond between two equals. Yes, there was the God-ordained hierarchy within a marriage, but aside from that a marriage should be built on and held together by mutual respect, mutual affection, mutual love.

Also note that the emphasis here is not on taking, but giving. In accordance with the time and culture in which he wrote, Paul could have said something like, The husband should be reasonably nice to his wife, and the wife must submit to the demands of her husband, whatever they are. Her duty is to always be available for him. Instead, the language is balanced and mutual, and, as Fee notes, about giving, not taking: “Paul’s emphasis is not on ‘You owe me,’ but on ‘I owe you.’”

We have to keep in mind the context of this counsel: Back in our first apartment—a renovated one-car garage (\$90 per month)—during the first few months of our marriage, if I had read this verse I would have been incredulous: The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife? I’m just back from a six-month Vietnam cruise, freshly married to the most beautiful eighteen-year-old girl in the world. Are you kidding? I’ll be more than happy to fulfill my duty to my wife! But Paul’s command is not to teenagers in the twentieth century, but to sanctimonious, spiritualized idiots in the first century who were intentionally withholding their conjugal duty from each other because they were of the mistaken belief that this made them more pious. But v4 is for all of us.

v4

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.

Now the perspective, at least as regards conjugal rights, is reversed. In v3 the emphasis is on one spouse giving to the other; in v4 the emphasis is on each spouse having the right to take—having power, control over the other’s body. Here we revisit the same word Paul used in v6:12, when he wrote that “...[he would] not be mastered by anything.”

exousiazō = from <G1849> (*exousia*); to control :- exercise authority upon, bring under the (have) power of.

This is not contradictory, but balanced; both are true. In a healthy marriage—that is in a marriage obedient to God’s ideal—each partner has the obligation to give, and the right to take. When we combine this with Paul’s thoughts in Chapter Six (“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’”[6:16]), we see pictured not just the mutuality, but the exclusivity of God’s definition of marriage.

Only the husband is granted this power over his wife’s body, and only the wife is granted this power over her husband’s body. God’s idea of marriage is that of a perfect circle: all-encompassing, self-contained, exclusive, focused upon each other.

As perfect as this is, it contains what Bengel called an “elegant paradox.”

J. F. B. (paraphrasing Bengel): A paradox. She hath not power over her body, and yet it is “her own.” The oneness of body in which marriage places husband and wife explains this. The one complements the other. Neither without the other realizes the perfect ideal of man. [*Johann Albrecht Bengel (24 June 1687 – 2 November 1752)*]

The only way these verses can be rightly evaluated and applied is in the context of the immediate passage, as well as the context of God’s word as a whole. All the epistles, specifically, and the tenor of God’s word as a whole, speak to the mutuality, exclusivity (“one

flesh”) and beauty of believers’ marriage—in stark contrast to the civil or pagan marriages of the time.

The immediate context is in response to the bizarre behavior in Corinth of a married partner either denying conjugal rights to his or her spouse, or both of them agreeing that this would no longer be part of their marriage. To this, at the beginning of v5, Paul commands, “Stop depriving one another”!

And this is where we will pick it up in our next session.

Session 60: Two Special Gifts

1 Corinthians 7:5-7

Preface

As we have and continue to see in this extended passage, the apostle Paul is way ahead of his times with his counsel and commands to the married and the unmarried. In many respects his counsel to the Corinthians fits much better into our time than the first century. For example, those who claim that women are still lacking the fullness of “equal rights” they deserve, should applaud what the apostle states in vv2-3 (and, as we will see in a moment, v5).

Read 1 Corinthians 7:2-3.

What we see in those two verses and in v5 is balance, equity, mutual authority in marriage—everything one would expect from a union in which “two become one flesh.” Yet in some respects he would find himself at odds with many today—especially those on the left. Take, for example, his command in v4.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:4.

Still balanced and equal, but the radical feminist and pro-abortion crowd is going to have a problem with this. How dare you claim that my husband has power over my body! It’s my body to do with what I please—even to take the life of the baby living inside it.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:5-7.

v5

Verse 5 does not begin a new thought, but flows out of the previous verses. As mentioned previously, it is apparent that the Corinthian congregation included married couples who, by misinterpreting the apostles’ teaching and by adopting certain pagan practices, were “spiritualizing” their union to such an extent that they had, in some cases, removed its more physical components. To this the apostle commands, “Stop it!”

Stop depriving one another...

Read 1 Corinthians 6:7-8.

That word translated “defraud” in Chapter Six is the same word translated “deprive” in v5; *apostereo* is a derogatory word for taking away what rightfully belongs to another. Then Paul sets up an exception to the command, one he offers as a “concession” (v6).

except by agreement, for a time,

He allows this concession on two conditions:

1. That it only be interrupted by mutual consent; both husband and wife must agree. Here, in the first century, Paul is breaking new ground in the marital relationship. The wife would not typically be part of such a decision; the husband would simply dictate what was going—or not going—to transpire.
2. “For a time” is better rendered, as in the ESV, “for a limited time.” The idea is that this would not be open-ended, and certainly not a permanent state; it would be only for a set, specified period of time.

Why?

so that you may devote yourselves to prayer,

We must be careful not to read too much into this. Paul is not saying that to effectively pray one must be ceremonially “clean” as Israel was commanded before they could approach Mount Sinai upon which the Lord God would visit them.

Read Exodus 19:14-15.

Nor is he saying marital relations are by nature a hindrance to prayer. As David Garland puts it, “The spiritual life does not cut a person off from the natural order of creation.” As Paul will address soon, there are those given by God the gift of celibacy, but that gift was (and is) not common. Paul’s point is that extended celibacy within a marriage is against the natural—and God-ordained—order of marriage.

But if both husband and wife agree that a period (implied, brief) of focused, even intense prayer is called for, they may set aside their physical relationship for the duration.

and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

Adam Clarke: [regarding “lack of self-control,” or “incontinence” (KJV)] want of strength to regulate one’s desires or appetites.

The NIV and ESV do a better job of capturing Paul’s emphasis; here is the ESV:

but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. (emphasis added)

A “but” is stronger than an “and.” To paraphrase, Sure, there are times when a couple should come together for a brief time of focused prayer during which the more physical aspects of marriage are dispensed with. But beware of extending this for too long, as then your natural and God-ordained drive may be sidetracked by Satan’s temptations.

Sidebar: Those using one of the King James versions may note that I haven’t mentioned “fasting,” which is included along with prayer in those translations—NKJV: “...that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer”—but left out in the other common translations. Garland explains, “The omission of fasting is attested by the earliest and most reliable witnesses. It has weak manuscript support and probably was added by later scribes because fasting was an interest of the early church.”

v6

But this I say by way of concession, not of command.

Verse 6 is another pivot point: It both concludes Paul’s thoughts in v5 (Fee), and serves as a segue into his discussion about celibacy in the upcoming verses (Garland), contrasting the God-given gift of celibacy with forced celibacy within a marriage. What the apostle has described in v5—mutual, temporary abstinence for periods of devotion to prayer—he terms a “concession,” a compromise, as it were, meeting them halfway; they are not to consider it a “command.”

v7

In v7 Paul foreshadows a lengthier discussion on individual gifts he will conduct in Chapters Twelve to Fourteen. Before that, however, he expresses his wish that all people had his gift.

Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am.

It is easy for casual readers of portions of Chapter Seven to conclude that the apostle holds a low opinion of marriage—and, by extension, the conjugal rights enjoyed there. But not so.

Garland: One can get the impression that Paul thinks that marriage is only a second-best choice for the “burners” [vv8-9]. That is not his intention. The issue is not what is the highest “good” but what is good for each individual Christian as he or she understands his or her endowment and calling by God.

More on this in a moment. Paul here speaks of true celibacy—not just the single state. What he wishes for all is what he has: the special gift from God that is freedom from desiring sexual relations. For someone in Paul’s position, with his burden for evangelizing the known

world, this was a special gift indeed. He was free of the responsibility of supporting a wife and family; he was free of the desire and temptation for physical release. Thus he could give all of himself, body and soul, to God and his calling.

By saying this Paul is not suggesting that he has the superior gift, and that literally every person on earth should have the same gift of celibacy. This statement is best seen as a response to the Corinthians' misguided effort for forced celibacy within marriage. By saying this he is also saying that these individuals do not have the gift of celibacy, so they should stop trying to force such constraints on their marriage. Then he quickly adds an important "but."

However, each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that.

We will consider this important truth in its fullness later in this letter; for now let's narrow its scope to this immediate context. What is stated here is something to which I fear we do not give sufficient attention.

Paul considers his celibacy a charisma—a divine gift. And considering the natural condition for men and women in this world, one can only conclude that he is correct. Considering man's nature, true celibacy can only be a gift from God. In this context it is to this that Paul refers when he writes, "one in this manner."

Now, on one level Paul is stating, in the second half of v7, the obvious: one person has this gift from God, and another person has a different gift from God. Very true, and later in this letter Paul will make clear his position that one gift is not necessarily superior over another. They are all important in kingdom life. But there seems to be an extra level here, one reflected in the KJVs and the NASB.

...one in this manner, and another in that.

I looked everywhere for some confirmation, or even mention, of what I was hearing here, but alas to no avail. Thus you are free to consider this with the feather weight it rightly deserves.

What I hear in these translations is the supremacy and centrality of God in this matter of divine gifts. That is, God not only dispenses the gifts, He is to be the reason and focus of how they are employed. Every spiritual gift handed down from above is to be used for Him, to His glory—not ours and not others. Others may and should benefit from the employment of these gifts—for example, I believe Christians for the last two thousand years have benefited from Paul's gift of celibacy—but they are to be dedicated to the One from whom they came. As he puts it in Romans:

For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen. (Romans 11:36)

So we might paraphrase this, However, each man has his own gift from God, one serves Him in this manner, and another serves Him in another manner. Let's close with a passage by the apostle Peter which summarizes this nicely.

Read 1 Peter 4:10-11.

Paul was given, by God, *singleness* and *celibacy* as divine gifts. Others are given, by God, *marriage* as a divine gift.

All are to be used for Him.

Session 61: A Singular Devotion

1 Corinthians 7:8-9

Preface 1

As you might imagine, even before we landed in Chapter Seven I have struggled with—and earnestly prayed for—the best way to present it to a class of our composition. And, quite frankly, I would not be at all surprised to learn that our class today is smaller than it once was because some have opted out over the subject matter of Chapter Seven.

I am convinced that the way to both understand and accept the teaching of this chapter is to understand the apostle's mindset, his motive, his worldview. Once we adopt that, we can accept the teaching—without being either offended or embarrassed by it—because we are seeing it through the perspective—through the eyes, as it were—of a holy God wanting only the best for His children.

In other words, it is critically important that we first discover and then apprehend God's "why." Because he was the earthly author of this text, we repeatedly cite the apostle Paul. But we dare not lose sight of the fact that these are the Lord God's words, given to Paul by the Holy Spirit. Accepting this still may not remove all the discomfort factor from the text, but I believe much of that will be dissipated if we stop looking at this from an earthly, cultural, or human experience perspective, and begin looking at it from the perspective of God—and this is facilitated when we understand the "why."

This is how we are to understand the entirety of God's word, but especially in passages like this that are so contrary to the world in which we live. For example, we read things such as the command in vv10-11,

...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.

And our flesh cries out, "But, but..." We may not say the words out loud, but something inside us protests with, "Paul, you just do not understand the way things are today. You don't understand what I have been going through." We must quickly throw water on that flame, however, because by even thinking something like that we are saying that Almighty God doesn't know what He is doing; we are essentially calling God a liar, for He states clearly in His word that He knows very well how things are today, and knows exactly what He is doing.

Read Acts 17:24-27.

To understand God's "why" we must first understand—and accept—who we are in Him. We are trained by the culture in which we dwell to always think of ourselves first, to think we know best, and that we have every right to live and do what we think is best for us. But that is an earthly, fleshly perspective. God's perspective is quite different.

Read Acts 17:28.

As stated time and again in His word, God's perspective is that as His children—as "Christ-ians"—we belong to Him. And what is His "why" for us? Why are we His? What is our purpose? Why are we here?

Read Psalm 96:7-10.

The prophet Isaiah says it flat out:

**"I will say to the north, 'Give them up!'
And to the south, 'Do not hold them back.'
Bring My sons from afar
And My daughters from the ends of the earth,
Everyone who is called by My name,
And whom I have created for My glory,
Whom I have formed, even whom I have made.'" (Isaiah 43:6-7)**

When we turn to a challenging passage, such as Chapter Seven, we must consider it not from an earthly or fleshly perspective, but from *God's* perspective—which is, to put it succinctly, His glory. Because He loves us, one of God's "whys" is the good of His children. Why did He hand down all those laws and regulations to Israel in the Pentateuch? For their own good, for their good health, and joy and well-being. But before and above that, His "why" is that He be exalted, magnified among the nations, that He be glorified.

When we realize that in all things the focus of our life is to be our heavenly Father's glory and our Savior's glory, we approach passages like this from a supernatural, an other-worldly perspective, because as spiritual beings, we belong to that other world more than we do this world in which we now dwell. Doing so, it doesn't matter that His counsel is challenging or uncomfortable; He is Lord! and we belong to Him. We obey because it brings honor and glory to His name.

Secondarily, His "why" is that it is for our own good. We are His children and He loves us; His commands and His counsel are for our well-being. But we only understand this if we see it from His perspective.

With all that in mind, let's return to our passage, and examine it by means of this method.

Preface 2

In our local church we have R.O.M.E.O. (Retired Old Men Eating Out)—a bunch of old guys who meet for breakfast once a month to accomplish little more than add to their cholesterol level. When I was a little kid in Marshalltown back in the fifties, and even before I was born, our church (First Baptist) had the "Gamos Club." From some of the old pictures I have scanned, this group, of which my parents were a part, did some pretty silly things at their gatherings. I have pictures of the group looking like they were dressed to go out Trick-or-Treating. It was only recently I learned what the word "gamos" means. This was a social group within the church for married couples, and the name of the group was taken from the Greek word for "married": *gamos*.

In the passage before us, in vv10-11, the apostle addresses the *gamos*—the married—but first, in vv8-9, he addresses the *agamos*—the unmarried—and widows. (More accurately, *gamoí* and *agamoí*, because it is in the plural.)

Read 1 Corinthians 7:8-11.

When we began our study of Chapter Seven, I pointed out that the overarching counsel in this portion of the letter—Paul's repeated answer to situations in and out of marriage, divorce, widowhood—is to remain in the status one was at the time of one's call. We can see this from our recent studies, as well as the one immediately before us.

vv1-7 to the married: stay married with full conjugal rights

vv8-9 to the "unmarried" and widows: it is good to remain unmarried

vv10-11 to the married (both partners believers): remain married

vv12-16 to those with an unbelieving spouse: remain married

v8

But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I.

With v8 Paul begins a series of three statements in which he applies his general rule of "stay as you are." This verse has several challenges to understanding precisely what is being said—not least, just who is Paul speaking of when he uses *agamoí*, more often translated "unmarried"? I think Gordon Fee's conclusion is the most sensible. Because widows are specifically singled out in this verse, and because later, in vv25ff, virgins (*parthenos*) are addressed, it makes sense that *agamos* in v8 does not refer to anyone and everyone not currently or ever married. Instead Paul is referring to widowers, and "unmarried" could and perhaps should be translated, "demarried." Thus in v8 Paul is addressing those of both sexes who were once married, but have lost their spouse through death. So we could paraphrase v8,

But I say to widowers and to widows that it is good for them remain unmarried and celibate—as I am.

Now we must apply our godly perspective and ask: Why does God say it is best that those who have lost their mates remain unmarried? We find at least one answer to this question in Paul's lengthier treatise on widows in the church in his first letter to Timothy. Please turn there. But before we read that passage, remember that in 1 Timothy Paul is addressing different situations in a different congregation. So while the counsel harmonizes well, there is a different tone, with different emphases.

Read 1 Timothy 5:5.

Here Paul is speaking, initially, of widows age 60 or older who are “widows indeed,” that is, widows without family or any other resources and utterly dependent on the church. They are to “fix their hope on God and continue in entreaties and prayers night and day.” In other words, whereas once their lives were focused on their husband, now they are to be focused on their Lord. As v2 states, those who are younger in the church are to look up to the older women (especially the widows), honoring them as “mothers.” The picture of older widows in the NT is one of the woman being dedicated to piety and devotion to the Lord: if she has family, for their sake; if she does not, for the church's sake. Return to First Corinthians. Look at v34.

The woman who is unmarried [i.e., widowed], and the virgin, is concerned about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit;

What about younger widows? Paul addresses them—but not exclusively—in v9.

v9

But if they do not have self-control, let them marry;

Read 1 Corinthians 7:9.

It would be so pleasant if we could just read a verse then go directly to application, because we all can clearly understand what it is saying. Sadly that is rarely the case, so I guess my job is secure. There are a couple of things that require clarification in v9. Once again we have one of those mystifying situations where virtually all the common versions have translated a phrase in a way that most commentators agree is incorrect. How this happens I do not know.

The NASB is the only version that gets close to the correct translation: “But if they do not have self-control...” A. T. Robertson and Young's Literal translate this, “But if they have not continency...” The other common translations use the word “cannot,” (NIV: “But if they cannot control themselves...”) which speaks of an unsuccessful effort to control one's sexual drive. See the difference? Paraphrasing, the incorrect translation says, If you are trying to bridle your sexual urges and failing, while the correct translation says, If you do not have the gift of celibacy...

If one does not have the gift of celibacy, then marriage is the solution. It is a small nuance, but this refers not to the act of getting married, but to the married state. Paraphrasing again, If you do not have the gift of celibacy, be married. Why?

for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

The apostle is setting out a hierarchy of ideals concerning our relationships with each other. He speaks of that which is “good”—the ideal state is one of single celibacy, living a life wholly dedicated to God without the responsibilities of a family, and sharing one's affections with someone other than the Lord.

But not all are so gifted, which is why God created marriage. It is not a sin to have sexual desires and to want to be married. It is a sin—or at least sets one up to sin—to have sexual desires and instead of marrying to burn. The text is vague; Paul is not explicit on what he

means when he writes, “to burn.” But there is good evidence that what is meant is “to be aflame with passion.” This metaphor was so common in the literature of that time that he did not need to expand on what he meant; his readers would know.

Conclusion

Verses 8 and 9 are addressed to individuals of either sex who have lost their mates through death. In keeping with what he has said thus far, Paul’s counsel is that they remain unmarried, so that they might devote themselves to the Lord. If they are still young, or if at any age they still have sexual desire burning within, they are to marry. From God’s perspective, what is the “why”? We find it down below. Earlier we read v34; now let’s read the whole paragraph.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:32-35.

When queried by the Pharisees,

“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law? [Jesus answered,] “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 22:37-40)

This world throws up many obstacles to such incredible devotion, and some, like marriage, are even sanctioned by God. But given the opportunity—given the spiritual gifts He has or has not granted us, given the situations in which He has placed us, given even the anguish of losing a husband or wife to death—we should embrace the gift and blessing of dedicating “all our heart, all our soul, all our mind” to the Lord our God, serving both Him and our “neighbor” in His name.

Session 62: Breaking Faith

1 Corinthians 7:10-11

Preface

Within the context of Chapter Seven, it is perhaps nowhere more important to understand God's "why" than in His commands about divorce. And if you will pardon me the cheap promotion, I am reminded of the topic of this month's Reflections by the Pond, which is all about whether or not we, as individuals who call ourselves "Christians," are willing to follow the one source we have for knowing the mind of God the Father and His Son. In this month's issue I cite a number of public figures, "religious" leaders who claim to be Christians, yet deny the truth of God's word. One of these individuals, an ordained minister, on virtually every major topic of Scripture—the virgin birth, the crucifixion, the resurrection, heaven and hell, homosexuality, the omnipotence and omniscience of God—on all of these she holds a position in opposition to Scripture. Yet she calls herself a "Christian" minister.

And here, as we approach vv10-11 and following in Chapter Seven, we must ask ourselves: Are we willing and sufficiently courageous to set aside all the societal pressures, the coercion to be on the "correct" side of the cultural war, our personal experiences and emotional preferences—are we willing to set all that aside and follow what God is telling us in His word? Are we willing to accept and obey God's "why" over the "why" of this fallen world?

Read 1 Corinthians 7:10-11.

v10

But to the married I give instructions...

In Corinth, not only was it convenient and simple for a man to divorce his wife—he could just walk out the door—but, in contrast to Judaism, it was also permitted for the wife to divorce her husband. Once again the Corinth of the first century was very much like our society today. John MacArthur makes the point that since Paul never gave instructions to unbelievers, "the married" refers to marriage between two believers.

give instructions^{nasb}, **command**^{niv, kjvs}, **give this charge**^{esv} = *parangello* = from <G3844> (*para*) and the base of <G32> (*aggelos*); to transmit a message, i.e. (by implication) to enjoin :- (give in) charge, (give) command (-ment), declare; to order. [Compare this to "wish" in 7:7—thelo \(an inclination\).](#)

So here we have a new tone from the apostle; he is not just "saying" or "wishing," but commanding. And, as M. R. Vincent puts it, "Paul means that his readers had no need to apply to him for instruction in the matter of divorce, since they had the words of Christ himself."

not I, but the Lord,

Let me throw in a reminder here of what I said about this in our first study on this chapter:

Some have interpreted v10 to mean "not I, but the Lord [is telling me]..." and v12 to mean something like, "since I haven't heard anything from the Lord, I'll offer a best guess." But that is not how these are to be read.

The contrast is not between authoritative revelation and guess, but explicit command stated by Jesus and authoritative apostolic command or counsel. This situation is similar to the erroneous position taken by some sects that the only authoritative text in the Bible are those words printed in red—which is nonsense. The Bible is God's word from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22. In these passages Paul, in answering the questions sent to him by the church in Corinth, is referencing either something Jesus had earlier stated ("not I, but the Lord"), or his authority as someone called by Jesus Christ not just as an apostle, but to render trustworthy judgment (v25: "as one who by the mercy of the Lord is trustworthy").

When he states that this is from the Lord, Paul is probably citing what Jesus said in Matthew 19, but before we look at that, let's stop by the prophet Malachi to read what God the Father, Yahweh in His own words, has to say about this. The passage in Malachi 2 includes a lot of textual challenges, so there can be many differences between the translations. Let's read it from the NIV to get the sense of it. (You may want to just listen.)

Another thing you do: You flood the Lord's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask, "Why?" It is because the Lord is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not [the lord] made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. "I hate divorce," says the lord God of Israel, "and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment," says the lord Almighty. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith. (Malachi 2:13-16)

This is not metaphorical; Yahweh is indeed speaking of human divorce. But the passage is in the context of Judah being unfaithful to Him, and Yahweh cites married partners breaking faith with each other as an example of how they are breaking faith with Him. He hates both! Now let's see what Jesus had to say about this.

Read Matthew 19:3-6.

Marriage between man and woman is an act of God in which the two become one (Genesis 2:24). It is God's doing. Thus, as D. A. Carson puts it, "Divorce is not just 'unnatural' but rebellion against God. God and man are so far apart on this issue that what God unites, man divides."

The Pharisees pressed the point with another question. Paraphrasing v7, they asked Jesus, If what you say is true, "let no man separate what God has joined together," then why did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away? Jesus never let the religious leaders get away with their semantical tricks; He points out that Moses did not command, but "permitted."

Read Matthew 19:8-9.

In agreement with the prophet Malachi, Jesus points out that divorce was never part of God's righteous, perfect plan for man. Let's return to Carson's comments on this passage in Matthew.

D. A. Carson: Jesus taught that Moses' concession reflected not the true creation ordinance but the hardness of men's hearts. Divorce is not part of the Creator's perfect design. If Moses permitted it, he did so because sin can be so vile that divorce is to be preferred to continued "indecentcy." This is not to say that the person who, according to what Moses said, divorced his spouse was actually committing sin in so doing; *but that divorce could even be considered, testified that there had already been sin the marriage.* Therefore any view of divorce and remarriage (taught in either Testament) that sees the problem only in terms of what may or may not be done has already overlooked a basic fact—divorce is never to be thought of as a God-ordained, morally neutral option, but as evidence of sin, of hardness of heart. (emphasis added)

Earlier, in His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus raises this same subject, adding a little more information. In the previous passage with the Pharisees Jesus declared that when a man divorces his wife and remarries, he commits adultery. In His treatise on the mount, Jesus expands this and makes an important point for our consideration.

Read Matthew 5:31-32.

The additional information is found in the middle of v32:

everyone who divorces his wife...makes her commit adultery (emphasis added)

How can this be? [Let's return to our passage in First Corinthians.](#)

v11

(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.

The apostle Paul is straddling two cultures here. He is issuing a command to Corinthian women not to divorce their husbands—a prospect unthinkable under Jewish law; the wife could never do this. So the Corinthian culture, which did permit women to divorce, is being addressed here. Yet his command to “remain unmarried” rises out of Jewish law—not the Corinthian culture. David Garland offers a fascinating insight.

Garland: It may seem that Paul presents the Christian wife with two options: either remain unmarried or be reconciled to her believing husband. *But he directs her to remain unmarried in order to be reconciled with her husband.* In Paul's Jewish tradition, a wife who has been divorced and has married another is forbidden to her former husband. (emphasis added)

Let's interrupt Garland for a moment and take a look at the passage he cites for this—one which gives an illustration of a divorced woman who remarries, then, for whatever reason, wished to return to her former husband.

[Read Deuteronomy 24:4](#)

Now let's return to Garland.

If there was to be a reconciliation, she must remain unmarried. The assumption behind this instruction is the same as in the teaching of the Lord: the marriage bonds remain intact regardless of what steps spouses might take to end the marriage.

When Jesus said in His Sermon on the Mount that “everyone who divorces his wife...makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery,” He was citing the Mosaic Law, but by bringing it forward into *His* law, He made it relevant for Christians today.

It would be easy, as I am sure many Christians do, to consider this as just one of those archaic OT laws applicable only to Jews under the Mosaic system—hence not applicable to Christians. The first nagging problem with this rationale is that both Jesus and the apostle Paul cite these passages from the Law in their teaching.

But even that is beside the point. The important take-away from all these passages from God's word is that marriage between man and woman—the only marriage that *is* a marriage—is something far more serious to the God who has joined them, than it often is to the ones who have been joined. That is, the Lord God places far more importance on that idea of “one flesh” than people today.

Divorce does violence to that. These were not just clever words Jesus employed to win an argument and make the Pharisees look bad; He really meant it when He said, “So they are no longer two, but one flesh. *What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.*” (Matthew 19:6; emphasis added)

People today—even some within the church—think of marriage as two people who come together for a while, and maybe a ways down the road they part, go their separate ways, and come together with someone else. That is not how God sees it. God sees that marriage union as a whole, a singular unity. So when divorce occurs, in His eyes it is not two people going their separate ways, but something that was whole being ripped violently apart, torn in two. In God's economy those two halves still belong to each other. So if one one of them remarries, adultery has already occurred; the marriage union has been defiled.

Paul's command in v11 for the wife (or husband) to remain unmarried is not a restrictive penalty, but a grace. If both spouses remain unmarried there is still hope for reconciliation.

Conclusion

The reasons for divorce in Corinth that Paul is dealing with were the opposite of what most are today. More often than not, in our society, the desire for divorce is founded on sexual license, whereas in Corinth it was founded on the misguided “spirituality” of the time, that is was it more spiritual to be unmarried and celibate. This is probably why the command in vv10-11 is directed toward women first: most commentators are of the opinion that this situation was centered around the so-called “eschatological women,” who considered celibacy to be a higher spiritual plane. They had probably tried celibacy within their marriage, but, finding that unworkable, now wanted to divorce their husbands. Paul is saying believers are not to divorce, but if they do, they are to remain unmarried, so as to leave open the preferred reconciliation with their spouse.

God’s “why”? We have already stated it; just as God looks down on a believer and instead of a sinner sees the atoning blood of His Son, He looks down on believers’ marriage and sees not two, but one. Divorce does violence to that beautiful, God-ordained unity.

Nevertheless, as Fee points out, “Paul does not raise this norm to law. Divorce may happen, and such a person is not [to be] ostracized from the community.” The ultimate point of this is less a granting or withholding permission to divorce, but, for every Christian marriage, *will we be obedient to the Lord who joined us as one?*

Session 63: Whether to Stay or Leave

1 Corinthians 7:12-14

Preface

In our passage today Paul continues answering the questions put to him in the recent letter from the Corinthian church. And here we cannot accuse the Corinthians, as we could earlier in this chapter, of holding to a skewed perception of spiritual reality. Here they seek Paul's counsel for a very real and not unexpected situation—not just in the Corinth of the first century, but in our world today. That is, What to do when a believer is married to an unbeliever?

Read 1 Corinthians 7:12-14.

vv12-13

But to the rest...

In vv8-9 Paul addresses widows and widowers; in vv10-11 he addresses married believers—that is, marriages in which both spouses are followers of Christ Jesus. Now, in vv12-16 Paul addresses “mixed” marriages, meaning marriages in which one spouse is a believer and one is not—either a pagan or a Jew. Once again his counsel is what it has been all along: So long as it depends on you, remain as you are. But along the way he speaks to some specifics.

I say, not the Lord,

In vv10-11 Paul was handing down counsel about which Jesus had spoken specifically, but now, in vv12-16, since Jesus did not address these specifics, Paul speaks from apostolic authority on the topic.

that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her.

This is not a suggestion, but a command (“must not”); the KJVs soften it a bit with “let him not,” and the ESV softens it further with “should not..” The command is that the believing (Christian) spouse is to never be the one to initiate divorce.

We know that this is addressed to mixed marriages—note, “brother” (*adelphos*)—but we also know that it is addressed to marriages in which one partner has become a believer after the wedding. Remember that the apostle was in Corinth for over a year and a half, and he would never have countenanced a marriage between a believer and nonbeliever.

Read 2 Corinthians 6:14-15.

But we can easily imagine a number of instances in which just one in an existing marriage is converted, but not the other. We can also easily imagine the friction this might cause in the household. These are the situations being answered here.

We can also imagine that anyone in the church who was willing to forego a physical relationship within a believing marriage, or even separate from each other, because they considered themselves to be in a spiritual state above such things, would readily assume that they should divorce a partner who was not a believer. They would take the position that somehow the unbeliever defiled the believer—especially the former Jews in the congregation. Beyond any Jewish influence, these individuals could have been basing their position on what Paul had written in an earlier (now lost) letter—something they had misunderstood.

Read 1 Corinthians 5:9-11.

Even after his clarification in this letter they may have (mistakenly) taken the counsel to mean that they should no longer associate with an unbelieving spouse. But, again, that was not what he was saying; his original counsel was not to associate with someone who, though claiming to be a Christian, remained fundamentally immoral and an idolater—to wit, a liar

and hypocrite. The unbelieving but honest spouse actually fits the description of those with whom they should associate—and pretty much for the same reasons.

We need to define a few terms used in vv12-13 before we go much further.

consents^{nasb,esv}, **willing to**^{niv, nkjv}, **pleased to**^{kjv} = *syneudokeo* = from <G4862> (*sun*) and <G2106> (*eudokeo*); to think well of in common, i.e. assent to, feel gratified with :- allow, assent, be pleased, have pleasure.

We are not to think this refers to a grudging, conditional relenting; it is not just willingness, but includes a measure of approval, and it also assumes there is not coercion from the believing spouse. In other words, it is the unbelieving spouse saying, “I want to stay.” Notice that the “mutual agreement” of v5 is still being applied in this situation.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:5.

live with = living together in a marital, conjugal commitment.

divorce, send...away, put...away, leave = *aphiemi* = from <G575> (*apo*) and *hiemi* (to send; an intensive form of *eimi*, to go); to send forth, in various applications (as follow) :- cry, forgive, forsake, lay aside, leave, let (alone, be, go, have), omit, put (send) away, remit, suffer, yield up; divorce. [Verse 12b and v13b both this word.](#)

And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away.

The idea that some today can still claim that the apostle Paul was a woman-hater, teaching that the man should enjoy unfettered dominance with his foot on his wife’s neck, reveals only their ignorance of Scripture. Not only do we see mutual agreement in the word translated “consents,” but notice the perfect symmetry and balance between v12 & v13: The only difference between the two in the Greek is that in v12 he refers to the man as “brother” (*adelphos*)—probably to emphasize his believing status as a brother in Christ—but in v13 he uses “woman” (*gyne*) rather than the equivalent “sister.” Other than that small difference, there is perfect balance between the sexes of believers in a mixed marriage.

The command is the same for both: If you are a follower of Christ, married to an unbeliever, you must not be the one to initiate divorce.

v14

In v14 Paul supplies the “why” behind his command—one that points back to God, the one, of course, from whom the command comes.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:14.

For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband;

This is pretty straightforward—except we need to know how to understand his use of the word “sanctified” (ESV: made holy). The root word of this verb is

hagiazō = from <G40> (*hagios*); to make holy, i.e. (ceremony) purify or consecrate; (mentally) to venerate :- hallow, be holy, sanctify.

That’s the encyclopedic definition, but it doesn’t help us very much. We can affirm, at least, what Paul is not saying, that the unbelieving spouse is “saved” by the believing spouse. Verse 16 makes clear that the unbelieving spouse still needs to be saved.

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?

Now, v16 requires its own clarification (which we will address in our next session), but for the moment it makes clear that the unbelieving spouse is not automatically saved by virtue of his or her relationship with a believing spouse. And, of course, if it did, that would fly in the face of everything the NT teaches about how to come to Christ. So what is he saying in v14?

There is, of course, the obvious explanation that if the unbelieving spouse remains in the household and proximity of the believer, it increases the odds that they would, as it were, see the light and be converted, influenced by the life of their sanctified spouse. But v14 is saying more than that; there is a middle ground, a spiritual reality for this situation that lies somewhere between just one spouse witnessing to the other, and one spouse literally being the salvation of the other. Paul will later, in his letter to the Romans, speak of this with rich imagery.

Read Romans 11:16.

Here Paul speaks of the special “holiness” enjoyed by Israel. Gordon Fee explains:

Israel is not yet converted, but because the “firstfruits” and “root” were “holy,” that is, because Israel was originally thus “sanctified” [i.e., set apart] unto God, the Israel of Paul’s day, though still in unbelief, was nonetheless “holy” in this special sense. Precisely because they belonged to God in this special sense, Paul hoped for their eventually coming to faith. That seems to be the same analogy put forth here [in 1 Corinthians 7:14].

John MacArthur brings out another aspect of this—that of “common grace.”

MacArthur: In God’s eyes a home is set apart for Himself when the husband, wife, or, by implication, any other family member, is a Christian. Such a home is not Christian in the full sense, but it is immeasurably superior to one that is totally unbelieving. Even if the Christian is ridiculed and persecuted, unbelievers in the family are blessed because of that believer. *One Christian in a home graces the entire home.* God’s indwelling that believer and all the blessings and graces that flow into the believer’s life from heaven will spill over to enrich all who are near. (emphasis added)

Finally, David Garland cites a quote of profound imagery from R. B. Hays, regarding a marriage and home in which only one is a believer:

...this should be hallowed as “a sphere in which God’s holiness and transforming power operate.”

for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy.

Let me illustrate this—as well as the end of v14—from my own childhood, an experience many of you could attest to as well. I was born into a family as the second son (and last child) of two Christian parents. As a child in a “Christian home” I was not just influenced by the faith of my parents, in the sense that I picked up information from them, from Sunday School and church, from their behavior, but more than that, in our home I was enveloped in the sphere of “God’s holiness and transforming power” that resided in that home because of their faith. In that family and home the “natural” state was one of being enveloped by the grace of God. It was natural not just to go to church on Sundays, but to talk about God, to think about God, to read about God, to thank Him for what happened in our lives. Being raised in that environment, it was thus “natural” for me, at the tender age of seven, to walk the aisle of our Baptist church and ask Jesus to come into my heart.

I was not saved by the faith of my parents, but by being raised in that sphere of holiness charged by the transforming power of God, it was a natural, perhaps predictable, consequence that I would be saved.

Here is the graphic yet mystical “why” God wants believers to remain married to their unbelieving wives or husbands. It is an example of His grace—both common and saving grace.

Session 64: The Call to Peace

1 Corinthians 7:15-16

Preface

The verse and passage before us now has, through the centuries, suffered from more varied interpretations and, yes, misinterpretations than perhaps any in God's word. (In fact, in the Catholic church its misinterpretation is canon law.) If I had been warned about Chapter Seven as a whole—and I was—verse fifteen was the bright, red-hot beacon of that warning. Never have I read so many different opinions from scholars, so many nuances of interpretation, for any one verse.

Exacerbating the situation, on top of the scholarly exegesis of the literal text are the many layers of societal rationale; that is, we like to think, if, in our society, it has been all right to do things this way for so long, then that must be what the Bible text means. However, the only society that should be considered when trying to understand what Paul is saying to the Corinthians is... the Corinthian society. The truths contained herein are certainly applicable to us; they have been put down in God's word for our enlightenment and instruction. But the context for our understanding is the Corinthian community and church. Our consideration should be, What were they doing that caused Paul to give the instruction he did? What was the situation there? We should never interpret the counsel of God's word by the standard of today's culture, but always apply the counsel of God's word to today's culture for correction.

Here is just one example: It is safe to say that in today's society, more often than not an individual's motivation for divorce is unhappiness with one's partner; fornication, infidelity, adultery (i.e., lust); financial problems; or "I just don't love him any more." But these were not the situations to which Paul was responding in his letter to the Corinthian church. Their reasoning, while still wrong, was based for the most part on a misguided interpretation of the "spiritual" life. They thought it was more "spiritual" to be single and/or celibate—even if they were presently married.

So we must continually—not just in this passage, but in the entirety of God's word—guard against interpreting it by our contemporary standards and lifestyles. In that habit lies error—and madness.

In our last session we looked at Paul's command to believers who found themselves in a mixed marriage—i.e., married to an unbeliever—in vv12-14. Verse fourteen was particularly eloquent in stating the reason for the believing partner to remain in the marriage: "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." I cited R. B. Hays, who described this "sanctification" as "a sphere in which God's holiness and transforming power operate."

Now, in vv15-16, Paul by the power of the Holy Spirit answers the question, But what if my unbelieving spouse does not consent to live with me? What if he insists on divorce?

Read 1 Corinthians 7:15-16.

v15

Under God, the believer in a troubled, mixed marriage has no recourse but to obey his or her Lord, and thus no power or rights to affect change. That is, under God the believer cannot—must not—initiate divorce from an unbeliever, nor can he prevent the unbeliever from leaving.

Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave;

The apostle has put forth an excellent argument for "remaining as you are" in v14—so long as the unbeliever chooses to stay. This has been his consistent picture of the ideal: wherever, whatever you are when God called you, stay there. Do not change your (in this context) marital status just because you are now a Christian. Now, of course, he is not saying that when you come to Christ as a little boy at the age of seven you are to remain for the rest of your life a young boy in your parents house. In the Corinth church individuals were running riot over their distorted conception of "spirituality," They were saying,

- it is good for a man not to touch a woman (v1);
- it is good to abstain from physical relations in a marriage (vv3-5)—but then it is also OK to visit prostitutes (6:15-20);
- it is OK for two believers to divorce for supposed “spiritual” reasons, but then later marry someone else; and
- it is certainly OK for a spiritually minded believer to divorce an unbelieving spouse.

To all of these Paul’s answer was, *It is best to remain as you are. Do not change your life situation just because you are now a Christian* (and he will illustrate this further in the interlude of vv17-24). A Christian should never marry a non-Christian, but it may be—and quite often is—that only one in a marriage between two non-Christians will be converted. Paul’s answer to this is the same: Remain as you are. If the unbeliever is pleased to stay, remain married. And if v15 stopped with the first sentence or clause, we could all go home now, since it is succinct and unambiguously stated: If the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave. You have held up your end of the covenant, but they have decided to leave. Then let them.

But v15 does not end there. Using language that is ambiguous and perplexing, Paul extends the thought.

the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases,

The immediate challenge before us is to understand what Paul is saying by his use of this word translated “under bondage” in the NASB.

under bondage^{nasb, kjvs}, **bound**^{niv}, **enslaved**^{esv} = *doulou* = from <G1401> (*doulos*); to enslave (literal or figurative) :- bring into (be under) bondage, × given, become (make) servant.

To say that opinions vary on this and the next clause would be a gross understatement. To say that the contemporary applications of this passage have given rise to marital permissiveness would be an even more profound understatement. But let us bravely and unabashedly examine it on the basis of the actual text, in the context of the Corinthian church. There we should discover the truth—and, by extension, the true application for us today.

Sidebar: “the brother or the sister”

For some peculiar reason the original NIV translates this “a believing man or woman.” The updated NIV corrects this to match not only the rest of our popular translations, but also the literal Greek: the brother (*adelphos*) or the sister (*adelphe*). Earlier, in v13, he chose to use “woman” (*gyne*) instead of “sister”; it is reassuring to see him use this balanced, even affectionate term here for a fellow believer who is female.

But let’s return to this business of bondage. *Doulou* is not Paul’s customary term for the binding character of marriage. We find an example of that near the end of this chapter (as well as v27).

Read 1 Corinthians 7:39.

Here the word is the Greek *deo*, which has more of a legal connotation—bound by law and/or duty—whereas *doulou* (v15) speaks more to, as reflected in the ESV, enslavement. This leads us to the conclusion that in v15 Paul is not saying that if the unbeliever leaves the marriage it means that the believer may now consider the binding nature of the marriage covenant null and void. Under God, only the death of one of the partners does this. But also under God there are two exceptions (concessions) permitted, as Jesus put it, “because of your hardness of heart”: adultery and an unbeliever initiating divorce. When the circumstances of these two situations occur, the believer is no longer enslaved to a relationship that someone else has dissolved.

Paul employs slave-language from his Jewish background to emphasize how serious this is and that the marriage bond is to be respected and not treated lightly.

We additionally have the Corinthian context. Under Jewish law, a divorce was invalid without the husband's consent; the wife had no say. But under the Roman law in Corinth, "marriage was a matter of intention, if you lived together 'as' man and wife, man and wife you were" (Crook). The converse was also true. Divorce was instantaneously effective whenever one party renounced the marriage (Dixon).

Thus in a culture in which "divorce" could be implemented so easily and cheaply (no lawyers to pay), Paul—who had just stated that those who are married are to remain married—does not want to see believers marooned in a state of limbo because of the action of an unbeliever. In this event, believers would be enslaved to a marriage that no longer existed! So in this event of the unbeliever initiating divorce by leaving, the believer is to consider himself "not under bondage" to that relationship. With this clause, Paul is essentially just restating the first part of the verse.

I admit this is a slippery concept; it is difficult to grasp the difference between what Paul is not saying, and what he is saying. Here is how Gordon Fee states it: "...[Paul] does not intend to say one is not 'bound to the marriage.' One is simply not under bondage to maintain the marriage, which the other person wishes to dissolve. From Paul's point of view, one is bound to a marriage until death breaks the bond." There is a critical takeaway from this that I will address before we are done.

but God has called us to peace.

Now we take a look at the second perplexing portion of this verse. Again, interpretations are myriad, with one of the most common being the one held by John MacArthur, that by forcing the unbeliever to stay when they wish only to leave, the believer is denied the peace to which God has called him or her. This interpretation flows effortlessly into a "pessimistic" interpretation of v16 (more on this in a moment). Neither of these are preferred.

Once again we must consider the situation in first century Corinth. Today, in most jurisdictions in the western world, one partner in a marriage has the right to contest a divorce, even take the dispute to court. As stated earlier, this was not the case in a Roman city of the first century. Even Paul's command to "let him leave" when the unbelieving partner wants to depart the marriage, is academic: the unbeliever is going to go no matter what the believer says or does. (Knowing this, Paul may have meant not so much give him permission to go, but accept the fact that he has ended the marriage.) So this plays into what Paul is saying regarding "peace."

vv15c-16

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?

The preferred interpretation of the end of v15 is aided by associating it with v16 rather than the first two parts of v15. (Remember, the versification of our Bible is not inspired.) Paul's overarching principle in Chapter Seven is that followers of Christ remain as they are—i.e., remain where and as God has called them (vv17-24).

He opens the interlude that follows with the same thought.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:17.

The point being that he has not veered off-course. That is still Paul's emphasis. So what do we mean when we apply the terms "pessimistic" or "optimistic" to v16? Remember, Paul is writing to people who want to end their marriage, not who are desperate to save it—if in fact they even could. He is offering reasons to stay married.

David Garland points out that the idiom that begins v16—"how do you know?"—can be used in a context of optimism, as well as pessimism. That is, it could be read with implied pessimism, as it reads in most of our translations, implying a negative result. But it is used elsewhere optimistically, such as by King David when he was praying for Bathsheba's child.

Read 2 Samuel 12:22.

Interpreting v16 optimistically—for example, by inserting just two words: “For how do you know, O wife, whether or not you will save your husband?” (or even just the one word “not”)—colors how we interpret the end of v15. If Paul has been pressing individuals to remain married because of the residual sanctification which comes from having just one Christian in the family, why would he then turn and say, in v16, But hey, odds are against you saving him anyway?

Then the “peace” spoken of in v15 is not the peace we deserve by ridding ourselves of an unbelieving spouse, but the attitude and life we are “called to” live peaceably with someone who just might come to Christ through our desire to emulate our Master, the “Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6).

It may help to read two paraphrases of these two verses that (mostly) follow this line.

The Message paraphrase (by Eugene Peterson): On the other hand, if the unbelieving spouse walks out, you've got to let him or her go. You don't have to hold on desperately. God has called us to make the best of it, as peacefully as we can. You never know, wife: The way you handle this might bring your husband not only back to you but to God. You never know, husband: The way you handle this might bring your wife not only back to you but to God.

J. B. Phillips paraphrase: But if the unbelieving partner decides to separate, then let there be a separation. The Christian partner need not consider himself bound in such cases. Yet God has called us to live in peace, and after all how can you, who are a wife, know whether you will be able to save your husband or not? And the same applies to you who are a husband.

Conclusion

I want to conclude this with two points: first, on remarriage, and second, on God's redeeming grace.

- First, throughout the history of the church this passage has been used to permit divorce and remarriage; as I pointed out earlier, in the Catholic church it is canon law. While it is true that this passage does indeed permit divorce from an unbeliever—but only when the unbeliever insists on leaving—it says nothing about remarriage. Paul simply does not bring it up at all. The issue of remarriage, as Gordon Fee writes, “must be wrestled with in the much larger context of Scripture.” It may be that some who are divorced and have remarried to believers have solid scriptural basis for this path, but this passage alone cannot be determinative for that.
- Second, if you or a Christian you know has not followed a scripturally sound path regarding divorce and remarriage, Fee leaves us with something important we should never forget:

In many cases such marriages are clearly redemptive. Even if it is not the ideal situation, God still redeems our fallenness, whether it be individuals or broken marriages.

There is not one believer in this class who has *always* been faithful to God's ideal path of righteousness. Not a one. Yet, praise God, the blood of Christ covers it all.

Session 65: An Illustrative Interlude, part one

1 Corinthians 7:17-20

Preface

In my first few readings of Chapter Seven, I considered vv17-24 to be—while not off-topic, a bit of a sideways diatribe, a “sidebar,” as it were that seemed to interrupt the flow of Paul’s answers to the queries sent him by the church in Corinth. As such, I imagined we might swiftly dispense with this before getting back to things in v25.

As usual, however, my first reaction to the text was replaced by a realization that this passage is invaluable to Chapter Seven in illustrating and reinforcing Paul’s primary and overarching point: Remain as you are. This “illustrative interlude,” as I have termed it, accomplishes something that is not addressed in the same way anywhere else in the chapter.

In this passage we discover a critical “why” for the command to stay as one was when one was called—not just a practical, sociological why, but a deep, foundational, theological “why” related to every Christian’s salvation in Christ. Hence what we have here in this extended passage is biblical truth that should resound and reverberate in and through our lives.

The manner in which Paul addresses the two topics in this interlude—circumcision and slavery—reveal that these were not pressing issues in Corinth; he simply employs them to buttress the thesis of this chapter.

The thesis is both the bread and the meat in this rhetorical sandwich:

v17: “...as God has called each, in this manner let him walk.”

v20: “Each man must remain in that condition [lit., calling] in which he was called.”

v24: “...each one is to remain with God in that condition in which he was called.”

It is easy to forget (especially when we have been in this letter for better than a year and a half already) that this has been on Paul’s mind since his amanuensis first dipped his stylus in the ink pot.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:1-2.

Read vv9, 24, 26.

This is an important point that the apostle wants to leave with the Corinthians—and us; our calling by God to Christ, in Christ, through Christ.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:17-20.

v17

Only...

Whether your v17 begins with “Only” (NASB, ESV), “Nevertheless” (NIV), or “But” (KJVs), this points back to the exception in v15.

Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases,

After stating that the believer is permitted to let the unbeliever depart the marriage (if that is their choice), yet the rule remains: It is best to remain in the social condition one was in when conversion took place.

as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk.

Paul consistently means Christ Jesus when he uses the Greek *kyrios*, translated “Lord” (“Lord” [in small caps] in the OT translates the Hebrew *YHWH*: Yahweh, or Jehovah). Some manuscripts have “God” as the subject of both clauses, while the KJVs reverse the subjects (NKJV: But as God has distributed to each one, as the Lord has called each one...). The preferred reading is found in the NASB and ESV; that is, we are called by God the Father into a life in God the Son—i.e., Christ Jesus—who is the one who assigns to each one the life in which we are to walk.

To gain full benefit from this verse and passage we must determine two things:

1. What does Paul mean by “called” (used eight times in this passage)? Does that refer to our vocation or job, our marital status, our personal “ministry”?
2. What does he mean by “let him walk”? Does that mean that we are to always remain in the calling we are when we are called by God?

This verse reveals that there are two parts to our “call.” Go back to Chapter One. In Paul’s opening to this letter he breaks it down for us in the same reverse chronological order that we find in v7:17.

- Christ Jesus called Paul to the life of an apostle,
- but for this to happen he first had to be called to Christ by the will of God the Father.

God calls us to Himself through or in Christ Jesus. Then God the Son assigns us to the life, or task, through which we will serve and glorify them both. Go back to Chapter Seven. While there are many opinions out there for what Paul means by “called,” in the context of Chapter Seven, he speaks primarily of the individual believer’s life in Christ. We could break it down into salvation followed by assigned task or situation, but all of that we can also combine under our “walk”—by which Paul always means the conduct of the believer’s life, his or her behavior as a Christian.

The ESV states it extremely well:

Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him.

That’s it! And what is that life? A life in Christ. We will see in the following verses that the particulars of that life—circumcised or not, slave or not, married, single, celibate, divorced—all are secondary to living a life under God, in Christ.

And so I direct in all the churches.

Paul finishes v17 by reminding the Corinthians that they are not alone, but part of an extended community. This also has the effect of pointing out to the believers in Corinth that it is their theology that is skewed. In v18 we see an example of change so that one might fit better into secular society, and an example of change so that one might fit better into religious society.

v18

Was any man called when he was already circumcised? He is not to become uncircumcised.

You might be wondering just how a circumcised man could become uncircumcised—and why. Well you might ask. As to the “Why,” in a cosmopolitan city such as Corinth in the first century, there were at least two venues at which this might become an issue. First there were athletic events, such as the Isthmian Games, held in Corinth every two years. At certain events of the games one competed in the nude (if memory serves, women were not present). Second, one would bathe not in one’s own bathtub, but at the community baths down the street. In both of these settings it would be obvious to all whether one was circumcised or not.

As to the “how,” to the Romans and Greeks circumcision was considered a barbaric practice that, of course, revealed that one was a Jew. I’ll not go into details, but there was, at the time, a surgical procedure that could make one *appear* to be uncircumcised. So a Jew might have this procedure performed so that he would be more accepted in the Greco-Roman society of the time.

Has anyone been called in uncircumcision? He is not to be circumcised.

We are reminded of the Galatian church, under the assault of the legalistic “Judaizers,” who saw “The Way” as simply a sect of Judaism. That is, to be a good Christian one must first be a good Jew: obedient to the Law and being circumcised. Paul’s answer to the Galatians is similar to what he writes to the Corinthians (v19).

Read Galatians 5:6.

v19

Again, there is no evidence that this was an issue in the Corinth church, and his manner of presenting it gives evidence that Paul is simply using this to illustrate his point.

Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing,

Just imagine the power of the gospel in Paul's life that this former member of the Jewish council could say such a thing! The circumcision of every male predated the Mosaic Law, going back to the covenant between God and Abraham.

Read Genesis 17:10-11.

God went on to say that any uncircumcised male would be "cut off from his people" because "he has broken My covenant." Paul is saying that now, in Christ, circumcision is immaterial to one's relationship with God.

Read Romans 3:27-30.

but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God.

Now this same individual, who is writing to the churches in Corinth, Rome, and Galatia that circumcision is nothing, would certainly not end his sentence with but what is really important is keeping the Mosaic Law. That does not track at all.

In Chapter Fourteen Paul will use the same word to refer to his (Paul's) commands to the Corinthians as coming from the Lord.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:37.

By this term (*entole*) in this context, is meant, as Fee puts it, "the ethical imperatives of the Christian faith." That is, not proving ourselves to God through the mechanical liturgy and works of the Law—foremost among them, circumcision!—but being obedient to a life that glorifies Christ. In v20 Paul restates his principle.

v20

Each man must remain in that condition in which he was called.

The NASB and ESV translate this "condition"—I assume based on the context of the immediate passage: circumcision, which is a physical "condition." But the word is just the noun form (*klesis*) of the verb he has been using here and since Chapter One: "called" (*kaleo*). So literally the verse would be, "Each one, in the calling in which they were called, in this let them remain."

The emphasis here is not on forbidding change, but that the change has no effect on one's relationship to God. Or, as David Garland puts it, "The point is that one does not have to change one's life situation as a Christian, not that one may not change one's life situation" (italics in original).

The Corinthians were making—or at least considering making—drastic changes to their lifestyle for the misguided purpose of becoming more "spiritual," with the implication that this would make them more pleasing, more acceptable to God. But they were forgetting who and what they were when He first "called" them to Himself in Christ Jesus.

Garland: The offer of salvation came to them without requiring them to alter their ethnic, social, or domestic status. Any attempt to make changes *for religious reasons*, in effect, controverts God's grace, especially if they think that these changes—such as changing marriage for celibacy—boost them to a higher spiritual plateau. Such a move substitutes the call to salvation that rests upon God's grace for one that hinges on works.

Even as far back as the writing of the Pentateuch, the Lord God (Yahweh) made it clear to Israel that the external sign of circumcision was not nearly as important as the internal circumcision of the heart.

Read Deuteronomy 30:6.

Through the prophet Ezekiel the Lord restated this.

Read Ezekiel 11:19-20.

Circumcision and uncircumcision are nothing; what matters is that we love the Lord our God and obey Him. We were as filthy rags when He saved us; no earthly, fleshly, societal or marital change will cause Him to love us more than He did when we still hated Him.

It is all of Him, and has nothing to do with us.

It's called grace.

Session 66: An Illustrative Interlude, part two

1 Corinthians 7:21-24

Preface

In vv18-20 the apostle Paul uses the example of circumcision to illustrate how the mechanical changes we make to ourselves in an effort to render ourselves more “spiritual,” more acceptable to God, mean nothing. What matters is our obedience to Him. Now in vv21-24 Paul employs another example—slavery—to illustrate that our social status, our lot in life, is secondary to the fact that every believer has been purchased by—and thus now associated with—God. That is, earthly status is nothing; it is our heavenly status in Christ that is all. Yet these two illustrations are not synonymous: Paul makes a different point with each.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:21-24.

v21

Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it;

Although there are similarities to the structure of this paragraph and the previous, they are not identical. If they were, Paul would have said, Were you a slave when called, do not become a freed person; were you a free person when called, do not become a slave. But a slave had no ability to just decide to be freed; unlike with the previous situations of marriage/divorce, circumcision/uncircumcision, a slave could not choose his or her status. So instead, Paul writes, “Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it.”

but if you are able also to become free, rather do that.

It is best to see this “exception” clause as parenthetical. The flow of Paul’s thought is, “Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it. For he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord’s freedman...” But he inserts this parenthetical clause (I believe with a shrug) to make the point that neither condition really matters. If you are a slave, be one for the Lord; if you are given the chance to be freed, be a freedman for the Lord.

v22

For he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord’s freedman;

Here a knowledge of ancient history helps us understand Paul’s argument. Reading v22 in the twenty-first century, we are left scratching our heads. What does Paul mean when he writes, “he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord’s freedman”? We want to read that, “if I was a slave when God called me, the Lord has now set me free.” Our reference for slavery is the first two centuries of the United States, in which if one gained his or her freedom (i.e., manumitted), one was free to walk out the front gate and make a life for oneself. One was now an independent human being, no longer owned by an earthly master.

But then, why does he follow that with, “likewise he who was called while free, is Christ’s slave”? So if I started out as a slave, I have now been set free, but if I started out free, I am now a slave? How can that be right?

The answer lies in understanding what is meant by a first-century “freedman,” and particularly a “freedman of the Lord.” Under Roman law, a “freedman” was not literally set free of all ties to his master. “Freed slaves were not free to do as they pleased.” There remained an obligation, both personal and legal, to the master to serve and render lifelong *obsequium*—i.e., “eagerness to serve respectfully,” with the former master, who was now the slave’s patron, looking after the welfare of the freedman (Garland). The freedmen took pride in being associated with a great patron, a great house. They would even include the name of their patron on their tombstone: “*apeleutheros* of [name of their patron].” Is this starting to sound familiar?

Remember, too, that a former slave turned out onto the streets was not in an enviable position. Poverty at that time would be just as foreign to us today as slavery. It was real poverty: no roof, no money, no food, no means of support. This is why some in that culture would voluntarily sell themselves as slaves; better to be fed and sheltered as a slave, than to starve in the streets as a free man.

So if one is still a slave when called by the Lord, in the flesh one may remain a slave, but in the Spirit, in Christ, he is declared a “freedman”—but now under a new Master and patron. He now serves Christ Jesus, owes Him his allegiance, and even takes on His name: Christian.

D. Martin: The slave’s real status is determined by his or her placement in a different household entirely: the household of Christ. The slave is a freed-person of the Lord and shares in the benefits, status, and obligations that relationship brings.

Sidebar: Keep in mind that here Paul is not just illustrating a point with slavery, he is using it metaphorically to make a point—which we will see in a moment.

To the church in Colossae the apostle offers more detailed instruction on this tension between being a literal slave to an earthly master, while serving the Lord as a believer.

Read Colossians 3:22-24.

We obey our earthly masters fearing the Lord. We do the work for our earthly masters as for the Lord. It is Christ Jesus we serve.

likewise he who was called while free, is Christ's slave.

One thing Paul is saying here is, Don’t think less of yourself if you are a slave, and don’t think more of yourself if you are free. We might say, Don’t think less of yourself if you are a ditch-digger, and don’t think so highly of yourself if you are a CEO.

Along with that the apostle is also foreshadowing something he will be addressing later in the letter.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-22.

In Christ, earthly social status, where we work, how much money we have, what role we play within the church—none of that means anything, for we are all slaves of Christ. We are all equal under Him. Once again, Remain as you are. And for those who bridle at the thought that in Christ we are slaves, Paul adds v23.

v23

You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men.

This is the second time in this letter that Paul has stated the first half of this verse—but with a different second half. He closes a discussion of immorality and the body with “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” (6:19-20).

Here in Chapter Seven this statement expresses the mystery of the cross: In Christ we are both slave and free. It is patently obvious that the one who purchases something, is the one who then owns that thing. Every believer has been purchased, and in the worship of the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders they sing to the One who made that purchase of every Christian on earth.

Read Revelation 5:9.

That is the definition of a slave: someone who has been purchased by someone else. But it doesn’t stop there; here is the rest of the mystery.

Read Revelation 5:10.

Only in Christ are slaves also kings and priests—and there is certainly no one more free than a king.

do not become slaves of men.

So to pull this together, the slave who comes to Christ is now declared a “freedman” in Christ: that is, he has been purchased by a new Master/Patron that he would now eagerly serve that Master. Similarly, the free man who comes to Christ has also been purchased (seemingly; Satan notwithstanding) for the first time, to serve his new Master, Christ. The first has been purchased for freedom; the second has been purchased for servitude—both stated in contrast to their former lives, but in reality both have been given freedom, and both have been given a new Owner to serve.

Paul’s command then to “not become slaves of men” (*anthropos*) is not literal, but metaphorical, and is probably aimed at those institutions that have held the Corinthians enthralled: the human “wisdom” of Hellenistic philosophies of spiritualism, leading some members of the church to seek celibacy instead of marital conjugal relations, or divorce instead of the God-ordained marital union. And it takes little effort to draw contemporary parallels to this, where individuals and families have enslaved themselves to spurious and unbiblical teachings, thus doing violence to their relationship with God in Christ.

v24

Brethren, each one is to remain with God in that condition in which he was called.

Here we have an *inclusio* to how Paul opened this interlude. In v17 he states, “Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk.” Paul is simultaneously referring to one’s situation when called and to God’s call itself. It sanctifies that situation as a place where one can truly live out God’s call in the present age (Fee).

Let me illustrate the apostle’s emphatic point from my own life. For many years the Lord called me to serve Him on the stage: acting, singing, writing, directing. I remained obedient to that call. But then the Lord called me to something else; He moved me from the stage to the classroom. I did not seek that change, nor did I accept it with the misguided notion that it would either improve my social standing or render me more “spiritual.” I just accepted and obeyed His call. If God is glorified by my life, that is all that matters, regardless who I am and what I am doing.

One might interpret the echoing command of this chapter to “Remain where you are” as “Wherever and whatever you are, remain faithful in service to the Lord God who bought you and called you.”

Session 67: Regarding Virgins

1 Corinthians 7:25-27

Preface

As we leave the “illustrative interlude” (vv17-24) and Paul resumes addressing the issues sent him from the Corinthian church, the apostle is still thinking and counseling from an eschatological perspective. Not only does Paul speak as if the “end times” may be imminent, but he understands better than most that believers are to be living even now with an eschatological worldview—not in the perverse sense of some in Corinth who thought they were already living on the other side of the resurrection, but that, who Christians are and how they live right now, is informed by what they will one day be when Christ returns.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:25-28.

The passage before us contains a number of points where the attentive reader will ask, What does Paul mean by...

- What does Paul mean by “virgin”? (v25)
- What does he mean by “present distress”? (v26)
- Does he mean “virgins” of both sexes, because he immediately addresses men? Or, if he means just female virgins, why does he address the man immediately after referencing virgins? (v26)
- What does Paul mean by “bound to a wife,” and “released from a wife”?
- What sort of “trouble in this life” does he have in mind that those who are married will experience? (v28)

These we will answer as we dig into the text. There is one more question to answer before the ones we have listed: Why is Paul addressing this topic? Answer: He is still on the same topic. Prominent in the letter sent to him from Corinth was the maxim “It is good for a man not to touch a woman.” The apostle does not totally disagree with this; what he disagrees with is the reason those in the Corinthian church were espousing this philosophy. Paul has already stated the case for celibacy (when one has been granted that gift from God, as he has). We have seen that, everything being equal, he sees this as preferable.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:7-8.

As Gordon Fee puts it, Paul finds himself “on the horns of a dilemma.” He favors celibacy, but he emphatically disagrees with their ascetic reasons for such a position. He wants to affirm celibacy without affirming their misguided asceticism. So far he has addressed this regarding those who are already married (vv1-7), those who are single or widowed (vv8-9), and in the context of divorce (vv10-16). His counsel throughout has been the same: It is best to remain as you are. And now he applies this to “virgins.”

v25

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.

A direct command from Christ Jesus always has precedence, but in this case there is none. So Paul must answer by his apostolic authority. I am personally uncomfortable with the NASB’s “opinion,” which sounds a little too soft and squishy. On the other hand, “judgment” in the other popular translations sounds too firm, too unwavering. On this topic Paul is not commanding but advising; referring to himself as “one who by the mercy of the Lord is trustworthy,” he extends this mercy to the church. What we hear in the extended passage to the end of the chapter is not the voice of ruling authority, but of a concerned pastor wishing the best for the flock. Just take note of how he peppers the text with phrases such as

“I think” (v26)

“This I say for your own benefit” (v35)

“I am trying to spare you” (v28)

“let him do as he wishes” (v36)

“I want you to...” (v32)

“he will do well” (v37)

“In short, Paul is being cautious” (Margaret Y. MacDonald) as he broaches the topic at hand, which is “virgins.” Not everyone agrees on what he means by this, but the most logical conclusion, based on the context, is that he refers to betrothed women. That is, virgin women “engaged” to be married. Remember that at least for the Jews, the betrothal period was a solemn and permanent state that could be broken only by divorce. The only difference between betrothal and marriage was that the woman remained a virgin, as the two were not yet sharing a home and bed. But what Paul writes would also apply to betrothal more akin to our time—one that could be easily ended by agreement, or even by just one of the two parties calling it all off.

v26

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.

The NASB and KJVs do their best to be faithful to the admittedly awkward Greek of this verse. (In my opinion the NIV and ESV, while more legible, trim away a little bit too much.)

I think then that this is good

There are two “is good”s in this verse. The first “this is good” probably points back tacitly to the maxim stated (by the Corinthians in their letter to Paul) that “...it is good for a man not to touch a woman” (v1). Again, Paul agrees with this in principle, but not for the reasons they have cited. “Good” here means functionally beneficial.

in view of the present distress,

Just what is this “present distress” (or “crisis” in the NIV)? This is one of those extended passages—vv25-40—in which one would prefer to address it as one contiguous thought, rather than its component parts, but that would have its own difficulties. So consider the answer to this in v26 to be a partial answer that will be fleshed out further as we proceed through the passage.

Because of v29, which seems to have a clear eschatological reference (“the time has been shortened”), and the end of v31 (“the form of this world is passing away”), many have interpreted “present distress” in v26 as eschatological as well. The problem with this is that the grammar, along with Paul’s customary usage, means that this refers to “something they are already experiencing” (Garland).

Read 1 Corinthians 3:22.

“Things present” translates the same word used in v26 (*enistemi*) and in Chapter Three is in contrast to “things to come”—that is, in the future.

So whatever Paul refers to here is something the Corinthians are experiencing right now. Nevertheless we cannot deny that this extended passage has about it an end-times flavor. Paul does not specify what this “distress” is, but his perspective on the end-times is that they have effectively already begun (v29-31). Let me offer an admittedly pitiful illustration for how this can be true; how even before the eschatological events begin, believers live—and may suffer—as if they already have.

Imagine a small village nestled in a valley surrounded by small mountains. For generations the village families have remained in their village, never having the courage or even curiosity to climb the peaks to see what lies on the other side. They can hear a rhythmic roar, but don’t know what it is; they can smell salt in the air, but don’t know why. But one day a young man is curious about what lies beyond, and works up the courage to scale one of the peaks. Once he reaches the top, he discovers a vast ocean lying before him, and immediately he knows the reason for the sound and the salt in the air. There is nothing he can do about it, but now he knows the answer, and even as he descends to his valley home his thoughts return to the image and memory of the sea, and just as he was curious about what lay beyond the surrounding mountains, he is now curious about what might lie beyond the seemingly endless ocean.

Those who have placed their faith in Christ Jesus remain here on earth, dwelling in a fallen and sometimes hostile environment. But they have, as it were, “been to the mountain.”

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., April 3, 1968, Memphis, Tennessee (the last paragraph from his last sermon before being assassinated): Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

In my illustration, when that courageous young man returned to his village there were probably many who called him a liar, or maybe a gullible idiot. As a result he experienced a measure of “distress” because of what he had seen. But he had seen it, and that knowledge forever changed his life. He suffered for it, but it also changed his perspective—even as he continued living in that isolated village.

Christians, as Dr. King explained, have been to the mountain top and looked over to the other side. We’ve seen the promised land. Because of that experience—and, not least, because of the indwelling Spirit—even though we may suffer for our faith, we live in the knowledge and the hope of what is to come. It is far more than just something we look forward to; it is something that has forever changed the way we live in the here and now.

that it is good for a man to remain as he is.

Here Paul repeats his maxim—but now we are left wondering why he says “it is good for a man” (ESV: “a person”) since we thought he was talking about virgin women. For the answer we must once again return to the first century. Garland explains, “The focus throughout is on the decision of the male, since in this culture males would have been the ones who took the primary initiative in such matters.” In that time and place the “virgin” did not decide that she wanted to get married, and so went on a quest to find a husband. Her parents and a prospective husband would be the ones to decide and do this.

Gordon Fee paraphrases this verse nicely: “In light of the troubles believers are already experiencing, who needs the additional burden of marriage as well?” More on this when we get to v32f.

v27

Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife.

Opinions vary on who is being addressed in this verse, but the most logical conclusion seems to be—especially considering the unusual word translated “released” (loosed or free = *lysis*)—that Paul speaks first to those betrothed, then to those not betrothed.

There are several pieces of evidence that point to this position:

- *lysis* (“released,” “loosed”) is not a common word for divorce, but is more often a technical term for discharging someone from the obligations of a contract.
- The word translated “wife” can mean that, but it is also the general term for “woman” (*gynē*).
- Paul has already stated that he has no command from the Lord concerning the topic at hand; Jesus did speak on divorce.
- We have already concluded that “virgins” refers to betrothed women—that is, women not married in the fullest sense, but just “engaged.”

So the first half of the verse speaks to men—again, the ones in control of such agreements in the first century—who are betrothed to virgins. Paul’s counsel is for them not to break the marriage contract. The second half of the verse would then speak to singles not betrothed; if that is the case, do not seek to be.

The updated NIV captures this well:

Are you pledged to a woman? Do not seek to be released. Are you free from such a commitment? Do not look for a wife.

Session 68: Living in a Dying World

1 Corinthians 7:28-31

Preface

We are so accustomed to treating most passages from God's word as authoritative, as the final word on how we are to live, that sometimes, with other passages, we need to deliberately reorient our receptors to hear not a command, but fatherly advice. Let's read the paragraph before us, beginning with v27.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:27-31.

In our last session I pointed out that at least on this topic of betrothed women (*parthenos*, "virgins"), the apostle Paul does not cite a command from Jesus, nor does he issue a command based on his apostolic authority. Rather, he expresses a pastoral concern for that which is best for them in that time and place. In v27 he succinctly issues his counsel: Are you betrothed? Then follow through on that commitment. Are you not yet betrothed? It is better that you not seek to be.

v28

But if you marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned.

This is a topic that, in one respect, has not changed from the first century to the twenty-first: The issue of whether to marry or remain single "lies totally outside the category of 'commandments' to obey or 'sin' if one does not" (Fee). Some are called to marry; some are called to singleness—and celibacy. The moment when disobedience and sin enter into the equation is only when one chooses the latter (singleness) without celibacy.

The difference between the two centuries is revealed in the need for the statement itself. I cannot imagine a preacher today including the line "if you marry you have not sinned" in one of his Sunday sermons. I'm sure that not one person seated in the pews would have even entertained the thought that marrying might be sinful. But for the Corinthian church it was necessary for Paul to point this out. Their perspective on all this was skewed, and it was necessary for Paul to bring them back to reality.

Yet such will have trouble in this life, and I am trying to spare you.

The plain truth is that we don't know what "trouble" for those who are married Paul is referring to. The phrase literally means (as the KJVs have it) "tribulation in the flesh." It doesn't mean that those who are married will suffer from some malady in the flesh, but that they will have tribulation or troubles while they are in mortal flesh, on earth—that is, "flesh" refers to "the physical sphere in which our weakness and mortality are so evident."

I was amused by what an ancient, sardonic rabbi wrote, quoted by Garland:

A young man is like a colt that whinnies, he paces up and down, he grooms himself with care: this is because he is looking for a wife. But once married, he resembles an ass, quite loaded down with burdens.

We will revisit this when we get to the paragraph beginning with v32. Now, in vv29-31, Paul launches into an "explanatory digression," fleshing out what he has just said by arguing broad counsel for the Christian mindset and worldview. In v32 he will return to specifics for the sake of the Corinthians. If this were to be blocked out for two actors on stage, vv25-28 would be face-to-face dialogue; vv29-31 would be where the dominant actor would turn out toward the audience to wax philosophical; then for vv32-35 he would turn back to the other actor for more specific face-to-face dialogue.

v29-31a

But this I say [ESV: this is what I mean], brethren, the time has been shortened,

It is important for us to understand what Paul means by this, for our conclusion will color how we interpret the rest of the paragraph. First, he is not saying something like, *You have only*

a few short days before Christ returns!, or, *You never know when the end will come*. As David Garland puts it,

Paul is not concerned about the duration of time, but the character of the time. He is talking not about how little time is left, but about how Christ's death and resurrection have changed how Christians should look at the time that is left.

Here we have a wonderful truth for believers. The Greeks at the time would have seen the future as either nonexistent, or off in the vague, murky, unknowable distance. Just as many do today, they would have answered the question about their eternity with a shrug: Who can say. For them the future was little more than an ellipse (...), just something that fades away into silence.

But Christ—His coming, His gospel, His death and resurrection, His salvation—has now “compressed” time “in such a way that the future has been brought forward so as to be clearly visible, not so much with regard to its timing as to its reality and certainty” (Fee).

Believers who apprehend this view, that they have a definite future and see it with a supernatural clarity, live in the here and now with radically altered values as to what counts and what does not (Fee). In Romans the apostle offers a picture of what this might look like.

Read Romans 13:11-14.

This is not unlike the individual who learns that he has terminal cancer. Suddenly he sees the future; no matter how long he has, he sees the end, and in one stroke his values change: some things that were not, are now very important; some things that were, are now suddenly unimportant. Knowing our end changes the way we live in the present.

Or consider another way to imagine it: The rest of the fallen world sees eternity as if through the wrong end of a telescope: far, far away, tiny and insignificant. Christians, however, see eternity as if through the correct end of binoculars; because we can see and know the eternity before us in Christ, it seems closer to us—as if we can reach out and touch it.

so that from now on...

That is, “therefore,” this is how you are to live. Paul follows this with five “as thoughts” (or “as if nots” [NIV])—five illustrations.

Sidebar: On a more personal level, normally I can read a passage a few times and glean from it, at least in general terms, the gist of what is being said. I confess that after reading these five illustrations a number of times I remained befuddled: What in the world was Paul getting at here? But with the help of those smarter than I, I finally came to understand.

These are not meant to be taken literally; if they were, some of them would directly contradict what he has just said about marriage—and what he will say later, in his letter to the Romans, about sorrowing and rejoicing. Fee describes these five statements as “the strongest kind of dialectical rhetoric.” Paul is employing the absurdity of opposites to illustrate his point; thus, these are not to be understood literally. Nevertheless, we need to figure out what Paul wants us to take away from this.

*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;*

Paul is using dramatic, even absurd, rhetoric to get the Corinthians—and us—to live in this world without becoming controlled by it—to live as one so marked by eternity in Christ, that one's relationship to the world is not the determining factor. Those who are followers of Christ Jesus are not to be under the dominating power of the circumstances or conditions that dictate the existence of so many others.

The point is not whether one is married or single, whether one is filled with sorrow or filled with joy, whether one rejoices or not. The important factor is, is any of that ruling your life?

The last two items in this list of illustrations lead us right into Paul's concluding reason for these illustrations.

and those who buy, as though they did not possess;

Once again, Paul is not denigrating commerce—buying and selling—but encouraging an eternal, an eschatological mindset that realizes we are all but mere stewards of the riches God has poured into our lives. Back in Chapter Three he said much the same thing, but came at it from a different angle.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:21-23.

All things belong to us because we belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God. So who is the real owner? To Timothy Paul said it yet another way.

Read 1 Timothy 6:17-19.

It is not so much the idea of “you can't take it with you”; that is the worldly view of this. It is more the idea that it never belonged to you in the first place. As James put it, “Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow” (James 1:17). Earlier in this chapter Paul, using the word “authority,” made the point that my wife's body does not belong to her, but to me, and that my body does not belong to me, but to her (7:4). But the true owner of both of these aging bodies is neither one of us, but the Lord God.

I often take issue with the NIV for edging a little too close to paraphrase, but in this instance the NIV helps us understand what Paul is saying:

those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep;

That's it. Christians do not “possess”; Christians are mere stewards of what the Lord has entrusted to us.

and those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it;

Paul's last rhetorical illustration before his concluding reason for all this is, as the others, at first glance confusing. What does he mean, that we are to take small helpings? No, once again the NIV helps us with

those who use the things of this world, as if not engrossed in them.

Sidebar: The KJV's “not abusing it,” and the NKJV's “not misusing it” are just wrong.

The apostle, far from advocating that all believers become separatists, tells us to go ahead and live in the world, use its resources, be a part of it, make use of what it has to offer because God has created it for us. But we are to always remember that this world is just a way-station for the Christian. David Garland offers a pithy interpretation of this:

Being engaged with this world is one thing; becoming enmeshed in it is another.
Becoming wrapped up in the world is to become wrapped in a death shroud.

Why? Because,

for the form of this world is passing away.

This earth is not just a temporary home for the Christian, it is itself a stepping stone toward a “new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21:1). In that verse John goes on to say what Paul is saying in our passage: “for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea.”

Not just our use of it, but the very earth we now know is on life support. It is physically groaning (Romans 8:22) as it longs to be reborn just as each individual believer has been

reborn. And by “form” Paul does not just mean the way the world appears; this idea includes “the scheme of things as they presently exist,” the ways of this world.

The tense of this verb (“is passing away”) means that this is not something that will occur in the distant future, but is a process that has already begun. Let’s close with another quote from David Garland:

Nothing in this physical world seen and experienced by our physical senses has any enduring character—including marriages, weepings, rejoicings, possessions, and business opportunities. The fabric of life is just that, a fabric, frayed and flimsy, and nothing eternal.

Session 69: Discrepancies

1 Corinthians 7:32-35

Preface

As I proposed in our last session, were this portion of Chapter Seven a stage play, v32 is where the main character would turn upstage, back to the other character, to nail down the specifics of what he has just been philosophizing to the audience. Now in this next paragraph we listen in on face-to-face dialogue; no longer general philosophy, now the main character—the apostle Paul—gets down to real-life.

But before we dig into that paragraph, the passage before us presents a perfect opportunity to pause and address in greater detail the subject of discrepancies between our popular translations—something which seems to come up in just about every session.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:32-35.

In our next passage we find three obvious differences between our common translations—primarily between the KJVs and the rest.

v32

NASB, NIV: “...free from concern”; ESV: “anxieties”
KJV: “...without carefulness”; NKJV: “without care”

v34a

NASB, NIV, ESV: “...and his interests are divided”;
KJVs: “There is a difference between a wife and a virgin.”

v34b

NASB: “The woman who is unmarried, and the virgin”; NIV: “An unmarried woman or virgin”; ESV: “And the unmarried or betrothed woman”
KJVs: “The unmarried woman cares about the things of the Lord”

For our purposes—this is just a thumbnail sketch of the background explanation for these differences (a “Reader’s Digest” version)—we can whittle down the reason for these and similar discrepancies found in our NT text to four common possibilities:

1. the theological or doctrinal stance of the translators (seen less often in our common versions [KJVs, NASB, NIV, ESV], but may be evidenced more often in less-common versions);
2. the translators’ understanding of the context, and thus choice of English words with which to assign to a particular Greek word or phrase;
3. as is very often the case with the KJV, the vernacular of the era in which the translation was made; (e.g., “In my Father’s house are many mansions” [John 14:2], Greek *monē*) Doesn’t mean it is necessarily wrong; just doesn’t translate well for the 21st century.
4. the different source Greek manuscripts used by the translators.

This latter is the predominate reason for the differences we see in this passage.

There are some 25,000 early manuscripts [of the NT] in existence, almost 6,000 of which (many being only recognizable fragments) are Greek texts and the others being early translations of the Greek New Testament. The earliest textual evidence we have was copied not long after the original [40-60 years]. (*Institute for Creation Research*)


Over recent centuries there have been a number of scholarly efforts to accurately compile and refine these early manuscripts into a cohesive version of the NT Greek. [This set of scholars over here, another set of scholars over there, doing their own compilations—putting in order the thousands of Greek fragments from the many “shoe boxes”—not translating, but simply compiling a cohesive, one-package Greek NT.] Very often—but not always—the discrepancies we discover between our modern translations can be traced back to the translators working from different versions of these Greek compilations.

On the surface this might sound as if we can have little faith in the accuracy of any of our versions of God's inspired word. But that would be wrong. Renowned Bible scholar F.F. Bruce declares, "There is no body of ancient literature in the world which enjoys such a wealth of good textual attestation as the New Testament."

The academic discipline of "textual criticism" assures us that the Bible translations we have today are essentially the same as the ancient Bible manuscripts, with the exception of a few inconsequential discrepancies that have been introduced over time through copyist error. We must remember that the Bible was hand-copied for hundreds of years before the invention of the first printing press. Nevertheless, the text is exceedingly well preserved. Of the approximately 20,000 lines that make up the entire New Testament, only 40 lines are in question. These 40 lines represent one quarter of one percent of the entire text and do not in any way affect the teaching and doctrine of the New Testament. Compare this with Homer's *Iliad*: Of the approximately 15,600 lines that make up Homer's classic, 764 lines are in question. These 764 lines represent over 5% of the entire text, and yet nobody seems to question the general integrity of that ancient work. (taken from *All About the Journey* web site)

Our Bible—no matter the translation—is vastly more reliable, more authenticated than Homer's *Iliad*, Caesar's *The Gallic Wars*, Herodotus' *History*, or all of Shakespeare's plays. Written as recently as the 1600s, there are no surviving manuscripts of any of William Shakespeare's 37 plays, and scholars have been forced to fill some gaps in his works. Compare this with the over 5,600 copies and fragments of the NT in the original Greek that, together, assure us that nothing's been lost. In fact, all of the New Testament except eleven minor verses can be reconstructed outside the Bible from the writings of the early church leaders in the second and third centuries AD. So understand that time frame: The NT was written during the first century AD—from, by our calendar, AD 0 to AD 100. Then we have individuals—church leaders, etc.—writing out, copying these original documents, sometimes immediately, sometimes within the next century, and the next. So, historically speaking, you have hundreds of copies written not just very soon after the originals, but at times by those who even knew the original writers—at time fresh from the apostles' handwriting! There is nothing in ancient manuscript evidence to match such textual availability and integrity. (Ibid).

Discrepancies			
	Total Lines	In Question	% of Whole
New Testament	20,000	40	0.25 %
Homer's <i>Iliad</i>	15,600	764	> 5.0 %



So we are left to ask the question: Should we be concerned about that "one quarter of one percent" that is in question? Does this render the Bible we hold in our hands unreliable? The bottom line is this: In those few passages about which questions still exist, no questionable passage contradicts any Bible teaching. That is, just as in the passage before us in Chapter Seven, none of the discrepancies between the translations changes or even challenges our theology, our doctrine, or the gospel. Put bluntly, not one of these affects your salvation in Christ Jesus, nor your eternity with Him. They are peripheral in nature.

I would take the position, as do many others, that God, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, not only breathed into existence His written word, but that He, through the many centuries that followed—up to this very day—ensures the faithful and dependable integrity of that written word. Father God has never let loose of this Book; even today He is superintending its essential inerrancy.

At the same time we must remember that no translation, no commentary, no margin explanation in any study Bible is one-hundred percent perfect. There will be times when the KJV is the best, there will be times when the ESV is best. But again, the Holy Spirit has never relinquished His control of this Book: the same Spirit who wrote it and helps us understand it, remains alongside to help us properly adjudicate even these small, ultimately inconsequential variations.

There are several passages from God's word that should rightly haunt the sleep of those who teach it.

Read 1 Timothy 1:6-7.

Read 2 Timothy 4:1-4.

Right there is a description of our own times. People who claim to be Christian ministers preaching and teaching heresy and calling it truth; dispensing teaching utterly against God's word. Why? Because it is what the people want to hear—or worse, to make themselves rich.

Read James 3:1.

Acknowledging that burden and personalizing it, every week I do my best to

- compare all the common translations;
- examine, where necessary, the original language, whether it be Greek or Hebrew;
- add to this the scholarship of respected commentators—every one of which is smarter than I—comparing them to each other in the same way as the different translations;
- finally—but certainly not least—I rely on the counsel of the Holy Spirit to help me digest all this information and understand any given passage (John 15:26)—all the while praying that my conclusions are faithful to God's word as a whole, and will both glorify Christ and edify His body.

I would encourage every one of you, whenever and wherever possible, to do the same in your personal study. Use every tool at your disposal to understand God's written word. Don't settle for what you think you find on the surface, but

- establish the habit of digging deeper,
- compare translations,
- consult one or more reliable commentaries, and
- find joy and fulfillment in doing everything you can to grasp the truth of God's word.

Why? Can there be anything more important—aside from worship itself—to a Christian's daily walk in Christ and in the Spirit than to know and understand what God the Father has put down—in writing!—for the conduct of that walk? Is there anything more important than that?

Session 70: Undivided, part one

1 Corinthians 7:32-35

Preface

In studying vv32-35 in Chapter Seven, something rare happened in my thought process. When comparing the counsel from NT letters or the teachings of Jesus—that is, God’s counsel put down in writing in the first century—my typical response is to quickly see that the application still holds down through the centuries even into the twenty-first. God’s word is timeless, and His beneficial counsel for believers is timeless. For example, look at what the apostle Paul wrote earlier in this chapter.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:13-14.

He goes on to say, in v16, “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?” Something mystical and deeply spiritual happens in a home—even one in which there is just one believer. The Lord God and His Holy Spirit have a foothold in that household that may just redound to eventual salvation for its other members. This is as true today as it was when Paul first wrote it.

When reading and even rereading our passage for today, however, I found myself repeatedly thinking, My, how times have changed. In fact, God’s counsel in this passage remains relevant and applicable, but whereas some earlier passages seemed to be holding up a bright and shining mirror to our own times, now, in vv32-35, that mirror casts a more shadowed reflection.

As we will see, however, my initial reaction to this passage was based on forgetting, if just for a moment, that when Paul—that is, God—says “unmarried,” he does not mean just single, but celibate. Keeping that in mind brightens up the surface of that mirror and, as usual, gives us strong counsel even for today.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:32-35.

v32a

But I want you to be free from concern.

One gets the impression from the letters of Paul that he enjoyed words, the sound of them, their texture, for he uses and reuses them, sometimes in an almost alliterative sense, repeating not just the words themselves, but employing other words that (in the Greek) sound similar. For example, one day, while he was writing his next letter to the Corinthians he camped out for an entire paragraph on the word *paraklesis*: translated “comfort,” or “encourage.”

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all *comfort*, who *comforts* us in all our affliction so that we will be able to *comfort* those who are in any affliction with the *comfort* with which we ourselves are *comforted* by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our *comfort* is abundant through Christ. But if we are afflicted, it is for your *comfort* and salvation; or if we are *comforted*, it is for your *comfort*, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer; and our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our *comfort*. (2 Corinthians 1:3-7; emphasis added)

The apostle does a similar thing in our passage, this time with the word *merimnao*, used in both a positive and negative sense, translated “concern” or “anxious.” Then at the beginning of v34 he chooses a word that sounds like *merimnao*: the Greek *memeristai*, translated “divided” in the non-KJVs, which is from the same Greek root as “concern” or “anxious.” This can’t be an accident; Paul loved words, and he had a gift for employing them to great effect.

While not entirely wrong, the KJVs give, I believe, a misleading impression with, in the NKJV, “But I want you to be without care,” as if Paul were saying that he wished they could live free from all worldly cares. But that is not what this passage is about, nor is it necessarily an argument for or against marriage. In the rest of the paragraph Paul fleshes out what he

means by this opening statement, but it also flows out of the context of the previous paragraph.

Paul is speaking here, as he did in the previous paragraph of the believer's state of mind. He is telling us to go ahead and live in the world, use its resources, be a part of it, make use of what it has to offer because God has created it for us; to be married or remain celibate. But we are to always remember that this world is just a way-station for the Christian. Our focus is always to be on the world to come and its Lord, rather than on the things—the anxieties—of this world.

Gordon Fee: Paul's concern most likely still has to do with living in the present age as an eschatological person. That is, because life is determined by one's new existence in Christ...the believer should be free from the anxiety-ridden existence of those who are determined by the world in its present form.

vv32b-34a

One who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord;

Here is the gateway to my initial reaction of *My, how times have changed*. Admittedly, it has been quite a few decades since I was “unmarried”—approaching five decades, to be precise—but as I recall, at the time I was less concerned with the “things of the Lord” than I was panting after my betrothed.

But, of course, Paul does not have in mind the male of the species who is desperately looking for a wife, or one who is in desperate anticipation of having a wife, and especially not the lovable but libidinous rogue in search of anything but a wife, but the male of the species who is a spiritually enabled celibate. He is the one who is free to—and has the God-given ability to be—free from sexual desire, free from the (not unpleasant) burden of caring for a wife and family, thus free to devote far more of his life to the Lord—he is not “divided,” as it were (v34a).

With the second part of v32 Paul returns to a comparison of the unmarried with the married, beginning with the men (to v34a), then addressing the women (v34b). Although there are different interpretations—indeed, translations—of this, probably the best is to see that Paul is not saying that one condition is superior and one inferior—or one is sin and one is not (being married or unmarried), but that in either condition he desires that believers have “undistracted devotion to the Lord” (v35)—which is always Paul's highest ideal.

but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and his interests are divided.

Let us first consider what Paul is *not* saying. In Jesus' parable of the sower we have a worst case scenario.

Read Matthew 13:22.

This is a picture of someone whose devotion to the world has overwhelmed his devotion to Christ. He has heard and, perhaps, even believed the gospel, but the incessant corruption of the world—and the man's lingering dedication to it—has choked out his faith, so that he bears no fruit.

This is not the picture in First Corinthians. Paul is not being critical of the man who marries, but simply stating reality. The married man takes on extra responsibilities unknown to the celibate, so, as he states at the beginning of v34, the man's interests—and specifically, his devotion—are divided. His faith in Christ is intact; he has not let the world extinguish his love for the Lord. He simply has other responsibilities—wife, family, home—that subdivide his devotion in practical ways. Although not a man nor a marriage, the classic illustration of this is the picture we have of the two sisters, Mary and Martha.

Read Luke 10:38-42.

Mary chose to sit at Jesus' feet and listen to His every word—that was the “good part.”

The call to every believer is to live other-worldly—in this context, eschatologically—whether married or not. Paul’s earnest desire for the Corinthian men is that they would live free from the concerns of this world—ideally as an unmarried celibate, wholly devoted to the Lord, but at least as a husband and father who does not let the burdens of this world distract him from the joys of the next.

This potential conflict can only be comprehended when one understands that the believer’s eternal life has already begun. Our life on this soil is not as if we were sitting in a waiting room listening to insipid Muzak, cooling our heels until the big day arrives and we get to go to heaven. That is not the biblical picture of the Christian’s life. Rather, we are already on the Lord’s “Highway of Holiness” (Isaiah 35:8), traveling onward and upward through our sanctification on our way to heaven. In His high priestly prayer in Matthew 17 Jesus defined eternal life for us. He said,

“Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You, even as You gave Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life. [and what is eternal life?] This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.” (John 17:1-3)

It is while we are on this earth that we come to know, to understand, to perceive (Greek, *ginosko*) God the Father and His Son. And through that learning we then devote our lives to Them. There will inevitably be earthly distractions to that devotion—even for the celibate, but more so for the husband and father. But we should not get lost in the contrast between the two; the ultimate message of this passage—for married and unmarried, for men and women alike—is that we all strive for “undistracted devotion to the Lord.”

To that end, let us all personalize the powerful, eloquent, passionate prayer of the apostle Paul for the Ephesians.

Read Ephesians 3:14-21.

No matter our station in this life, no matter our marital status, no matter how many burdensome responsibilities we must address while we walk this soil, let us determine to know and hence serve the One who has granted us the privilege of knowing Him.

Session 71: Undivided, part two

1 Corinthians 7:32-35

Preface

Read 1 Corinthians 7:32-35.

Before we return to our passage in Chapter Seven, it will be worth our time to revisit a few key points from our session on “Discrepancies.” In v34, which we will study today, there are two discrepancies that we need to address.

v34a

NASB, NIV, ESV: “...and his interests are divided” (which completes the thought in v33);

KJVs: “There is a difference between a wife and a virgin.”

v34b

NASB: “The woman who is unmarried, and the virgin,”; NIV: “An unmarried woman or virgin”; ESV: “And the unmarried or betrothed woman”

KJVs: “The unmarried woman cares about the things of the Lord”

These segments obviously reflect more than just differences of opinion on how to translate a given Greek word or phrase; they represent utterly different (in this verse) source material. In that earlier session I said,

Over recent centuries there have been a number of scholarly efforts to accurately compile and refine these early manuscripts into a cohesive version of the NT Greek. [I liken it to our annual income tax preparation process.] This set of scholars over here, another set of scholars over there, doing their own compilations—putting in order the thousands of Greek fragments from the many “shoe boxes”—not translating, but simply compiling a cohesive, one-package Greek NT.] Very often—but not always—the discrepancies we discover between our modern translations can be traced back to the translators working from different versions of these Greek compilations.

Since I do not have the scholarship or training to ferret out on my own which is best from the original Greek manuscripts, I follow my customary procedure of first examining the various translations to see which, based on the context, make the most sense. So I begin by comparing the translations, drawing from my own experience in study. Then I read and compare respected commentators—those who do have the scholarship and training. When two or more of these are in general agreement, this makes my task easier; when all disagree with one another (as sadly they do on occasion), my task is made more difficult.

Concerning the passage before us, we can see that with only minor variations, three of our common translations—NASB, NIV, and ESV—are on one side of the ledger, with the two King James translations—KJV, NKJV—on the other.

In this instance the discrepancies we see in our text, from here and into the next paragraph, stem primarily from the translators using different manuscripts (in my vernacular, “compilations”) combined with the sheer difficulty of the Greek. The venerable M. R. Vincent says, “The textual question here is very perplexing, and it is well-nigh impossible to explain the differences to the English reader.” And A. T. Robertson says, “The text here is very uncertain, almost hopelessly so.”

Since we are not translators but students, and since as students we must decide between the two, we can take confidence in the fact that the most recent scholarship and translations, along with the two principal commentators I am using—Gordon D. Fee and David E. Garland—all agree that the beginning of v34 completes the thought about the man in vv32-33 with “and his interests are divided,” rather than beginning a new thought about women with “There is a difference between a wife and a virgin.”

But as discussed in that earlier session, none of this challenges established doctrine or contradicts earlier Scripture—and, of course, we cannot disagree with the alternate translation: There is indeed a difference between a wife and a virgin!

v34b

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;

Then we are faced with a second discrepancy, because here is where the preferred translation places the Greek *parthenos*, here translated “virgin.” But there remain differences even between the preferred translations. We must decide: Does Paul refer to two different subjects for the verb (NASB: “unmarried, and the virgin,”), or is it just one subject described in two ways (NIV: “an unmarried woman or virgin”)?

Although John MacArthur takes the position that “unmarried” in v34 refers to divorced women, the better interpretation (Fee, Garland) is that it refers to widows, and that “virgin” refers to those who have never married—especially the young and betrothed (ESV).

Sidebar: We will take the stance that Paul is addressing two of the three categories he has used in this chapter to refer to what we would lump together in our vernacular as the “unmarried:” “unmarried” (*agamos*), “widows” (*chera*), and “virgins” (*parthenos*). Look at v8; there we determined that Paul was employing *agamois* (plural “unmarried”), to refer to widowers—that is, in v8 Paul is addressing both men and women who have lost their mates from death. As in our own time, *agamos* was a catch-all word used in the *koine* period for anyone not married, but context suggests that in v8 it should refer to males who have been “de-married.” Since Paul specifies “woman” in v34, then here it would be widows.

Taking the long view, in v34b Paul is simply doing what he has all along: address men and women alike. So in vv32-33 he speaks to men, and in v34 he speaks to women. But the second is not a mirror image of the first.

men: “...how he may please the Lord”

women: “...that she may be holy in both body and spirit”

The case can be made that this just represents two ways of saying the same thing. How do we please the Lord? By living in such a way that we are holy inside and out.

but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how she may please her husband.

The second portion of what Paul says about women is a mirror image of that said about men. The married woman is—no harm, no foul—is concerned about pleasing her husband. She has more things on her plate than the celibate widow or virgin.

Paul is speaking practically here. We know from the previous passages in Chapter Seven that Paul sees his own situation and lifestyle—i.e., single and celibate—as the ideal, because it affords unfettered devotion to the Lord. But it is nothing new or surprising that any man or woman with a spouse and family is going to be “divided” in his or her responsibilities or affections. In v35 he goes out of his way to assure the Corinthians that in none of this does he mean to put pressure on them to live one way or another.

v35

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.

With v35 Paul accomplishes two things: First, he closes out the argument he has been making since v29, that even while believers are living out their daily lives here on this earth, they are to be thinking and living with a view to the return of Christ and His final judgment. Those belonging to Christ are to tread this earth lightly; their true home is with Him, their true devotion is to be for Him.

Second, v35 transitions into his concluding paragraph regarding behavior that is appropriate and well-ordered toward and for the virgin.

Let me point out just a couple of textual details before we summarize what Paul has been saying, and then bring it home for us. The word translated “restraint,” “restrict” (NIV), “snare” or “leash” (KJVs, and most literal), *brochos*, is a colorful word that in ancient writings was used metaphorically as an image of a noose or snare around the neck, and literally in the context of

a battle. So the picture is of one being restrained by a rope around the neck. Paul uses it here in the negative; this is not his intent.

Euschemon (yoo-skhay'-mone), translated “appropriate,” “proper” (NKJV), “comely” (KJV), “good order” (ESV), Paul will use later in Chapter Twelve, where he uses the human body as a metaphor for the body of Christ.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:21-24a.

...and our less presentable members become much more presentable, whereas our more presentable members have no need of it. (1 Corinthians 12:23b-24a)

Finally, the word translated “undistracted devotion,” literally means “good sitting beside.” Remember the image of Martha’s sister Mary, sitting at Jesus’ feet intently listening to every word He said; by extension this includes not just listening, but being there, alongside, ready to serve.

The standard interpretation of this verse—especially in Catholic quarters—has been that here Paul is reaffirming the requirement of celibacy for “undistracted devotion” to the Lord (KJV: “that ye may attend upon the Lord without distraction”). Hence the requirement for celibate priests, whether or not they have been granted that gift.

But that really is not what Paul is saying here. He began this paragraph by stating his purpose: “I want you to be free from concern/anxiety,” and we could extend that statement with ...about the things of this world. “For,” as he closed the previous paragraph, “the form of this world is passing away.” Don’t put your hope in this world, don’t find your joy in this world, don’t depend on this world, but put your hope, your trust in the returning Lord. In Him is true joy.

Here’s is Paul’s overarching point: If you can give the Lord Jesus undistracted devotion as a single celibate, and you have that gift from Him, then I believe that to be the best. But if you haven’t that gift, and can serve the Lord and be devoted to Him wholeheartedly, effectively, while married, then that is good as well. Only because you are married, your devotion will, by necessity (in most instances), be “divided.” Regardless your gifts and marital status, however, as you live in this world, live for the next.

Session 72: “A Notorious Crux”

1 Corinthians 7:36-38

Preface

How pleasant it would have been if the apostle Paul had permitted us to ease our way out of the backbreaking Chapter Seven with a simple, easily understandable summary. Alas, it was not to be. By saying things in vv36-38 in such a way that multiple and very different interpretations are possible—and predictable—the apostle closes this difficult chapter with yet another quandary. Scholars have a favorite phrase they use for passages such as the one before us: “a notorious crux.” The word “crux” in this context refers to “a difficult problem; puzzling thing” (Webster’s).

Permit me to first summarize the problem; I will not go into the many details, all the whys and wherefores, since I would use up the rest of our time doing so: most of you would be bored, and we would never get to the meat of the matter. So let me address just the large chunks. The most efficient way to do this is to focus less on the underlying text than with the obvious differences between our modern translations. [See Handout \(last page of this lesson\)](#).

I have color-coded the key words or phrases that set off the differences between the translations. The first three of our translations—NASB, KJV, and NKJV—have the perspective of a father with a virgin daughter still living in his household—one presumably approaching or having already reached an age when she should be married. This interpretation assumes a question written to Paul along the lines of, What is a father’s duty when he has a daughter of marriageable age?

The last two of our translations—NIV and ESV—have the perspective of a man betrothed to a virgin. In the current climate in Corinth, one we have looked at a number of times, this assumes a question written to Paul along the lines of, I have made a vow to marry this girl; would it be wrong to not marry and keep her a virgin? And, of course, there are smaller differences between the translations even within these two groups. There is a third perspective, seen in the New English Bible (NEB) that is such a minority view I have not included it for our consideration.

The Father-Daughter Interpretation

Normally I would decide which interpretation is the best and then focus on it alone. But in this instance I am going to do my best to fairly present both. I freely admit that I prefer the ESV interpretation for this passage—the 2011 NIV is an improvement over the earlier NIVs, and is even closer in perspective to the ESV—but the camp (translators and commentators) that subscribes to the first perspective is too large to be dismissed. So let’s begin with a quick survey of the first perspective.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:36-38 in NASB.

The primary reason and strongest argument for this interpretation is found in v38, with the verb usually translated in Scripture, “give...in marriage.”

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.

give...in marriage = gamizein = from <G1537> (ek) and a form of <G1061> (gamisko) [compare <G1548> (ekgamisko)]; to marry off a daughter :- give in marriage.

It is assumed by this that the awkward phrase “his virgin” (v36; the NASB adds “daughter” for clarity) refers to a young woman still living at home under her father’s care and rule.

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.

The phrase “past her youth” must be kept in the context of the first century. This does not refer to what we would term an “old maid,” well past her prime. Girls would be given in

marriage at a younger age than in our time, so this could just mean that she has reached puberty but as yet the father has not found her a suitable husband.

Here the ambiguous phrase “and if it must be so” is taken to mean “the thing out to be done” (a betrothal should be pursued if the father thinks he is acting improperly by keeping her a virgin). Paul declares that there is nothing wrong with the father pursuing this path and marrying her off.

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.

Verse 37 addresses the alternate path: If the father is convinced that it is best that his daughter remain a virgin and remain under his roof, then—consistent with the apostle’s view throughout this chapter—this would be an even better option.

Difficulties

While we can treat this interpretation seriously, with respect, it is also fair to point out some (but not all) of the difficulties with it.

1. From a layman’s overview of the NASB (et al), before consulting anyone else, this passage is jarring; it seems out of place, oddly worded. David Garland agrees: “Nothing in 7:25-35 prepares for this reading of the situation.” And one of the reasons for this is the reference to “his virgin,” which is an irregular and extraordinary way to refer to a father’s daughter.
2. Referring again to the strongest argument for this interpretation—the inclusion of *gamizein*, translated here “give...in marriage”—can also be translated, “the one who marries.”
3. G. Schrenk argues that if this passage refers to the father’s authority, “Paul is justifying an unheard of tyranny, for to impose asceticism [the Corinthian brand of spiritual purity through ritual celibacy] on oneself is rather different from imposing it on marriageable children.” J. Hering adds that it is “grotesque to praise the unswerving constancy of the father in a decision which costs him nothing, and in which it is his daughter, who is not consulted, who bears the full weight of the sacrifice” (Garland).
4. Finally, why inform a father, who presumably is or at least was married, that marriage is good but the single life is better? It makes more sense if these words were directed toward those exploring the possibility of marriage for themselves (Garland).

The Man Betrothed Interpretation

Now let us turn to the second interpretation, which has Paul addressing not a father of a virgin, but a man betrothed to a virgin.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:36-38 in ESV.

The ESV replaces the Greek for “virgin” (*parthenos*) with “betrothed woman,” which, for the context of this counsel and the times, would be synonymous. Verse 36 thus echoes what Paul wrote in v28.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:28.

If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed,

In this interpretation the paragraph before us flows more naturally out of the previous paragraphs. We may wonder what Paul means by the man “not behaving properly toward his betrothed,” but if we read on it becomes clear.

if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin.

One of the challenging problems with this passage is not just translating the Greek, but understanding Paul's awkward sentence construction. To begin, he uses a Greek word not used anywhere else—*hyperakmos* (hoop-air'-ak-mos)—which, if it referred to the woman could indeed mean “past the bloom of youth,” but if referring to the man would mean “over the top”—i.e., “strong passions.” Garland points out that after exhaustive analysis of this word in other (non-biblical) contexts, the word is synonymous with “to burn” (*pyroun*) in 7:9—“For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.” But we can't be sure whether Paul speaks here of the man or the woman! Gordon Fee concludes that grammatically the subject should be the man, and hence the ESV “if his passions are strong.”

This informs the first part of the sentence and paints a pretty familiar picture of an engaged couple. As my mom told Linda and me once, remembering her courtship with Dad in the mid-forties, “It was getting harder and harder to wait.” To a young man who clearly does not have the God-given gift of celibacy, Paul declares that it is no sin for them to marry.

But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart,

Now Paul addresses the other option for the man: valid reasons to call off the marriage and remain as he is. He does this by giving the man four criteria by which to determine whether this is the correct path.

- *firmly established in his heart*,
“heart” (*kardia*) here means mind (thoughts and feelings)—that is, he has made up his own mind;
- *being under no necessity*
this (*ananke*) could mean that he has his sexual passions under control—the opposite of *hyperakmos*, in v36 (Garland), but since the third criterion states this, likely means that he is not under compulsion from outside influence (Fee);
- *but having his desire under control*,
here either option for the second criterion could apply: reiterating having “authority” over his passions (Garland) or reiterating that he is exerting his own authority over his decision rather than someone else forcing the action on him (Fee);
- *and has determined this in his heart*

Taken as a whole, these criteria emphasize personal responsibility and sobriety as regards the sexual passions. Having met these requirements, the man is free to call off the marriage (betrothal).

to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well.

Here is the only place I could find where the ESV has a problem. This translation has been consistently translating the Greek *parthenos* as “betrothed,” instead of virgin. But doing so here presents a point of confusion. If the man has decided against marrying the girl, how could it possibly make sense that he would “keep her as his betrothed”?! But it does make sense that he—and only in regards to him—would keep her a virgin, thus releasing her to marry someone else. The NIV reflects this with “not to marry the virgin.”

So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better.

In v38 Paul recapitulates his counsel in vv36-37. He tells the man that, based on the various gates he has set before him, if he still wants to marry the virgin, that's OK; if not, based on his consistent counsel in this chapter of “remaining as you are,” that's even better, because of “the present distress” (v26).

Difficulty

But to be fair to the opposing camp, we must reconcile Paul's choice of verb in this last verse, switching from "to marry" (*gameo*) to "to give in marriage" (*gamizo*)—which is the foundational reason for the opposing interpretation found in the NASB, KJV, and NKJV—that is, the "father-daughter" interpretation. Happily this is easily resolved. Fee explains,

The verb *gamizo* is not found outside the NT; in classical Greek *gameo* served both purposes. To the question whether the verb *must* carry the nuance "to give in marriage," the answer is No. There is sufficient evidence that the classical distinctions between *-eo* and *-izo* verbs had broken down in the *koine* period. But that still does not answer the question as to *why* Paul changed verbs in this set of sentences. The usual answer is "for the sake of variety," which may still be the best one.

Conclusion

I believe we have shown that the second, the betrothed man interpretation, is a better fit with the context of Chapter Seven. But there are far too many translations and commentators in the other camp for us to be dogmatic about it. Let the earnest student of God's word decide which is the best reading.

In our next session we will take a brief look at the last two verses of this most troublesome but rewarding chapter, where Paul then, as he has consistently, turns to address the female side.

More important, however, because we have spent so much time down in the weeds in our study of this chapter, in our next session we will revisit and summarize, in a more comfortable manner, all of Paul's counsel found in Chapter Seven, before moving on.

"A Notorious Crux"

1 Corinthians 7:36-38

NASB (updated)	KJV	NKJV	NIV (1984)	ESV
36 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 .	36 But if any man think that he behaveth himself uncomely toward his virgin , if she pass the flower of her age , and need so require, let him do what he will, he sinneth not: let them marry .	36 But if any man thinks he is behaving improperly toward his virgin , if she is past the flower of youth , and thus it must be, let him do what he wishes. He does not sin; let them marry .	36 If anyone thinks he is acting improperly toward the virgin he is engaged to , and if she is getting along in years and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. They should get married .	36 If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed , if his passions are strong , and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry —it is no sin.
37 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.	37 Nevertheless he that standeth stedfast in his heart, having no necessity, but hath power over his own will, and hath so decreed in his heart that he will keep his virgin , doeth well.	37 Nevertheless he who stands steadfast in his heart, having no necessity, but has power over his own will, and has so determined in his heart that he will keep his virgin , does well.	37 But the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but has control over his own will, and who has made up his mind not to marry the virgin —this man also does the right thing.	37 But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed , he will do well.
38 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.	38 So then he that giveth her in marriage doeth well ; but he that giveth her not in marriage doeth better .	38 So then he who gives her in marriage does well , but he who does not give her in marriage does better.	38 So then, he who marries the virgin does right , but he who does not marry her does even better.	38 So then he who marries his betrothed does well , and he who refrains from marriage will do even better.

Perspective: a father with a virgin daughter still living in his household.

Commentators holding this view: John MacArthur (after the NASB), David Guzik, and most older commentators such as Chrysostom, Augustine, and some "modern" scholars such as A. T. Robertson, M. R. Vincent, Lange, JFB, Edwards, Lightfoot, Robertson and Plummer, Ketter, and Morris.

Other translations with this perspective: ASV (American Standard Version), YLT (Young's Literal Translation).

Perspective: a man betrothed to a virgin.

Commentators holding this view: Gordon Fee, David Garland, W. Harold Mare, Conzelmann, Thiselton, Wolff, Winter, and R. Collins.

Other translations with this perspective: NRSV (New Revised Standard Version), ISV (International Standard Version).



Session 73: Reviewing a Challenging Chapter

1 Corinthians 7:39-40, and Review

Preface

Since April 7 of this year we have been studying Chapter Seven. On that first day I offered two reasons for approaching this chapter with fear, trembling, and humility:

1. Portions of it would be challenging to understand and interpret—especially when we, sadly, have been and continue to be daily schooled in our modern, fallen, culture. This would be a portion of Scripture in which it is easy to respond with, “Oh, surely he does not mean that.”
2. The one teaching this portion of Scripture would be painfully aware that, because of circumstances or life decisions they may have made in the past, some in the class might be uncomfortable hearing what is declared here.

For the last five months we have accepted the challenge of Chapter Seven and examined it with unblinking allegiance to the authority of God’s word. Some of it made us a little uncomfortable; some made us a lot uncomfortable. But we soldiered on. Now we have reached the last two verses, which we will look at later.

But first it will be worth our time, before we proceed into Chapter Eight (which, by the way, has its own challenges), to review Seven’s essential teachings. We have spent much time down in the weeds of this chapter, and perhaps some of us have lost sight of the big picture—or worse, we may have allowed the pervasive culture of this world to creep back in to soften some of its more tough counsel.

Review

One aspect of Chapter Seven that makes us so uncomfortable is that it delves into the most personal area of our life: that which happens behind closed doors. In that sense the topic really begins in the middle of Chapter Six, with v9.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:9-11.

Paul then finishes Chapter Six by addressing the horror of married Christians visiting prostitutes.

Read v15.

Although the subject matter of Chapter Six flows effortlessly into the next chapter, Chapter Seven begins a new section in the letter, with Paul answering specific concerns of the church sent to him by letter. And for his answers Paul draws from several kinds of authority:

- the teachings of Christ Jesus (e.g., v10);
- his (Paul’s) authority as a called apostle of Christ (e.g., v25);
- the counsel of the Holy Spirit working within him (e.g., v40).

On these authorities—which really are just one: the authority of God—Paul addresses issues in the Corinth church dealing with the married and formerly married, widows and widowers, abstinence within marriage, divorce, the single life, and virgins.

There are two overarching themes that run through the entire chapter. Although the apostle allows for exceptions and circumstances—that is, he does not command it—he consistently counsels two best solutions to their questions: one a practical plan, the other an essential mindset.

A Practical Plan

By my count Paul states twelve times in this chapter, in so many words, that the best plan is for everyone to “remain in that calling in which [they] were called.” In this he is simultaneously referring to one’s situation when called and to God’s call itself. It sanctifies that situation as a place where one can truly live out God’s call in the present age (Fee). The Lord

may move you about or change your circumstances, but wherever and whatever you are, remain faithful in service and obedience to the Lord God who bought you and called you.

A Mindset

To remain as and where one is is a sturdy principle for right “now,” but it is based on a mindset focused on the “not yet” of God’s Eschaton. “The Greek language uses the word *eschatos* to designate the end-point of a continuously conceived succession of circumstances” (Brown). “Eschatology” then refers to the doctrine of the last things—the end times as designed and planned by the Godhead before time began—the return of Christ, the Day of Judgment, the establishment of His kingdom on earth, followed by creation of the New Heaven and New Earth.

Throughout Chapter Seven Paul has repeatedly—again, in so many words—expressed his desire for those in the Corinthian church to live as eschatological people: living by necessity in the here and now, but seeing and thinking about this world from the perspective of the next.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:29-31.

Christ—His coming, His gospel, His death and resurrection, His salvation—has now “compressed” time “in such a way that the future has been brought forward so as to be clearly visible, not so much with regard to its timing as to its reality and certainty” (Fee).

Believers who apprehend this view, that they have a definite future and see it with a supernatural clarity, live in the here and now with radically altered values as to what counts and what does not (Fee).

When we studied this passage I suggested a way to imagine it: The rest of the fallen world sees eternity as if through the wrong end of a telescope: far, far away, tiny and insignificant. Christians, however, see eternity as if through the correct end of binoculars; because we can see and know the eternity before us in Christ, it seems closer to us—as if we can reach out and touch it.

If there is only one thing you take away from Chapter Seven this would be it: to live in this world, but live for the next—even as regards our most intimate relationships.

A Counterfeit Spirituality

Throughout Chapter Seven—indeed, the entire letter—Paul is battling a pervasive culture that is pulling the church in an unhealthy direction. Under the guise of a counterfeit “spirituality,” they are being told (among other things) that the body means nothing; because the spirit is everything, what one does with the body is immaterial. This was producing even within the church the bizarre practice of married couples abstaining from sex (because they were too “spiritual” for that) but then visiting temple prostitutes (because what they did with their body meant nothing). This is why it was necessary for Paul to remind them, in Chapter Six, that the body does indeed count for something.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:19-20.

When one combines these two realities for the Christian—the body being a temple for the Holy Spirit, and the supernatural oneness of the bodies of a married man and woman—we are presented with an amazing illustration of God’s extraordinary intimacy with His people.

No Abstinence within Marriage

The apostle opens Chapter Seven with the same topic that he closed Chapter Six: the body. Only now he places it in the context of this Corinthian notion that it is more “spiritual” for married couples to abstain from sexual relations. Not only does he declare (in two different ways in vv2-3) that the man and woman are to enjoy the marital bed, but he follows this with a statement of mutual but reciprocal authority over the body of one’s spouse.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:4.

His allowable exception to this rule is that from time to time the couple could—only by mutual consent—abstain from sexual relations for a brief period of intensified prayer (much as one abstains from eating during a religious fast).

In v1 Paul quotes back a common slogan or maxim in the Corinthian church that was probably stated in their letter to him: “It is good for a man not to touch [i.e., have sexual relations with] a woman.” We learn from Chapter Seven that Paul does not necessarily disagree with this—but he strongly disagrees with their reason for holding this position. They were not espousing the biblical/Pauline command to abstain from sex outside of marriage, but a more ascetic lifestyle in which even sexual relations within marriage were discouraged.

The apostle repeats several times in this chapter that he believes the preferred lifestyle for a devoted follower of Christ—one that will better facilitate a life given wholly to Him—is a lifestyle like his: single and celibate. But this is not the forced celibacy that the Corinthians were espousing, but celibacy as a gift from God. Without that spiritual gift, his clear counsel is for them to be married.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:8-9.

On Divorce

Perhaps the most uncomfortable portion of Chapter Seven for some deals with the issue of divorce, which is concentrated in vv10-16. Paul’s counsel begins with Christ’s position, and then he fleshes this out by his own apostolic authority. We can summarize it this way:

- If you are married, stay married. Only death can break the marriage covenant.
- If one *does* leave they must remain single (and celibate) or reconcile; to remarry is adultery (Matthew 5:31-32).
- A Christian should only marry another Christian (v39), but if one (only) in a marriage becomes a believer after they are married, the believer should not divorce the unbelieving spouse. Not only does this leave the door open for the believing spouse to witness to the unbelieving spouse, but the family and home is “sanctified” by the presence of the one believer.
- However, if the unbeliever *chooses* to leave, the believer should let him or her, rather than force them to stay.

An Interlude

Paul bolsters his counsel and commands with an off-topic interlude—off-topic only in the sense that it is about circumcision and slavery, rather than marriage and home life—in vv17-24. In this he reinforces his stance on “remain as you are,” using circumcision and slavery to illustrate the point. He will do a similar thing in vv29-31, in the sense that beyond “remain as you are,” Paul is emphasizing that we are not to be concerned about such relative trivialities because “the form of this world is passing away” (v31).

Concerning Virgins and the Betrothed

Near the end of the chapter Paul addresses, specifically, young men and women who are betrothed, or men who may be considering becoming betrothed to a virgin. He really does not break new ground here, but simply reiterates what he has been saying all along: If you can, remain single; if you cannot, get married. And there is nothing unexpected in the last two verses of the chapter.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:39-40.

The best interpretation of “only in the Lord” is as the NIV translates it: “but he must belong to the Lord.” That is, Christians should only marry Christians.

The end of v40 is a bit cryptic; the word “also” or “too” may indicate that Paul is answering those who claim, either for themselves or their on-site teachers, that they are more “spiritual,” and hence know better than Paul.

In Conclusion

Chapter Seven puts the lie to the belief (generally by people who don't read the Bible for themselves) that Paul was a woman-hater and didn't believe in marriage. If we had only this chapter from Paul we would know that he considered men and women, husbands and wives, to have equal rights and worthy of respect. And when it was the appropriate path for a man and woman, based on their God-apportioned gifts, he encouraged them to get married. If they had the gift of celibacy, then he encouraged them to remain single.

But throughout the length and breadth of this important chapter Paul's essential and overriding concern may be summarized by v35 (along with the two mentioned at the top). Here we have the apostle's foundational "why" for everything he has been saying.

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.

There is his motive; there is his prayer for all the Corinthians as well as every believer today, that we would live lives that are "appropriate," proper, and with "undistracted devotion to the Lord."

Session 74: The Old Ways: An Overview

1 Corinthians 8-10

Preface

With the page-turn to Chapter Eight, we not only leave behind all that discussion of marriage, divorce, and celibacy, but we begin a lengthy—three-chapter!—discourse on whether or not it is permissible to eat “food sacrificed to idols.” Now, before you answer with, The last time I was tempted to eat food sacrificed to idols was—never! be assured that the teaching in these chapters ranges far wider, and has specific parallels in our culture. In fact, even Paul’s opening salvo gives us a taste of his approach to this controversy: he does not just answer their errant position directly with a command, but immediately broadens it to a discussion of “knowledge” (*gnosis*) versus “love” (*agape*).

Read 1 Corinthians 8:1-3.

Does it sound to you like he has already gone off-topic? Read on.

Read v4a.

Beginning from the topic about which the Corinth church wrote to Paul, that of Christians eating food sacrificed to idols, in the next three chapters Paul will

- discuss “knowledge” versus love and consideration for fellow believers;
- in response to their accusations and doubts, make a defense for his apostolic authority (Chapter Nine);
- speak against their habit of eating with unbelievers at pagan temples; and
- draw a distinction between temple food and marketplace food.

The Inquiry

The traditional view of these chapters has been that the Corinthians sent an innocent and fresh inquiry to Paul asking for his counsel regarding an internal squabble between the strong and the weak: whether it was all right for them to purchase and consume food that had previously been involved in pagan worship or sacrifice. This question was raised because some believers whose conscience was stronger thought it was permissible—after all, these gods were not real anyway—but some whose conscience was more fragile or new thought it was not permissible.

But the traditional view breaks down at several points. W. L. Willis “thinks that the Corinthians had asked Paul in their letter whether it was permissible to eat in an idol’s temple. They not only asked for Paul’s view, but also ‘gave their reasons to justify their participation,’ perhaps anticipating his criticism or to show off their wisdom and knowledge” (quoted in Garland). Thus the issue really was a dispute not between the strong and the weak in the Corinthian church, but between the Corinthians and Paul.

So what we have here is another instance of a church whose members are pushing back against Paul’s counsel.

- The Corinthians have done this regarding divisions in the church,
- they have done this regarding the “spiritual” and “wisdom” philosophies of other teachers,
- they have done this as they winked at extraordinary sexual immorality within the church,
- they have done this regarding lawsuits between believers,
- and they have done this regarding marital relationships.

They do not stop at seeking his counsel, but question his counsel, even argue against it—and, as we will see in Chapter Nine—go so far as to question the authority of his apostleship. Here in Chapter Eight Paul is not just answering their query, but refuting their rebuttal of him—their rationale for behavior destructive to the witness of the church, and the walk of fellow believers. As one commentator succinctly puts it, “They were not asking, ‘Can we eat idol food?’ but ‘Why can’t we eat idol food?’”

At first blush we might find this behavior hard to believe: Why in the world would a Christian be in a pagan temple in the first place? But it is really not difficult to imagine this.

The Cultural Environment

Most cultures in the ancient world did not draw the bright line of distinction between religion and business, religion and social life that is more common today. On the other hand, however, there remain in place even in our culture, some lingering remnants from the first century, such as

- prayer at the beginning of Senate sessions;
- “In God We Trust” placed on our coinage after the Civil War, and in 1956 adopted as the nation’s official motto.

Religion (i.e., the polytheistic beliefs of those in the region) was so suffused throughout every aspect of life that it was almost impossible to avoid it. Like today, when a business executive might find it advantageous to join a country club or civic organization to further his career up the corporate ladder, the merchant in Corinth—Christian or no—would by necessity need to associate with others who might not share his religious beliefs. And an otherwise innocuous business or social gathering would probably include offerings to, and blessings beseeched from, any one or more pagan gods.

Some of these business/social gatherings might even be held inside the pagan temple itself, where the food for the evening would be first dedicated to the temple’s resident god. This is why Paul says what he does in v10.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:10.

It is easy to see how business or social gatherings—basic and often necessary interactions with non-believers—would bring members of the church into regular contact with pagan culture, and even have them sitting down to eat a meal that had or had not been part of a pagan devotion. As a member of the local Rotary Club, you could receive a parchment stating that this month’s meeting would be held in the banquet room of the temple to Apollo—dinner and dancing to follow. And the meal would probably have consisted of leftovers from that morning’s worship and offerings to the god.

The Weight of Earlier Traditions

It is safe to say that virtually all of the members of the Corinth church came from either different traditions from Christianity, or no religious traditions at all. If you had been born into and raised in the religious traditions of your parents and grandparents, it would be very difficult to, first, let loose of those traditions and, second, not see them as relatively benign. Even after being converted to Christianity, you would retain fond memories of the faith with which you grew up—especially when one mixes into that a devotion to family.

We have a niece who is Japanese, raised on a small island. She became a Christian before she married our nephew. I have no evidence to doubt that she is truly born-again. Yet family and ancestors are very important to her; while growing up she surely was part of the annual ancestral ceremony called *Bon*, which takes place in either July or August along with the New Year’s celebration.

Bon is considered to be one of the two most important observances in Japan (Yanagita 1970). During *Bon* ceremony, family members return to their parental homes to honor all spirits of the dead who are believed to return to their homes at that time. As was the case in China, fresh fruit, flowers, and cooked rice are offered on the family altar. Many family members go to meet the souls of their ancestors in the cemetery or at the temple. In many neighborhoods, an annual *Bon* dance is held to celebrate this special observance in which adults and children dance to Japanese folk music.

I remember our niece more than once raising questions to me regarding her sainted grandfather—someone still holding to the traditional beliefs of his people. As a Christian she believed that there was only one way to salvation: the eternal life in Christ Jesus. Yet she could not get past her deep love and devotion for a dear grandfather who was such a “good” man.

Even if left unstated, her pained expression revealed the content of her heart: A loving God would not send my dear grandfather to hell, would He?

Multiply that sentiment, that tenacious hold of family traditions, by tens, maybe even a hundred, and you have the church in Corinth, dwelling not in the modern United States but in a time and place where the traditional family gods still held powerful sway over every aspect of life—their statues on every street corner, on the parapets of buildings, their shrines nestled in every business frequented on Main Street and every home on every other street.

One reason the apostle takes the long way around in refuting their practice—as we see in the opening verses and throughout the three chapters—is that he understands the familial, business, and social pressures to compromise and continue to join in the idol-associated practices with which they were accustomed. This is the context for that familiar verse in Chapter Ten.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:13.

Paul understands how thoroughly intertwined the worship of these pagan gods is with every aspect of their former, and even present lives—and how personal some of this can be. The ramifications for some members of the church extend well beyond just stopping their eating of meals at the temple: it would be tantamount to denying their heritage.

David Garland: K. K. Yeo puts it in a modern Chinese perspective: “To advise the Chinese not to offer food and not eat the food in ancestor worship may be implicitly advising them not to love their parents, not to practise love, and ultimately not to be Chinese.”

Telling our niece she must now, as a Christian, shun certain religious traditions of her Japanese family would, to her, mean showing disrespect to her beloved grandfather, even denying her Japanese heritage. Of course it would be a struggle for her.

Nevertheless, Paul follows v13 with a command: “Therefore, my beloved” he concludes in v14, “flee from idolatry.”

Choosing

Paul opens this long passage couching his argument in love over knowledge, because, as he states in v1, “Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies.” Thus he continues throughout Chapters Eight to Ten to speak quietly with reason and love, rather than shouting orders. He wants them to understand “the theological implications of their behavior” and decisions, and “seeks to convince them as reasonable persons to act out of love for others” (Garland).

But the inescapable message of these three chapters is that the follower of Christ must choose what he or she is going to be. Are you a Christian? Then you cannot continue to pay respect to the idol of a false god—you cannot even appear to be doing so. You must get off the fence. One either loves God and His Christ, or one loves the false gods of this world—you can’t do both.

And if we say we love our friends and family who persist in their idolatry, then we cannot express our love by turning a blind eye to the consequences of their beliefs. Our niece loved her grandfather dearly, and she did not want to be disrespectful to him and his traditional beliefs. But he, now deceased, is now in hell. No matter how hard it is for her to accept that, that is the cold truth. Paul closes this section of his letter at the end of Chapter Ten with counsel that speaks to this.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:31-33.

That word “no offense” (*apros'kopoi*) means, as the NIV has it, don’t cause anyone else to stumble. So let’s quickly break out the bullet points of this. The Christian is to

- do everything to the glory of God (i.e., not the glory of an idol),
- do nothing that would stand in the way of anyone being saved by Christ.

How much do we love those who are on their way to hell? Which is more important, that we show our love for them by respecting their pagan traditions, or by loving them into the arms of Christ Jesus? The choice is ours.

There is much to glean from these three chapters, and I look forward to digging into the treasure to be found within—which we will begin in our next session with Chapter Eight.

Session 75: The Root of Knowledge

1 Corinthians 8:1-3

Preface

Read 1 Corinthians 8:1-3.

v1

It will be worthwhile to define a couple of terms before we go too far into our passage. Two of those terms are “idol” and “god,” and we need to clarify their difference because it is easy to make them synonymous in our minds. It is true that to the Jews, they were virtually synonymous. But it is more important for us to understand how the Corinthians understood them.

In v1 the phrase “things sacrificed to idols” translates one long, almost unpronounceable Greek word (to *eidolothyton* [to ay-do-lothe'-oo-ton]). The root of that word is *eidolon*.

eidolon = from <G1491> (*eidōs*); an image (i.e. for worship); by implication a heathen god, or (plural) the worship of such :- idol.

Hence,

eidolothyton = neuter of a compound of <G1497> (*eidolon*) and a presumed derivative of <G2380> (*thuo*); an image-sacrifice, i.e. part of an idolatrous offering :- (meat, thing that is) offered (in sacrifice, sacrificed) to (unto) idols.

Here the NASB gives us the most literal translation by using “things,” rather than “food.” (The sacrifice could be food, but didn’t have to be.) More important is that these Greek words refer to an “image.” Jews at the time, as well as us today, can easily refer to a graven idol sitting in a shrine as “a pagan god”; I know that I have from time to time. But we need to delineate the two so as to understand how the Corinthians—and all idolaters at the time—perceived these statues.

These idols were images—tangible representations, but not the god itself. The worshipers bowing down before them or offering these statues sacrifices did not believe that the idol was the god. Nevertheless, by worshiping before the graven idol, the follower was worshiping the pagan god.

The god being represented by the idol was considered to be supernatural—dwelling outside the realm of mortal man—but was not the omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent being that we know as the one and only true God. After the gods in the highest echelon of the pantheon—e.g., Zeus (Gr.), Jupiter (Rom.), Amun, Osiris and Isis (Egy.)—most gods were specialized (e.g., fertility, rain, crops, rivers) and local, in the sense that they would be associated with specific villages, towns and cities (not to the exclusion, however, of the other gods). Private households would have their favorite gods to whom they prayed, with small shrines located somewhere within the home. Now back to v1.

Now concerning...

The apostle probably refers to a topic about which the church has written him, but it is also possible that the way he begins this verse and chapter is just a literary device to demarcate one subject from another. In any case, the topic at hand is “something offered to images.”

Sidebar: One hesitates to paint too detailed and too critical a picture of the Corinthians. After all, this sequence of correspondence took place just less than 2,000 years ago; unlike the digital architectural recreation of the city itself, we cannot revisit the actual congregation and speak with its members to ascertain their motives, the depth of their combativeness with Paul. All we can work from is what we know of them from God’s word, references to them from other works, and what we know of the history of the region—and that picture is far from complimentary of the church. The evidence at hand suggests a group of people who thought far too highly of themselves, and were happily prepared to argue for their position and against the apostle’s.

we know that we all have knowledge.

As he did at the beginning of v7, regarding sexual proprieties, Paul quotes back to the church a maxim they had quoted to him: “we all have knowledge.” Gordon Fee points out that “they did not say, ‘we all know,’ but that ‘we all possess knowledge (*gnosis*).” That is, we are in possession of a special kind of knowledge. Just as in the first verse of Chapter Seven, where the Corinthians stated “It is good for a man not to touch a woman,” Paul, on one level, can agree with the premise—but not their reasoning behind it. It is true that “we all Christians have knowledge,” but once again, just as in Chapter Seven, the church in Corinth has run wild with the concept, infusing it (*gnosis*) with the super-irrigated spiritualism they have adopted from the resident Greco-Roman culture of the city. Paul tacking on his “we know that” before the maxim (or slogan) represents his agreement with it—in principle. But immediately he starts punching holes in their inflated pride.

Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies.

Let me channel Eugene Peterson, author of the sometimes grossly loose paraphrase *The Message*, for a moment: In place of the direct and succinct “Knowledge makes arrogant,” I can hear Paul saying something like, Well now, it is clear from your attitude that the acquisition of *gnosis* makes people downright puffed up with themselves. Like much of *The Message*, that is an embarrassingly loose paraphrase, but it just might reflect the apostle’s state of mind. “Puffed up” is a literal translation of *physioo*, which is how all but the NASB translate it (a picture of blowing up a balloon). Different “Ups”: Knowledge puffs up; love builds up.

I think the behavior and attitude of the Corinthians regarding their “knowledge” can be illustrated by a scene out of early school days. At recess someone (probably a boy) comes up to a group of his classmates and proudly declares that he is in possession of a special and unique ability. And he proceeds to demonstrate this ability for those at hand. His behavior and the expression on his face makes it clear to everyone that he thinks that this skill is his and his alone, thus setting him above everyone else. But then someone in the audience—and to his infamy and eternal shame, a girl—points out to him and everyone present, “So what? We all can do that.” And she, along with several in the group confirm her statement by demonstrating the same ability.

That’s a pretty good picture of what is happening here between Paul and the Corinthians (to be fair, a subset of those in the Corinth church). Look what we can do, they were saying. We have a special knowledge that sets us apart. Paul’s response? “We know that” all believers have knowledge. But in you this knowledge has gone to seed and made you arrogant—you are puffed up like peacocks. But knowledge of God is meant to create in us a love that builds up the brethren—not tear them down with our arrogance. Paul has already, in a different context, spoken of this earlier in the letter.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:6-7.

If you think we are being too harsh with the Corinthians, that Paul is only speaking generally about arrogance, let me remind you that this is a continuing riff in his letter to the Corinth church.

4:18-19 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.

5:2 You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst.

5:6 Your boasting is not good.

13:4-5a 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...

Clearly there were some in the church who had a problem with being too full of themselves.

vv2-3

As he did in Chapter Seven, Paul continues to supply employment for the preacher and teacher by using shorthand in his statements. Just what sort of “knowledge” Paul speaks of here has been debated, but the best interpretation is that this knowledge refers to “the revealed illumination that comes from the Spirit” (Garland, Fee). So this was not a worldly knowledge that Paul wishes the Corinthians did not have, but a righteous knowledge given them by God that they were abusing. As Garland puts it, “The only knowledge that counts with Paul is that which is Christ-centered and results in other-centered loving behavior.”

There are some textual challenges with vv2-3—especially v3; not so much in what Paul has said, but why he has said it. We can state the essential point of these two verses, It is better to be known than to know. The Corinthians were preening over what they thought they knew, but what was far more important was that God knew them.

If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know;

The translations that have “something” (NIV, ESV) instead of “anything” (KJVs, NASB) translate a two-letter Greek word that is probably not in the original. The word “something” places the emphasis on the content of knowledge, while the word “anything” places the emphasis on “the reality of having knowledge as such” (Fee).

We have a saying that fits pretty well here: knowing just enough to be dangerous. In that case, the Corinthians knew just enough to be dangerous to those who were stumbling over a brother eating meat offered to idols. But this situation is even more pitiable, more tragic, than that. The first half of v2 means, “If anyone thinks they have arrived at knowledge—that is, “having come to the full state of knowledge” (Fee). The Corinthians were especially dangerous, not only to others but to themselves, because they thought they knew it all! And the apostle points out, when you’ve reached the point where you think you know it all—paraphrasing here—you know nuthin’. Seriously, what Paul is trying to get across to them is an idea that takes more than a few gray cells to grasp.

v3

but if anyone loves God, he is known by Him.

We might be inclined to read this, if anyone loves God, then God will know him—that is, our determination to love God results in God knowing us. But that has it backwards.

Again, the challenge of v3 is not what Paul is saying, but why he is saying it here. For now let’s focus on what he is saying, for it is important.

The better way to read v3 is if anyone loves God, this means that he is known by God. That is, God knowing us comes first. The phrase “known by God” is wrapped up in the divine initiative of election and redemption.

Read Jeremiah 1:4-5.

In God’s economy, to be known by Him is far more than to be known about by Him; it expresses a deep, sanctifying relationship. Out of His loving us comes our love for Him—and then for His people. This is the polar opposite of what was happening in the Corinth church, where individuals were so filled with “knowledge” (i.e., themselves) that it produced in them an arrogance that threatened to bring harm upon fellow believers. The normal, redemptive process had been short-circuited.

In Romans Chapter Eight Paul lays out the complete sequence of events that results from God’s knowledge of us.

Read Romans 8:28-30.

Can this go sour, as we see happening in Corinth? Well, it seemed to have happened in the region of Galatia. Turn to Galatians Chapter Four, and note how Paul here blends together, as if they are synonymous, our knowing God and His knowing us.

Read *Galatians 4:8-11*.

Because of their arrogance, the Corinthians had lost sight of the fact that anything they “knew”—including God Himself—was only because of God knowing them, and loving them, first.

Session 76: One God, One Lord

1 Corinthians 8:4-6

Preface

Before we proceed into our next passage I'd like to circle back for just one more point from v1. When in my study I learned that the "knowledge" that is the focus of vv1-3 is "the revealed illumination that comes from the Spirit," I found this to be troubling. After all, how could knowledge that comes by way of the Holy Spirit lead to or produce the arrogance being demonstrated by the Corinthians? This seemed antithetical to me. But Paul confirms this in Chapter Thirteen, where he expands on this contrast between knowledge and love; note especially v2.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:1-3.

What we have here, once again, is an example of the power of fallen flesh to corrupt something so righteous as to come to us from the Father by way of His Spirit. Even something as beautiful as the illumination we receive by the indwelling Holy Spirit can turn sour in the hands of a believer more enamored of himself than his Savior, and his fellow believers. I find that a sobering realization indeed.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:4-6.

v4

Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world,

Here again we have illustrated for us the reason not to be enslaved to only one translation of God's word. My otherwise trusty NASB translates v4 in such a way that the reader immediately responds with "But wait a minute..."

Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one.

To the statement "there is no such thing as an idol in the world," we want to respond with, "But wait a minute, Paul. You just mentioned in v1, and even the beginning of this same sentence that there are things sacrificed to idols—so they must exist." An idol is simply an image of a pagan god, and of course those images exist in the world. To this very day, 2,000 years later, they can still be found.

The other translations handle this better, and to its credit the NASB footnotes the other ways to translate it—something at which the NASB is very good. What we are also seeing here is the Jewish/OT practice of blurring the distinction between a god and its associate idol. The prophet Jeremiah wrote, "Can man make gods for himself? Yet they are not gods!" (Jeremiah 16:20) The word translated "gods" is *elohim*, but if one is crafting it with one's own hands, then what is made is an idol—an image.

We also have here in this verse two more maxims, or slogans, as the 2011 NIV and ESV make clear by placing them in quotes: "an idol has no real existence," and "there is no God but one." So Paul is agreeing with the premise: idols are worthless and there is only one true God (Yahweh).

and that there is no God but one.

This of course echoes the Shema from Deuteronomy 6:4: "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!" That is, "Yahweh is our God, Yahweh is one."

Sidebar: I'm struck by the similarity between antagonism to Judaism in the first century and Christianity in the twenty-first. In the first century Judaism was ridiculed by many because of its insistence upon there being only one God, and in the twenty-first century Christianity is ridiculed because of its insistence upon there being only one way to God—that is, through Christ.

Paul will expand on this in the next verse, but before we get there let's consider something that is hiding beneath the surface of v4. The Corinthians were saying to Paul. Hey, these pagan gods do not really exist, so that means their idols mean nothing at all. So what can be the harm in eating any food that has been part of their worship? But what they are glossing over is that, in a sense, there is a reality behind those gods and their images—an even darker reality. We see this in what one psalmist wrote about what happened to Israel because they failed to destroy all the people in Canaan.

Read Psalm 106:34-39.

As J. Moffat puts it, idols are nonentities, but demonic powers used idols to inveigle (i.e., cajole) humans into worshipping false gods. Demonic forces are at work, whether we realize it or not, whenever we associate in any way with false gods and their images. Even though the gods do not exist, the demons behind them surely do. They will do anything to pry us away from the true God.

vv5-6

Verses five and six comprise one long sentence which was split into two verses when the numbers were added to the Bible in the fifteenth century.

For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth,

In this long, awkward sentence (even in the Greek), Paul is making two points: Father God is the only true God, but just because they are not real, this does not mean that the pagan gods are harmless.

Read Galatians 4:7-9.

Later in this three-chapter treatise the apostle will come down hard on this in no uncertain terms.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:19-21.

as indeed there are many gods and many lords,

In v5, when Paul affirms that there are “so-called gods”—indeed, “many gods and many lords,”—he is not claiming “they ‘exist’ as objective realities,” but that “they ‘exist’ subjectively in the sense that they are believed in” (Fee). When individuals believe in even a nonexistent god, when they worship and make sacrifices to it, and even conduct their lives according to its precepts, that god becomes as “real” to them as he can be.

yet for us...

Note how Paul begins his contrast of the pagan with the Christian perception: “yet for us” implies there is a tacit “for them” in v5. For them there are many gods and lords, but for us there is only one God and one Lord.

Verse six is an eloquent summation of the God we worship and our relationship to Him through Christ. It supplies for us the script for our response to anyone who challenges us with a different god, a different faith, a different creed. In its two halves Paul chooses his words carefully; here is no sloppy theology.

God, the Father

there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for Him;

Keying off his earlier reference to “many gods and many lords,” Paul first describes our God as “Father,” conveying that He “is the ultimate origin of all things” (Garland).

Sidebar: Even with the beauty with which this is written, it is nonetheless strong and delivered with unequivocal force. A true follower of Christ cannot worship

multiple gods—how did that work out for Israel and Judah when they did it? We cannot do that.

Paul sets out three characteristics of our God:

1. **He is our Father.** Israel knew Yahweh as the Father of their nation, but it was Jesus who made this an appellation of personal intimacy—not just for Himself, but extended from Him as a gift to His followers.
2. As our Father, **God is the progenitor of “all things.”** Every human being, every tree in the forest, every planet and star in the universe—all things come from Him and,
3. **We, especially, exist for His purposes.** We not only will return to Him, but we live for Him right now.

Lord, Jesus Christ

and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him.

Then paralleling in form, but not content, the apostle gives us three characteristics of our Lord:

1. **He is our Lord**—our Master, supreme in authority—but also echoing the term used in the Greek OT (Septuagint) for Yahweh Himself, thus implying the deity of Christ and His place in the Godhead.
2. **He is the one through whom God created all things.** Christ Jesus was, as it were, the “agent” through whom creation came into being, as Paul writes in his letter to the Colossians.
Read Colossians 1:16.
The writer to the Hebrews states it flat-out: “through whom also He made the world” (Hebrews 1:2).
3. **He is the one through whom we are.** Just as Christ was the agent of creation, so too He was the agent of our redemption.

Read Colossians 1:19-20.

Conclusion

Certain members of the Corinth church were our brethren in more ways than one. Sadly, from our perspective they were quite modern, for they were exhibiting philosophies and behavior that mimic our own—or, more accurately, foreshadowed our own.

Every day we make decisions both large and small that risk diluting the lordship of Christ in our lives. If we took the time to think them through we would realize that some of our choices, while on the surface benign, contain the seeds of a cancer that weaken our faith and our walk.

Paul takes this opportunity—still laying the groundwork for his main point (as he did in vv1-3)—to eloquently drive home the point that for followers of Christ there can be only one God and only one Lord. We have life and salvation only through them, and we dare not play fast and loose with other “so-called gods,” for ultimately they are not harmless, but the face of evil that wishes only to separate us from the God who is Lord over all.

Session 77: It's Not About the Meat! part one

1 Corinthians 8:7-13 (7)

Preface

One day, when I was just a young lad in Marshalltown, I left my bike on the sidewalk and walked into the downtown establishment known as The News Stand. If you were in the business district and needed a newspaper, magazine, cigarettes or pipe tobacco, chewing gum or candy this was where you got them. I was probably there to get some candy.

When I entered the store this time I noticed a familiar face back in the magazine racks: it was the adult son of a family—a very conservative family—that was a pillar of our church. He was standing before the large display of periodicals, leafing through the pages of a magazine. I couldn't identify the magazine in his hands, but he was standing very near the far-back area reserved for the type of magazines you wouldn't want your mom to know you had in your possession—or members of your church.

In a flash the high esteem I held for this young man and his family dropped lower on the scale. Now, in truth he may have been looking at the current issue of Life magazine, but his proximity to the seedier neighborhood of the racks left an indelible—if, admittedly, a possibly unfair—impression on my young mind.

Throughout this letter there has been a subtext hiding just beneath the surface, but which comes out into the open beginning in Chapter Eight and is revisited from here on out—especially in Chapter Fourteen. That subtext is the uniquely Christian call for and practice of edification—the “building up” of others, specifically our brothers and sisters in Christ. This begins in v1.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:1.

I use the word “unique” for a reason. There are, of course, other groups in which the members look out for each other, who help each other, but none with the God-ordained motive and Spirit-led selflessness of one Christian for another.

Last week after class a member of our class and I had a discussion about different situations in which it would or would not be acceptable for a believer to eat food that had been sacrificed to idols. It is true that we can look at each situation, check it against the counsel of Scripture—specifically Chapters Eight to Ten—to see whether or not it is permissible. But there is a more universal test for the Christian—one that does not require a specific proof-text from God's word: Will my behavior build up or tear down the faith of another.

And this goes beyond the criterion of weak or strong, whether one is a babe or mature in faith, for it is possible for our actions to chip away at even strong, well-established faith.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:7-13.

Paul's point here is that it is not about the meat; it is not about this rule or that rule, this is OK, that is not OK. It is about how much you care about your brother or sister in Christ. Through the prophet Micah the Lord made clear His priorities. (Even earlier on, in the Pentateuch, God was saying the same thing.)

Read Micah 6:6-8.

Filling our mind with detailed knowledge of God and His word, memorizing Scripture, fastidiously obeying even the most obscure of His precepts—all that is worthless if with that we care nothing for the spiritual condition and walk of our brethren. As Paul said in v1, Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. It's not about the meat; it's about love, mercy, consideration for others.

In a sense, the behavior that Paul propounds is the antithesis of behavior today. In today's culture everyone is demanding their rights—even when said rights do not even exist. People manufacture offense, demand others do things their way, like the things they like, respect the things they respect. Everything is me, me, me—and if you do not agree with me, then you are Adolf's long lost kin.

Using the issue of meat sacrificed to idols—and keep in mind that the primary focus here is not stumbling upon some idol meat when shopping in the marketplace, but rather sitting down to a meal with others at an idolatrous venue—Paul tells the Corinthians to do just the opposite, to give way to the needs of others, especially if they do not share your knowledge.

v7

However not all men have this knowledge;

In v1 Paul agreed, to a point, that “all have knowledge.” But here he qualifies his position: All have knowledge of a sort, but not all have this knowledge, referring back to what he said in the first two paragraphs about the edifying aspect of love, and his discussion about gods and lords. In my opinion he refers back, specifically, to his statement, “indeed there are many gods and lords, yet for us there is but one God... and one Lord...” Gordon Fee puts it this way:

Paul now asserts that “this knowledge is *not* shared by all.” By this he means that even though at the theoretical level all may believe that an idol does not represent a [true] deity, not all equally share this “knowledge” at the experiential, emotional level.

What does Fee mean by this? How does that work? Like this: All my life I have had people tell me, “What’s the problem? If you are overweight the answer is simple. Just eat less.” Now, on an intellectual level I can agree to that; of course that is a correct statement. But does that knowledge prevent me from eating more than I should? Does it keep me out of the refrigerator? Of course not. Having that knowledge does little to countermand the habits set in place when I was a kid, my metabolism, my lifestyle. Empirically that is correct, and I “know” it—but putting it into practice is another thing entirely. This renders me, on that topic, “weak.”

but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol;

There were some in Corinth who “knew” that the idols represented nothing that was real, so food sacrificed to them was no different from food that was not. Nonetheless—because of their history, their upbringing, their “weakness”—it was a hurdle they could not surmount. They just couldn’t shake it. Couldn’t get past it.

and their conscience being weak is defiled.

It was not so much that their faith was weak, but that because of their history whenever they sat down to a meal—especially one being offered in the precincts of a pagan temple—they couldn’t help but worry that the food had been previously offered to idols. They just could not easily dismiss that association. And, as a result, they are “defiled” (in v11 Paul will use a stronger term).

defiled = *molyno* = to stain, to soil, pollute.

There is a play on words in v7 that is made clear in the KJVs.

However, there is not in everyone that knowledge; for some, with consciousness of the idol, until now eat it as a thing offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. (NKJV; emphasis added)

I used to think that the conscience was too closely associated with the flesh to be of any value to a follower of Christ—as illustrated by the familiar maxim, “Let your conscience be your guide.” Well, no; God, connected to me by way of the Holy Spirit, is to be my guide, thank you very much. I cannot trust my conscience. But God’s word does not so easily dismiss

the conscience. Paul, standing before the Sanhedrin, refers to his conscience for evidence of his righteous behavior.

Read Acts 23:1.

conscience = *syneidesis* (soon-i'-day-sis) = from a prolonged form of <G4894> (*suneido*); co-perception, i.e. moral consciousness :- conscience.

The picture of the conscience from God's word is that an individual's conscience is one piece of evidence—a “check,” at best—among several. It is too susceptible to outside influence (as our text reveals) to be a reliable gauge on its own. The hypothetical individual in Chapter Eight, who sees a brother in Christ eating food in a pagan temple, has “a sensitive conscience which at the same time is imperfectly educated” (Colin Brown). As we proceed through this paragraph we will be examining this further.

In v10 Paul will address one result from “someone see[ing] you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol's temple.” He writes that the consequence of this would be that the observing individual may “be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols.” (Oh, then it's all right for me to do this.) This would be the result of the defilement of the man's conscience. I would respectfully suggest a second possible result from the same situation: a diminished effective witness of the one being observed. (I offer this not as an interpretation but as an extension of the text.)

When, as a Christian boy, I observed that man from our church in what might have been a compromising situation, my faith—my conscience—was not sullied at all. In that situation what was “defiled” was my opinion of him, and hence, at least in my eyes, his Christian witness. So, with respect to the apostle, I would suggest the possibility that either party could be “defiled.”

In our passage Paul addresses exclusively the responsibilities of the more knowledgeable (i.e., “stronger”) believer—and rightly so. He is and should be the one who relinquishes his “liberty” for the benefit of his “weaker” brother, and we will be developing this as we dig further into the paragraph. But I also find a couple of lessons for us all in the reaction of the weaker brother.

- Let us not be too quick to base the quality of our faith on the faith or actions of another. When we stand before Christ we will not be able to point a finger at our brother and claim, “Well, he did it!” Human beings will invariably let us down, because they are as fallible as we.
- And if, as in the scene from my childhood, the situation results in a different sort of defilement, let us not be too quick to judge a brother or sister in Christ. The observer never knows all the facts, and even if he did, he still hasn't the right, as an individual, to stand as judge and jury on another.

Let's close with a passage from Romans that speaks to this issue as well, and brings us back to Paul's point about love being more important than mere knowledge.

Read Romans 14:19-23.

Session 78: It's Not About the Meat! part two

1 Corinthians 8:7-13 (8-10)

Preface

In our library there are a few books that, for one reason or another, you would not find in any church library. Even in the section reserved for biblical reference there are volumes some would regard as heretical, because they espouse positions diametrically opposed to what we believe. As an adult on the brink of old age, and a reasonably mature Christian, I can handle the content of these books; for me they reveal and substantiate the truth of Scripture even as they speak against it. If, however, there were small children living in our home, or I had impressionable youth traipsing in and out on a regular basis, I would not have these books on our shelves, for they could do damage to the conscience of someone less mature in the faith—which was a mistake I made many years ago.

At the ripe old age of nineteen or twenty, barely out of diapers myself, freshly wed and still in the navy, I found myself directing the youth choir at a Baptist church in San Diego. At some point in this perilous relationship Linda and I invited the choir to our home for a social evening.

Now, I have always had a library of books, but in these early days our “library” consisted of various and sundry volumes filling a rickety, slide-the-pieces-together contraption that could hold no more than an armload of books. And in that collection were a few paperback copies of books by and about the very late “prophet” Edgar Cayce, a subject that had piqued my interest at the time.

One of the older teenage girls in the choir spied those books on the shelves during that social event and, confronting me about them at a subsequent choir rehearsal, was literally in tears over the fact that I would dare possess such heretical material. At the time I dismissed her hysterical response to my reading material as little more than the rantings of teenage angst.

But she was right and I was wrong. To her credit, she knew the books to be heretical, but the incident damaged my witness—and leadership of the choir—for her. However, there may also have been someone else there whose curiosity was piqued by the books, and who may have been ultimately led astray by them. *Hey, if Dave reads these it must be good stuff.*

Bottom line: The books should not have been there.

In our previous session, as we opened this last paragraph of Chapter Eight, we established that within the body of Christ in Corinth there were some who “knew” that the idols represented nothing that was real, so food sacrificed to them was no different from food that was not. Nonetheless—because of their history, their upbringing, their “weakness”—it was a hurdle they could not surmount. They just couldn’t shake it. It was not so much that their faith was weak, but that because of their history whenever they sat down to a meal—especially one being offered in the precincts of a pagan temple—they couldn’t help but worry that the food had been previously offered to idols. Their conscience would not let them easily dismiss that association.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:7-13.

v8

But food will not commend us to God;

commend = *parastesei*; future active indicative of *paristemi* = or prolonged *paristano*, *par-is-tan'-o*; from <G3844> (*para*) and <G2476> (*histemi*); to stand beside, i.e. (transitive) to exhibit, proffer, (special) recommend, (figurative) substantiate; or (intransitive) to be at hand (or ready), aid :- assist, bring before, command, commend, give presently, present, prove, provide, shew, stand (before, by, here, up, with), yield. (For once the NIVs are the most literal with “bring us near”. Can be positive or negative, depending on context, i.e., commendation or condemnation).

Verse 8 presents some problems of interpretation, but probably the best solution (as Fee) is to see both parts of this verse as another position of the Corinthians with which Paul agrees—but which he is about to employ as an argument against their behavior (i.e., their supposed “liberty” or “right” to eat food in a pagan temple).

The first part is straightforward enough, a statement of fact that agrees not only with what Paul had written earlier about circumcision, but what Jesus taught about food in the gospel of Mark.

Read Mark 7:14-15.

Then, because his disciples didn’t get it, he had to explain further.

Read Mark 7:18-23.

Food, what goes into our mouth, is in and of itself morally neutral. And...

we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat.

From the setting of Chapter Eight, and specifically the first part of v8, we would expect Paul to say something like (as Fee puts it), “therefore, abstaining is of no advantage to anyone [i.e., not eating food does not make you any more righteous to God]; nor is eating of any disadvantage” [i.e., eating food does not elicit God’s disapproval]. But Paul’s elaboration of the first part is precisely the opposite: “The one who abstains is not disadvantaged; and the one who eats is not advantaged.”

One reason Paul might have worded it this way was that he was thinking about the identical situation he had earlier addressed (in Chapter Seven) regarding circumcision. But let’s look at how he said it to the Galatians.

Read Galatians 5:6.

To the Galatians he said the same thing he has been saying to the Corinthians: If one looks at our life under God—even life under the Mosaic Law, which required circumcision to be an obedient Jew—there are some things more important than strict adherence to his regulations, and one of these is love—especially love for the brethren. If our behavior, even in obedience to or allowed by God’s precepts, does harm to a fellow believer, that brother’s condition must take precedence. Once again, when all is said and done, circumcision means nothing and food means nothing. What counts is the condition of our heart, and our consideration for a brother or sister in Christ.

As the late theologian and scholar Hans Conzelmann wrote, “The neutrality of food does not mean neutrality of conduct.” Paul now, in v9, begins to focus on the damage—potentially fatal damage—we can inflict on a brother simply by availing ourselves of the liberty, or right, we have to partake of this seemingly insignificant food.

v9

But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

Verse 9 offers us evidence that this business of eating food in a pagan temple was an argument set forth in the Corinthians’ letter to Paul, and that v8 is the essential text of that argument. It might have gone something like this:

Corinthians: After all, Paul, mere food isn’t going to commend us to God; we are no better or no worse if we do or do not eat.

Paul: I agree, but you are missing something...

liberty^{nasb, nkjv}, **exercise of rights**^{niv2011}, **exercise of freedom**^{niv}, **right**^{esv} = *exousia* = from <G1832>

(*exesthi*) (in the sense of ability); privilege, i.e. (subject) force, capacity, competency, freedom, or (object) mastery (concrete magistrate, superhuman, potentate, token of control), delegated influence :- authority, jurisdiction, liberty, power, right, strength.

Paul did not pluck this term out of thin air; almost certainly he is responding to a popular philosophy at work in Corinth and members of the church (“liberty of yours”)—one, sadly, still prevalent today.

A. T. Robertson: It becomes a battle cry, personal liberty does, to those who wish to indulge their own whims and appetites regardless of the effect upon others.

Perhaps this is an appropriate time to recall what the apostle wrote to the church in Philippi—something else that Paul did not pull out of thin air.

Read Philippians 2:1-4.

What was his model for this philosophy and behavior? Read on.

Read Philippians 2:5-8.

In Chapter Nine Paul will return to this word, *exousia*. In his apologia against the Corinthians’ challenge to his apostolic authority, he will use the word, translated “right,” five times.

v10

For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol's temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols?

Let’s consider, for a moment, this word translated “weak.”

asthenes (ahs-then-ace') = from <G1> (a) (as a negative particle) and the base of <G4599> (*sthenoo*); strengthless (in various applications, literal, figurative and moral) :- more feeble, impotent, sick, without strength, weak (-er, -ness, thing).

These were not bumbling idiots, they were not necessarily brand new believers, nor were they necessarily like those described by James as “double-minded” men, “unstable in all [their] ways,” “driven and tossed by the wind.” In this context I interpret this word “weak” as describing those lacking in the fullness of knowledge that would bring a foundational maturity to their conscience and faith.

We might say they were spiritually malleable, easily shaped by outside influence, either positively or negatively. This could be because of a lack of the knowledge their “stronger” brethren possessed, or simply because of their personality or life experience.

The impression we have of these more “knowledgeable” Corinthians—the ones “dining in an idol’s temple”—is that they were displaying an attitude toward their weaker brethren of, Hey, just grow up!, when what they should have been displaying was an attitude of spiritual noblesse oblige. Paul states this well in his letter to the Romans.

Read Romans 15:1-2.

The Corinthians thought they were edifying the weak by demonstrating their superior knowledge. Paul opened this chapter of his letter by stating flat out that it is not knowledge, but love that edifies.

Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies. If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know; (1 Corinthians 8:1-2)

Session 79: It's Not About the Meat! part three

1 Corinthians 8:7-13 (11)

Preface

Paul has been crescendoing his point from the beginning of Chapter Eight: Were this a musical composition, it began, in v1, at a quiet pianissimo and has gradually ascended, in vv11-13, to a resounding fortissimo. In this chapter Paul has moved from general agreement in principle to vibrant disagreement in practice, and from this practice by some of the Corinthians causing defilement, or soiling, in a weaker brother to their choices and behavior causing utter destruction of another.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:7-13.

v11

For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died.

This verse presents us with a challenge—a challenge that goes beyond just deciding how to interpret the text, or beyond just deciding which commentator makes the most logical interpretation. This verse includes two critical words—“ruined” and “brother”—the first of which is the same he employed in Chapter One.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-19.

In these two verses from Chapter One the meaning is clear; in v18 “those who are perishing” is contrasted with “us who are being saved.” One does not need a Doctorate to understand that this speaks of those who are on their way to hell instead of heaven. This word translated “perishing” in v18 and “destroy” in v19, which is also used in v8:11 is

apollysthai = from <G575> (*apo*) and the base of <G3639> (*olethros*); to destroy fully (reflexive to perish, or lose), literal or figurative :- destroy, die, lose, mar, perish.

There are other words Paul could have used if what he meant to say was that he who is weak is corrupted or made to sin. For example, he could have used *phtheiro*, as he does in Chapter Three.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:16-17. (NKJV or KJV)

The other versions translate the two occurrences of this word in v17 as “destroy” both times, but the KJVs make it “defile” and “destroy.”

phtheiro = probably strengthened from *phthio* (to pine or waste); properly to shrivel or wither, i.e. to spoil (by any process) or (genitive) to ruin (especially figurative by moral influences, to deprave) :- corrupt (self), defile, destroy.

But of course he did not use this word, but chose instead a word used repeatedly in the NT, in the Septuagint, and in secular Greek to refer to utter destruction, perishing, death; Paul always uses the verb *apollysthai* to refer to eternal, final destruction (Garland). And this presents a problem when we combine this with the second critical word in the verse: “brother,” which is Paul’s favorite word for a fellow member in the body of Christ—i.e., a Christian.

It is a safe bet that most if not all the members of this class subscribe to the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, which means, as Wayne Grudem defines it, “that all those who are truly born again will be kept by God’s power and will persevere as Christians until the end of their lives, and that only those who persevere until the end have been truly born again.” And we might add the flip-side, that those who do not persevere until the end were not truly born again.

It is this that brings the attentive reader of v11 to a grinding halt. We raise our hand and say, But Paul, how can the actions of a Christian cause the utter, eternal destruction of another “brother” in Christ? We cannot, as do some commentators, just gloss over this and move on. Is Paul really saying that the observed behavior of one Christian can cause a fellow Christian to lose his salvation and die without the grace of Christ? This is not the only place that Paul has written this.

Read Romans 14:14-15.

Not surprisingly, those commentators who deign to address the problems in this verse are divided on its interpretation.

Literal destruction: Garland, Fee, Lange, JFB, Clarke, Grudem

Cause the person to sin: MacArthur, Mare, Poole

So what are we to make of this verse when we subscribe to the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, yet that troublesome Greek word really means destruction? For what it is worth, Grudem—who is the only interpreter I could find willing to spend some ink to discuss this—may help us out.

His first two paragraphs are speaking to the familiar and equally challenging passage in Hebrews 6. Then he speaks to our verse in 1 Corinthians.

Read Hebrews 6:4-6.

At this point we may ask what kind of person is described by all of these terms. These are no doubt people who have been affiliated closely with the fellowship of the church. They have had some sorrow for sin (repentance). They have clearly understood the gospel (they have been enlightened). They have come to appreciate the attractiveness of the Christian life and the change that comes about in people’s lives because of becoming a Christian, and they have probably had answers to prayer in their own lives and felt the power of the Holy Spirit at work, perhaps even using some spiritual gifts in the manner of the unbelievers in Matthew 7:22 (they have become “associated with” the work of the Holy Spirit or have become “partakers” of the Holy Spirit and have tasted the heavenly gift and the powers of the age to come). They have been exposed to the true preaching of the Word and have appreciated much of its teachings (they have tasted the goodness of the Word of God).

Now the author tells us that *if these people willfully turn away from all of these temporary blessings*, then it will be impossible to restore them again to any kind of repentance or sorrow for sin. Their hearts will be hardened and their consciences calloused. What more could be done to bring them to salvation? If we tell them Scripture is true they will say that they know it but they have decided to reject it. If we tell them God answers prayer and changes lives they will respond that they know that as well, but they want nothing of it. If we tell them that the Holy Spirit is powerful to work in peoples lives and the gift of eternal life is good beyond description, they will say that they understand that, but they want nothing of it. Their repeated familiarity with the things of God and their experience of many influences of the Holy Spirit has simply served to harden them against conversion.

When Paul speaks in Romans 14:15 and 1 Corinthians 8:11 about the possibility of destroying one for whom Christ died, it seems best here as well to think of the word “for” in the sense that Christ died “to make salvation available for” these people or “to bring the free offer of the gospel to” these people who are associated with the fellowship of the church. He does not seem to have in mind the specific question of the inter-trinitarian decision regarding whose sins the Father counted Christ’s death as a payment for. Rather, he is speaking of those to whom the gospel has been offered. In another passage, when Paul calls the weak man a “brother for whom Christ died” in 1 Corinthians 8:11, he is not necessarily pronouncing on the inward spiritual condition of a person’s heart, but is probably just speaking according to what is often called the “judgment of charity” by which people who are participating in the fellowship of the church can rightly be referred to as brothers and sisters. (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Zondervan, 1994)

Every believer is free to interpret v11 in the way that makes the most sense to him or her. I will not be dogmatic about this challenging verse. For me, however, Grudem's comments make sense, and even though they do not, for me, answer every question I might have about the verse, they offer a reasonable interpretation for me.

It is a very real probability that not everyone associated with this [your] church, ones we [you] might even have referred to as a "brother" or "sister" in Christ, are truly born again. Only God can know the heart; our evidence is mostly external, and may be in error. Clearly the person being addressed in v11, the one with "knowledge" is unconcerned about dining in an "idol's temple." It does not affect his faith one way or another. But someone whom this man would consider a brother Christian sees him dining in this venue and, as a result, thinks it is then all right for a Christian to do this—and he joins the first man, reclining at table in the idol's temple. But there is a fatal difference between the two men, something not seen with the naked eye. Unbeknownst to the first man, the second man has a deep and powerful attraction to the idols of his youth. Attending the Christian meetings in Corinth has helped wean him away from that former life, but it had such a strong influence on him that he remains weak and susceptible to the idolatrous beliefs—and he does not yet have the advantage of the indwelling Spirit to help him overcome the temptation. Joining his Christian friend at table reawakens in him the old attraction of that life, and begins a downward spiral that ultimately sucks him back in. After a while he stops attending the Christian meetings, never returns, and eventually dies without Christ.

With that in mind, let's consider a contemporary, real-world illustration of the warning Paul delivers in v11.

You are traveling down the freeway with a friend from church. You're going around Des Moines, heading east on Interstate 80 and, since it is almost noon and you are approaching Altoona, you suggest stopping at Prairie Meadows for lunch.

"I really love their steaks," you say.

"But that's a casino," your friend reminds you.

"That's all right. We're not there to gamble—just to eat. Food is food," you answer with a shrug.

"I don't know..."

"Besides, the manager there is a friend of mine. He'll take care of us."

"Well, I suppose, but let's go right to the restaurant, OK?"

"No problem. There's an outside door."

But as soon as you step through the door of the restaurant there are slot machines all around. You barely notice them in your disinterest, but your friend is immediately uncomfortable—yet at the same time he experiences old familiar stirrings, a reawakening of a passion he thought had been left behind in his troubled past. Like a diabetic in a candy shop, he can literally taste the sweetness of gambling.

By your senses the lunch passes uneventfully. But all the time your friend is overwhelmed by the seismic tugs, the internal battle between something he knows to be wrong and its attraction upon his weakness. He doesn't even hear your conversation as he is helpless against the siren song of the slot machines, and the magnetic activities calling to him through the opposite doorway leading to the casino.

Even you notice that something troubles your friend as you pay the check and return to your travels. But, not wanting to pry, you don't say anything. Unbeknownst to you, a few days later your friend will return to the casino, and every pull of the one-armed bandit draws him back deeper into the vice that his interest in the teachings of Christ had helped him overcome. But now that voice of the Savior grows weaker and weaker, until it is silenced forever as he gives himself over totally to gambling.

In a few months he has lost his job, and within a year he has lost his wife and children. Penniless and friendless, two years later he is found dead in the alleyway behind a liqueur store. He has died alone, and without Christ.

All because you wanted a steak from Prairie Meadows.

Conclusion

For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died.

Earlier we read a parallel passage in Romans 14; let's close by reading how Paul finishes that chapter.

Read Romans 14:20-23.

Session 80: It's Not About the Meat! part four

1 Corinthians 8:7-13 (12-13)

Preface

In our last session we examined the challenging v11 and, not surprisingly, considering its controversial nature, the class was divided on its interpretation. The meaning and application of the verse hinges on what Paul intends by his use of the Greek words *apollysthai* (“ruined”) and *adelphos* (“brother”). Does he mean by the first word permanent, eternal damnation, or just “cause the man to sin”? And does he mean by the second word a true brother in Christ—i.e., a Christian—or just someone associated with the local church?

Happily we can draw profitable application from the verse no matter our position on its interpretation, for causing someone to sin is different only in degree from causing someone to spend eternity in hell. Neither is a path the follower of Christ should follow; either one should cause sleepless nights.

When turning to the issue of publicly eating food that had been sacrificed to idols, as he does in v1 of the chapter, Paul immediately brings in the component of love.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:1-2.

It is understandable that we read that the first time and wonder what in the world that has to do with food sacrificed to idols. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, however, Paul knows precisely what he is doing, and as he draws the chapter to a close it becomes clear why he set it up as he did at its beginning.

The spark that ignited this discussion, in the letter sent to Paul from the Corinth church, may have gone something like this: *With all due respect, Paul, we do not think there is anything wrong with eating food that has been sacrificed to idols. After all, idols represent gods that do not even exist, so where is the harm?* Certain members of the Corinth church were considering the situation philosophically and, in a sense, practically. Paul agrees with them to that extent: The food is not tainted because it has been associated with an imaginary deity. But the real issue is not the meat, but the witness. What might happen to someone else—a brother with a weaker conscience—who sees you doing this? That is far more important—potentially fatally so—than the condition of the meat itself. And in the last two verses of the chapter, before us today, the apostle draws his conclusion and preliminary verdict (a verdict expanded in Chapter Ten).

Read 1 Corinthians 8:7-13.

v12

And so, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.

There are times when we wonder what is meant by the phrase “personal Savior” (one not found in the Bible, by the way). Here, in v12, we have part of the reason for that comforting terminology.

And so,

The KJVs and NIV “bury the lede” somewhat by not beginning the verse (as do the NASB and ESV) with *houtos*, translated “And so,” and “Thus,” respectively, obviously referring back to what he has just stated in vv10-11.

Sidebar:

NKJV: but when you thus sin...

NIV: When you sin against your brothers in this way...

by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak,

This is a more broadly worded reiteration of vv10-11, in which the brother was singular rather than plural (“brethren” in v12) and the result was ruination, rather than “wounding” in v12 (*typto*).

Verse 12 is a bucket of cold water thrown in the believer’s face. Inundated day after day by the standards and practices of this fallen world and depraved society, our faith and behavior—that is, what we deem to be appropriate behavior for a Christian—becomes corrupted, weathered, with all its sharply defined edges worn down. Any time we take our cues from the world rather than from God’s word, we are replacing truth with a lie. And the world continuously drives into the psyche that I am important, that my rights are the rights that matter, that whatever I want is more important than what anyone else wants. As a result we have a society of spoiled brats. But God’s word says something diametrically opposed to this.

Read Philippians 2:3-4.

To the Romans Paul wrote that, “We who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves. Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification.” (Romans 15:1-2)

Those who spend every day out in the business world, in the “educational” institutions, or who spend countless hours listening to the garbage dispensed by the news networks or social media face a daily struggle to live by the wisdom that comes down from heaven. And here Paul splashes some cold water in our face to bring us back to the truth.

Paul first declares that when we do something like the man in this chapter who cared more for his rights than the conscience of a weaker brother, it is not just bad manners; it is sin.

hamartano = perhaps from <G1> (α) (as a negative particle) and the base of <G3313> (meros); properly to miss the mark (and so not share in the prize), i.e. (figurative) to err, especially (moral) to sin :- for your faults, offend, sin, trespass; to do wrong.

More than that, it is not just some hidden, private offense, but it is a public (just like the eating) offense against a brother or sister. What form does this sin take? What is the offense?

and wounding their conscience when it is weak,

wounding = *typto* = a primary verb (in a strengthened form); to “thump”, i.e. cudgel or pummel (properly with a stick or bastinado), but in any case by repeated blows; thus differing from <G3817> (παίο) and <G3960> (πατάσσω), which denote a [usually single] blow with the hand or any instrument, or <G4141> (πλέσσω) with the fist [or a hammer], or <G4474> (ῥαπίζω) with the palm; as well as from <G5177> (τύγχω), an accidental collision); by implication to punish; figurative to offend (the conscience) :- beat, smite, strike, wound. (Garland: “The word does not mean here ‘causing pain to,’ but ‘striking a blow against.’” A. T. Robertson: “to smite with fist, staff, whip.”)

With that in mind, the word “wounding” seems almost too tame; such behavior is tantamount to forcing someone into a corner and beating them unmercifully.

...you sin against Christ.

There is our “personal Savior.” For believers, Christ Jesus is so thoroughly—and inextricably—embedded in our lives—and we in His—that when we sin against a brother we are really sinning against our Lord. Jesus Himself describes this intimate connection with His followers in his last extended discourse before His arrest—this describing the Final Judgment.

Read Matthew 25:31-45

Notice what Jesus said to Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus.

Read Acts 9:3-6.

As far as we know, Saul had never been in the presence of Jesus, but simply because the zealot had been persecuting Christ's followers, he had actually been persecuting Jesus Himself.

v13

Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble.

The apostle Paul is a wise teacher. In this instance (perhaps because of his knowledge of the Corinthians' combative nature), he does not command their behavior, but his own. He instructs not by condemnation of their behavior, but by setting himself as the example—that is, he places the burden on himself. (However, Paul will issue a command to them on this in Chapter 10.)

We will see later that one thing Paul is doing here is setting up his argument in Chapter Nine: "an impassioned defense of his apostleship" (Fee).

Here is where the rubber meets the road; here is where being a Christian in this world really means something. And here is the climax to how he began this part of his letter with "Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies" (v1).

stumble, fall into sin^{niv} = *skandalizo* = ("scandalize"); from <G4625> (*skandalon*); to entrap, i.e. trip up (figurative stumble [transitive] or entice to sin, apostasy or displeasure) :- (make to) offend.

skandalon = ("scandal"); probably from a derivative of <G2578> (*kampto*); a trap-stick (bent sapling), i.e. snare (figurative cause of displeasure or sin) :- occasion to fall (of stumbling), offence, thing that offends, stumbling block.

This is a convicting passage. Again, no matter your reading of v11, causing someone to sin is different only in degree from causing someone to spend eternity in hell. Either result is an egregious offense against a brother in Christ, or even just a friend or acquaintance.

Gordon Fee: The real concern of the passage needs a regular hearing in the church. Personal behavior is dictated not by knowledge, freedom, or law, but by love for those within the community of faith. Everything one does that affects relationships within the body of Christ should have care for brothers and sisters as its primary motivation.

David Guzik: It is easy for a Christian to say, "I answer to God and God alone" and to ignore his brother or sister. It is true we will answer to God and God alone; but we will answer to God for how we have treated our brother or sister.

Session 81: The Authenticating Seal

1 Corinthians 9:1-2

Preface

Back in the late 70s, when I was a fashion photographer in San Diego, the husband of my makeup artist—a handsome dude named Randy, whom we regularly used in some of our ads—had a bit part as an extra in a movie being shot in the city. He asked me to visit the set to get some shots of him with some of the principal actors for his portfolio.

One day they were filming in Balboa Park, in the center of the city, so I showed up to do just that. At one point the principals were sitting around on the lawn, discussing an upcoming scene, and Randy positioned himself behind them so I could shoot him with them in the foreground.

At which point another photographer approached me to question my reason for being there. He was rather defensive, pointing out that he was the official still photographer for the film. I quickly assured him that I wasn't there to usurp his position; I was just getting some quick shots of the flunky standing behind the group—and that none of the shots would be for publication. He accepted my explanation, but I felt kind of sorry for him. By all rights it should have been some assistant to an assistant producer who confronted me, but clearly the photographer had to protect his turf himself, on top of the actual work of chronicling the film.

The Corinthians have been challenging Paul from the outset. At some point after their conversion and Paul's departure from Corinth, some of them began returning to some of their old ways and, thus, criticizing the apostle's firm stance. They saw no harm in sitting down to a banquet with their old chums—even if it were held in a pagan temple; and they were starting to question his apostolic authority on such things because, first, he was not permitting them to support him in the manner of a “true” apostle, and, second, his position on eating food was confused (in their eyes) by his admission that he abstained when eating with Jews, but partook when eating with Gentiles (as we will see in vv19-23).

In Chapter Nine—a most remarkable, dramatic, even explosive portion of this letter—we find the apostle Paul in a similar situation as that Hollywood photographer. Since he began this letter to the Corinthians Paul has been hinting at this—especially in Chapter Four.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:1-4.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:9.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:14-16.

In Chapter Nine, however, he delivers a full-voiced defense of his turf—and of his credentials as an apostle. And we are a little embarrassed for the apostle—first that he finds it necessary, and second that it falls to him to defend himself. It shouldn't be necessary for anyone to defend him to the Corinthians, but it certainly shouldn't be necessary for him to do it himself.

v1

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord?

Right off the bat we have a discrepancy between versions—not in translation, but in the order of the first two questions. The KJVs place “Am I not an apostle?” before “Am I not free?” which is the result (as we have discussed before) of working from different manuscripts. For our purposes it is a small thing, and we needn't concern ourselves with it.

This dramatic series of rhetorical questions, delivered as if from a Gatling gun, all expect a positive reply. Each begins with the Greek *ou*, that is “not”—i.e., “is it not so?” The expected reply would be, in order, “Of course I am; of course, I have; of course you are” (Fee).

The two last rhetorical questions in v1 represent Paul's evidence for his authentic apostleship. His first claim of authenticity is that he had “seen Jesus our Lord.” It seems obvious that Paul here refers to that dramatic moment on the Damascus road—and that he considers that visitation to be something more than a mere vision. To Paul “it was a

resurrection appearance of a kind with all the others” (Fee). We get that from what he writes in Chapter Fifteen of this letter.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:3-5.

He adds more appearances of the resurrected Christ, then, in vv7-8, he closes with

then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also.

Paul’s contention is that he received the same, in-person call to apostleship as the rest. He didn’t just dream it, nor was it a waking vision. The resurrected and (in his case) ascended Christ Jesus personally appeared to him for his call. This is Paul’s first piece of evidence to substantiate his apostleship.

Why is this visitation important? Because from Acts 1 we know that this was one of the criterion used by the apostles to replace Judas.

Read Acts 1:21-22.

M. R. Vincent: One who shall bear testimony: not a *spectator* [of].

Are you not my work in the Lord?

His second claim of authenticity is the existence of the Corinth church itself!

David Garland: The indisputable fact that they came into existence as a Christian community through his missionary preaching reveals God’s grace working through his life and confirms his apostolic role.

And Paul elaborates on this in v2.

v2

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.

Paul begins with statement of an unarguable fact; then he follows this with the reason it is a fact.

We cannot say with certainty who he refers to when Paul writes that “others” (*allos* = different) are suggesting he is not a true apostle. Does he mean some within the church, or other individuals that have come to teach the church—e.g., Cephas, Apollos (v1:12)? Or could he be referring to other Christian communities, other churches? Could it be troublemakers from outside the church, as he suggests in the second letter we have from him to the church (2 Corinthians 10-12)?

The evidence seems to be overwhelming, as we have seen, that no matter the instigators (from within or without) there were some in the Corinth church who were questioning Paul’s apostolic bona fides. As far as Paul was concerned, it was inconceivable that anyone in the church could or would doubt his apostleship. Why? Because of them! Because there was a church in Corinth, because they were a part of that body. Because the fruit of the Spirit was evident in that body.

Just as some doubted Jesus, repeatedly demanding miraculous signs from Him to establish His authenticity, there were some in the church who were doubting Paul, demanding some heavenly seal of approval on what he claimed to be his apostleship. But Jesus Himself established the authenticating criterion Paul will use.

Read Matthew 7:15-20.

“You will know them by their fruits.” You will know whether a prophet—or teacher, or apostle, or even another believer—is true or false by the fruit they produce.

for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

seal = *sphragis* (sfrag-ece') = probably strengthened from <G5420> (*phrasso*); a signet (as fencing in or protecting from misappropriation); by implication the stamp impressed (as a mark of privacy, or genuineness), literal or figurative :- seal.

Sidebar: In secular Greek *sphragis* referred to the tool that seals, the stone set in the tool (the medium in antiquity), the engraving on the stone, and the imprint left by the stone and tool. It used to be that the seal of a Notary Public in the United States was more impressive. It literally, physically impressed into the document paper a permanent sign that the accompanying signatures were valid—far more impressive and official in appearance than today's rubber stamp and ink.

A seal can also represent ownership and protection. And perhaps the best example we have for a “seal” in the Christian life is the indwelling Holy Spirit. Paul mentions this in the second letter to the Corinthians, but let's look at the fuller description he offers in his letter to the Ephesians.

Read Ephesians 1:13-14.

The seal, the authenticating stamp of the Holy Spirit in each believer, constitutes a pledge by God that we will receive our inheritance in His eternal family—fellow heirs with Christ (Romans 8:17). He is also God's seal of ownership upon the believer, as well as His protective fence encompassing the Christian's life.

Paul is essentially saying here, *You want to see my stamp of approval? Look in a mirror!* The very existence of the church represented the authenticating seal of his apostleship—and he expands on this, switching metaphors, in his second letter.

Read 2 Corinthians 3:2-3.

The church in Corinth was the “good” fruit, and establishing letter that proved that Christ had personally commissioned Paul and sent him out to speak for Him. And here is both comforting and convicting news for every church: When we are faithful and obedient to His word, we become a letter of Christ's to the world, written by the Holy Spirit. But when a church is not faithful and obedient to His word and teachings, it becomes a poison pen letter that effectively works against His kingdom and will.

Session 82: In the Dock

1 Corinthians 9:3-6

Preface

Before we dig into the text for this session, I'd like to spend a few moments looking at this issue of what Paul, as an apostle, was entitled to but often denied himself. There are some who have said that Paul's criterion for accepting help from one church but not from another was the financial health of the individual church—that is, whether or not the church could afford it. But that theory does not track with the apostle's missionary history, nor does it track with the teachings of Jesus.

Paul did both: he accepted help from some, but rejected help (or did not request it) from others. In at least one instance he at first rejected it, but was ultimately “prevailed” upon and relented. (Turn to Acts 16) Shortly after arriving in the Macedonian town of Philippi, Paul and his compatriots visit a place of prayer alongside a river on the Sabbath.

Read Acts 16:14-15.

prevailed = *parabiasato* = from <G3844> (*para*) and the middle of <G971> (*biazo*); to force contrary to (nature), i.e. compel (by entreaty) :- constrain; to force against. Same word used by the two disciples to persuade Jesus to remain with them for a meal on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:29).

In v12b Paul gives us and the Corinthians a clue as to his purposeful decision to support himself while in Corinth:

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. (emphasis added)

This can be taken to mean (as Fee) that he was emphasizing the “free gift” of salvation in Christ by his example of offering (preaching) the gospel freely—i.e., without pay or even acceptance of gratuity. This seems a valid interpretation—especially to the Corinthians—but we are again left asking the question, Why here, but not elsewhere? This reason would apply equally to the Macedonians; why did he then so gratefully accept their offering—especially considering their plight?

Read 2 Corinthians 8:1-5.

The churches in Macedonia were poor and the Corinthians, as best as we can determine, were well-off. Yet Paul gratefully accepted funds from the former and rejected funds from the latter. So we need some explanation beyond the ones we've heard so far.

I believe we can find an answer—or at least a clue—to this in the extraordinary scene of God's judgment in the fateful story of Ananias and Sapphira, a couple in the early church in Jerusalem. In Acts 4 we read of a pattern of sharing that was established in that Christian community.

Read Acts 4:32-35.

Note that “those who believed were of one heart and soul,” and “not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own,” and “abundant grace was upon them all.” Here is a picture of extravagant, voluntary generosity from the heart. This is followed by an example of such generosity and sharing.

Read Acts 4:36-37.

But when we turn the page to Chapter Five we read a cautionary tale of giving that was not from the heart.

Read Acts 5:1-6.

And God was not finished. The wife received the same terrible judgment.

Read Acts 5:7-11.

Scattered throughout the entirety of Scripture is evidence that the Lord God hates duplicity and insincerity. In Psalm 55 David describes the treacherous, and calls down the Lord's judgment on them.

**He has put forth his hands against those who were at peace with him;
He has violated his covenant.
His speech was smoother than butter,
But his heart was war;
His words were softer than oil,
Yet they were drawn swords.
Cast your burden upon the LORD and He will sustain you;
He will never allow the righteous to be shaken.
But You, O God, will bring them down to the pit of destruction;
Men of bloodshed and deceit will not live out half their days.
But I will trust in You. (Psalm 55:20-23)**

I believe at least a factor in Paul's decision not to accept help from the Corinthians was that he knew that that help would not be sincere—it would not have been from the heart—and thus not God-honoring. He knew them, and from his letters we have a pretty good picture of their thinking and behavior. Even if this was behind Paul's decision, we cannot of course be sure of his motive. Was he protecting the Corinthians from God's strict judgment? Was he keeping them from this sin? Or was it his pique at their attitude? We cannot say with certainty.

Read 1 Corinthians 9:3-7.

v3

My defense to those who examine me is this:

The NIVs and ESV make v3 a summation statement for vv1-2: "This [i.e., what I just said] is my defense to those who sit in judgment on me." But both Garland and Fee convincingly argue that the position of *haute* ("this") at the end of the clause in the Greek demands that v3 refers to what follows, rather than the preceding—as in the NASB and KJVs. Hence instead of a period, a colon, pointing forward. Paul is defending himself against those who are "sit[ting] in judgment" on him (NIVs).

examine, sit in judgment = *anakrino* = from <G303> (*ana*) and <G2919> (*krino*); properly to scrutinize, i.e. (by implication) investigate, interrogate, determine :- ask, question, discern, examine, judge, search; *a legal term for the investigation or inquiry made before a decision was reached in a case* (MacArthur).

vv4-5

Now Paul begins his defense, the purpose of which is to force the Corinthians to recognize that, as an apostle, he has certain rights—and specifically his right to their support.

Do we not have a right to eat and drink?

If Paul had not included "drink" here, we could assume that he was hearkening back to Chapter 8, and that situation about eating in a pagan temple. But by including "drink" he seems to be speaking of his right, as an apostle, to be provisioned by those to whom he ministers—on which he will expand in vv8-11.

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?

A “believing wife,” as all of our versions translate this, means literally, “a sister as a wife”—that is, a sister in the Lord who is also a wife. Here again he brings this up in the context of apostolic right to support.

Sidebar: Rights are funny things. We know coming into this passage that Paul is doing more than demand his rights from unwilling Corinthians. We know going in that, for example, Paul does not have a wife with him—indeed, has no wife at all. So what is his point? Where he is eventually going with this is his “right” not to avail himself of his apostolic rights!

Just as with the issue of food and drink in v4, this is probably an argument for an apostle (especially one on the road) to have his believing wife supported with him. They comprise a team, so she should be supported along with him.

v6

Or do only Barnabas and I not have a right to refrain from working?

Sidebar: Although the original NIV, in removing the double negative in the original—“Or is it only I and Barnabas who must work for a living?”—essentially gets to the same point (but over-stated), it is a poor translation because it is not what Paul said.

Though awkwardly stated, Paul is continuing his defense for his rights as an apostle. At first glance it seems a little odd that Paul would mention Barnabas instead of Silas, since it was the latter who was with him during the second missionary journey when he visited Corinth (Barnabas and Paul parted company just before the second trip over the John Mark issue).

The most probable explanation would be that the Corinthians were familiar with the reputation of Barnabas as someone, like Paul, who worked at a trade while traveling as a missionary for the gospel. “In the first great mission tour, Barnabas and Paul received no help from the church in Antioch, but were left to work their way along at their own charges. It was not till the Philippian Church took hold that Paul had financial aid (Philippians 4:15)” (A. T. Robertson).

The apostle wrote a more detailed account of his working in his second letter to the Thessalonians—off-hours work with which he supported himself, apparently for a different reason than in Corinth (their idleness).

Read 2 Thessalonians 3:7-9.

Paul is saying here that by working to support himself, for reasons of his own choosing, he is not forfeiting his rights as an apostle.

As the paragraph and passage continue, Paul will cite practical examples to supplement his defense arguments.

Session 83: A Share in the Produce

1 Corinthians 9:7-10

Preface

In vv3-6 Paul established his right, as an apostle, to be supported by those to whom he ministered. Note: “Support” does not mean paid a wage, a daily salary, or the right to hand the church a bill for his services, but simply to be fed and perhaps housed while serving in their midst. He now illustrates what he has been saying in vv3-6 with three examples from real life—each of which expects a negative response.

Read 1 Corinthians 9:7.

v7

Who at any time serves as a soldier at his own expense?

At first glance we might think Paul refers here to a soldier’s salary, but in this context the word translated “expense” in all our translations refers not to wages but rations.

opsonion = neuter of a presumed derivative of the same as <G3795> (*opsarion*); rations for a soldier, i.e. (by extension) his stipend or pay :- wages.

A close relative of this word tells the story:

opsarion = neuter of a presumed derivative of the base of <G3702> (*optos*); a relish to other food (as if cooked sauce), i.e. (special) fish (presumably salted and dried as a condiment) :- fish.

Elsewhere in the NT *opsonion* can refer to wages, but here, in this context it refers to basic room and board due a soldier of the state. In fact it was not at all common for Roman soldiers to receive any wage at all; their pay was traditionally the “spoils of war.”

Will Durant (The Story of Civilization): Food in camp was simple: bread or porridge, some vegetables, sour wine, rarely flesh; the Roman army conquered the world on a vegetarian diet; Caesar’s troops complained when corn ran out and they had to eat meat. The soldier received no pay till 405 b.c., and little thereafter; but he was allowed to share, according to his rank, in the booty of the defeated—bullion and currency, lands and men and movable goods.

This first illustration is simply a restating of v4: “Do we not have a right to eat and drink?” And Garland points out that all three of “these analogies refer only to maintenance for basic subsistence, and questions about wages for the work are far from Paul’s mind (Heidland).”

Who plants a vineyard and does not eat the fruit of it?

Read Proverbs 27:18.

In his second letter to Timothy, and probably his last letter before his death, Paul writes to his son in the faith, “The hard-working farmer ought to be the first to receive his share of the crops.” (2 Timothy 2:6)

Or who tends a flock and does not use the milk of the flock?

I am amused by how all of our common versions—except for the original KJV—are too chicken to translate this literally: NKJV, NIV: drink the milk; ESV: getting some of the milk; NASB: use the milk.

YLT: ...or who doth feed a flock, and of the milk of the flock doth not eat?

This may indicate that to the ancients milk was considered a food for nourishment, and not a drink; hence it is to be “eaten.”

M. R. Vincent: Bengel remarks: “The minister of the gospel is beautifully compared with the soldier, vine-dresser, [and] shepherd.” He goes forth to contend with the world, to plant churches, and to exercise pastoral care over them.

Read 1 Corinthians 9:8-10.

v8

I am not speaking these things according to human judgment, am I? Or does not the Law also say these things?

In moving from v7 to v8 the apostle Paul gives us a valuable lesson. He can only go so long in his arguments and counsel—in this case, three brief sentences—before citing Scripture. For Christians in the first century and today, our final authority is God: His written word and His Spirit active in each life. Citing that which is common and natural, as he did in v7, goes only so far; it may be evidence, but it is not at all authority. Only the sovereign God has that.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:13.

v9

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?

Many have taken issue with Paul’s use of Deuteronomy 25:4, claiming that the second part of v9, the question, “God is not concerned about oxen, is He?”, and v10 show a disregard for what God’s word says elsewhere.

Read Luke 12:6.

But the next verse offers us a clue as to how to interpret what Paul is saying in our text.

Read Luke 12:7.

The ultimate audience for the word of God—the ultimate receivers of its truth—is the congregation of those who claim Christ Jesus as Lord. Does this mean that God has no regard at all for animals? No, His word says different. But just as He made man the dominant species on earth, God designated man as the ultimate recipient of His word. We see the same combination that we see in Luke 12 in the source of Paul’s quote from “the Law of Moses.” Turn to Deuteronomy 25. Verse 4 is the verse Paul quotes to the Corinthians: “You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing.” But look at the passage immediately before v4.

Read Deuteronomy 25:1-3.

Now look at what immediately follows.

Read Deuteronomy 25:5-6.

This illustrates that the ultimate audience for this is people. All these lessons are for us. Oxen cannot read Scripture. There is no version of God’s word in “oxen”.

v10

Or is He speaking altogether for our sake? Yes, for our sake it was written...

In a sense, Paul is doing with the OT what we do very often with the OT and NT—and primarily his letters. For example, is it really important to our walk with Christ for us to know and understand the culture of first-century Corinth? Not really; it may be interesting for some of us, but two thousand years later our culture and perspective—even with its similarities—is mostly different from theirs. But we take that information and translate it into our modern

culture: instead of banqueting in a pagan temple, perhaps dining with Muslims in a mosque, or supping with members of the Freedom from Religion crowd.

Paul does not suggest that Yahweh is an animal hater simply because he points out that the ultimate audience for such truth is the redeemed in Christ.

because the plowman ought to plow in hope, and the thresher to thresh in hope of sharing the crops.

Thus not just the oxen that pull the plow or thresh out the grain, but the human beings who have a hand in tending and processing the crop are due their share. In the Greek the word “hope” is emphasized, and carries the same meaning as when it is applied to the hope of the believer for his eternal salvation and glory.

hope = *elpis* = from a primary *elpo* (to anticipate, usually with pleasure); expectation (abstract or concrete) or confidence :- faith, hope.

This expectation was played out dramatically in the story of David and his men in their work performed for Nabal’s shepherds, which we find in 1 Samuel 25. David had earlier sent a small company of men to protect the flocks of Nabal in Carmel. Later one of Nabal’s men informs his wife Abigail of all David’s men did for them.

But one of the young men told Abigail, Nabal's wife, saying, ... “The men were very good to us, and we were not insulted, nor did we miss anything as long as we went about with them, while we were in the fields. They were a wall to us both by night and by day, all the time we were with them tending the sheep. (1 Samuel 25:14-16)

In keeping with the Law and middle-eastern custom, during the time of shearing—which would have been a festive occasion—David sends a few men to politely and graciously request “Please give whatever you find at hand to your servants and to your son David” (1 Samuel 25:8b).

We are familiar with the story. The ungrateful Nabal not only refuses them, he does not even offer the men the basics of bread and water for their journey. And only through the wise intervention of his wife Abigail is Nabal spared massacre by David and his full company.

David and his men had a “hope”—a confident expectation—of a share in the bounty from the flock they had protected. In v10 Paul restates this for the benefit of the Corinthians: those who plow the field, those who have a hand in the sowing, nurturing, and harvesting of the crop have, and by all rights should have, a confident hope that they will have a share of the crop.

In v11 Paul will move from the general to the specific to declare that, as an apostle of Christ, “If we sowed spiritual things in you, is it too much if we reap material things from you?” This is where we will begin in our next session.

Session 84: A Square Deal

1 Corinthians 9:11-12

Preface

There are times when it seems a fairly straightforward process to get inside the apostle Paul's mind, to not just understand what he is saying, but why, and how he is thinking. I do not find this passage—indeed, most of Chapter Nine—to be one of those times.

- He uses up an extraordinary amount of ink making a case from which he is then going to divorce himself;
- Even within this he employs points that do not and will not apply to him: e.g., “a right to take along a believing wife”;
- Here and there he chooses words that, at least at first glance, seem inappropriate (or at least curious), such as the word “boast” in v15;
- One has the impression that the apostle's emotions may be getting the better of him, such as the abrupt break in the syntax of v15.

At such times perhaps the best plan of attack is to simply accept what Paul says, to find the “why” only from within the text itself, rather than trying to read between the lines. Come to think of it, that sounds like a profitable approach for just about any passage of Scripture.

Read 1 Corinthians 9:11-14.

v11

If we sowed spiritual things in you, is it too much if we reap material things from you?

Staying with his agricultural metaphors, Paul raises the issue of reciprocity specifically with the Corinthians. While ministering in Corinth, Paul will write a letter to the church in Rome. In our Chapter Fifteen of this letter he will speak of appropriate reciprocity, and gratitude, that should be an essential part of life in Christ.

Read Romans 15:26-27.

The pronouns in v27 leave it rather vague who is doing what for whom. The NIV (as it often does) inserts one word twice that helps clarify.

NIV 2011: They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings.

So out of Jerusalem (“the Jews”), location of the first church, came missionaries to spread the gospel (“spiritual blessings”). In gratitude these converts, poor as they were, generously shared over and above what they could of their “material blessings” with “the poor among the saints in Jerusalem.” The word translated “material” in most of our versions—both here and in 1 Corinthians—is the Greek adjective *sarkikos* (from *sarx*) meaning fleshly, carnal. But here it doesn't mean sinful, just “of this world.”

Sidebar: Let us not miss the fact that Paul speaks of an instance in which the poor were giving to the poor. As Jesus Himself pointed out (Luke 21:1-4), the poor are quite often more generous in their giving, relatively, than the rich.

Here in v11 Paul writes to the Corinthians what he wrote to the Romans while in Corinth: We planted in you things of the Spirit; is it too much to ask that you respond with things of this world?

v12a

If others share the right over you, do we not more?

Paul continues this same line in the first sentence of v12. Scholars have debated just who Paul refers to with “others.” He is probably not speaking of interlopers, such as the charismatic

speakers and philosophers of the city (1 Corinthians 1:19, 2:5), those not due this right. We can't say for sure who all ministered to the church in Corinth, but probably Paul is referring to Apollos and Peter (1 Corinthians 1:12).

Paul's point is not that they were not due this right, but that they came later, after Paul had already "sown" the gospel in them.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:14-15.

Others may have come in to help teach the young church, but Paul, as it were, gave birth to the church as their spiritual father. As such he is due this right over them all the "more."

v12b

Nevertheless, we did not use this right,

Then he once again touches lightly upon the point of this entire chapter—the point he will render with full force beginning in v15. He has been systematically making the case for these "rights" for the sole purpose of making his case for not using them.

but we endure all things so that we will cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ.

One has to think that saying these words, "we endure all things," to his amanuensis, Paul's mind would roll back to all he had endured up till then for the sake of the gospel: plots to kill him, run out of town, jailed, stoned almost to death, beaten with rods, shipwrecked. Beyond that, however, he is specifically referencing the work he had to perform to support himself while on his journeys.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:6-9.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:11-13.

Why was he doing this? In Thessalonica it was to teach some in the church to stop being lazy and get back to work; in Corinth it was "so that we will cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ." But what does he mean by this?

Let's first consider the word "endure" (NIV, "put up with"). Gordon Fee points out that "this is not Paul's ordinary word for 'endure'; here it seems not to mean 'endure sufferings,' but to put up with the kinds of hardships that working with one's own hands and evangelizing at the same time would bring on." So Paul here refers to the exhausting rigors of what we would call today the "bi-vocational" pastor or missionary.

Now let's consider what he means by "so that we will cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ." He does not elucidate here, but he does in the final paragraph of the chapter.

Read 1 Corinthians 9:18.

Paul's intention was to drive home the free nature of the gospel by making it clear to the Corinthians that he was not in any way "selling" it to them—even to rejecting their "freewill" offerings and other forms of support. God offers salvation in Christ for free—one does not have to prove oneself worthy of it, or to work for it—so Paul illustrates this by working himself, instead of permitting the Corinthian church to support him while he is ministering to them.

We are then left with the question: Why did Paul think this was necessary? Were there others who were selling the gospel? The answer to this is yes. He mentions this in his second (extant) letter to the church.

Read 2 Corinthians 2:15-17.

And once again we have an instance of how the English translation of a word—here, “peddling”—while not inaccurate, just does not give us the full flavor of the original Greek.

peddling^{nasb}, **corrupt**^{kiv} = *kapeleuo* = from *kapelos* (a huckster); to retail, i.e. (by implication) to adulterate (figurative) :- corrupt. “The term included dealers in victuals and all sorts of wares, but was especially applied to retailers of wine, with whom adulteration and short measure were matters of course. Galen speaks of wine-dealers playing tricks with their wines; mixing the new, harsh wines, so as to make them pass for old” (M. R. Vincent). “Hence, the word comes to denote to adulterate; to corrupt, etc. It is here applied to those who adulterated or corrupted the pure word of God in any way, and for any purpose. It probably has particular reference to those who did it either by Judaizing opinions, or by the mixtures of a false and deceitful philosophy. The latter mode would be likely to prevail among the subtle and philosophizing Greeks. It is in such ways that the gospel has been usually corrupted” (Albert Barnes).

We all remember from Sunday School the story of Paul and Silas thrown in the Philippian jail during the second missionary journey. But we may not remember that the reason they were thrown in jail was that they had put a stop to what had been a profitable enterprise selling false religion.

Read Acts 16:16-19.

Paul did not want to give the Corinthians the slightest reason to think he might be one of these hucksters, these corrupters of the gospel.

Not only is there is nothing new under the sun, there are also some things that will never end this side of glory. If this earth reaches the year 2525 there will still be those trying to sell Christ’s gospel for profit. Today we have them, for the most part, on television screens. They are slick marketers, hucksters, selling new wine for old: they have twisted and corrupted Christ’s good news, replacing its profound depth with vaporous bromides, false promises denuded of their true cost—all the while making themselves rich.

Recognizing the cynicism of some in the Corinth church, and purposely setting himself apart from the charismatic charlatans that had already left their mark on the church, Paul intentionally set aside his rights as an apostle to make it clear to the Corinthians that Christ’s gospel is not a commodity that can be bought and sold, but is free to all who believe.

Session 85: For Love

1 Corinthians 9:13-14

Preface

It is possible that some of us have forgotten that the apostle Paul is still addressing the topic he began at the beginning of Chapter Eight: “Now concerning things sacrificed to idols...”, followed immediately, in the second sentence, by a comparison of “knowledge,” which “makes arrogant,” to “love,” which “edifies.”

Some may think that by our current passage near the end of Chapter Nine Paul has strayed off-topic; perhaps some of the Corinthians, reading this letter (in their knowledgeable arrogance), imagined the same thing. What does all this about muzzling the ox, a plowman’s and thresher’s hope in sharing the crop, the rights of apostles to be supported—what does all this have to do with eating food sacrificed to idols? But Paul has not lost his train of thought; he is still headed in the same direction. He is still laying the groundwork for his dramatic conclusion at the end of Chapter Ten and the first verse of Chapter Eleven.

All of this is centered on how he began this treatise: the excellency, the supremacy of Christian love. Follow with me the tapestry he is weaving:

- 8:13 Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble. (a sacrificial concern for others)
- 9:12 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. (enduring all things for the benefit of others)
- 10:31-33 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. (glorifying God by not seeking one’s own advantage, but the salvation of many)
- 11:1 Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.. (imitating Christ in all of this)

If we had to summarize all this in one word, that word would have to be “love”—which is how he began this at the opening of Chapter Eight. So now let us return to this artfully crafted tapestry, following the apostle’s line of thought.

Read 1 Corinthians 9:11-14.

v13

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?

Thus far the arguments and evidence put forth by Paul for the right to support have been temporal analogies: soldier, vinedresser, shepherd, plowman, thresher, sower, reaper—even the one from Scripture, the threshing ox. Now in v13 he offers an analogy closer to home.

There is no point in arguing whether this illustration refers to pagan or Jewish cultic rites, for the practice was the same in both: those serving in the temple ate from the temple offerings. There are also two interpretations of the verse’s two parts.

- The first interpretation concludes that the second part simply “repeats the first half in a more definite form” (R-P).
- The second interpretation makes the second half a different category of temple workers, which is the interpretation that makes more sense to me.

It was common practice, both in pagan cultic rites and in Israel, that those who served in the temple (“performed sacred services”) would be sustained by the food offerings brought by the penitents. In Israel these were subdivided: the common Levites—anyone from the tribe of Levi, third son of Jacob (Israel)—performed the more menial and common work around the temple, in service to the priests—Levites as well, but who could trace their lineage back directly to Aaron—who alone could serve at the altars. None of the Levites were granted land

in Canaan (“no inheritance”); their “portion” would be from the tithes and offerings from the temple. And just as their duties were apportioned differently, so too was their sustenance. The Levites were supported by the tithes and offerings brought to the temple by the sons of Israel.

Read Numbers 18:29-31.

Note that the Levites received the tithes of Israel, and from this they tithed to Aaron the priest.

Read Numbers 18:28.

It was the priestly class, however, that got the best of the food.

Read Numbers 18:8-14.

Then Paul applies this same rule from the Levites and priests to those who “proclaim the gospel.”

(v13b repeated) Do you not know that...those who attend regularly to the altar have their share from the altar?

Before we leave v13 I want to point out how the apostle, in its last thought, is setting up something he will say later. What he is setting up is an “if this, then that” comparison—or, “if this is true, then the reverse is also true.” In the latter part of Chapter Ten, when Paul is approaching the climax of this treatise on eating food sacrificed to idols, he will reference what he says here.

In v13 he establishes that those who “attend regularly” (or sit constantly beside) the altar—that is, the ministrants in the temple, and specifically the priests—have their share from the altar. That is, the ones associated with the altar, eat from the altar. Now look at v18 in Chapter Ten, where he turns this around: “if this is true, then the reverse is also true.”

Read 1 Corinthians 10:16-18.

Here the logic of Chapter Nine is reversed; the ones who eat from the altar are associated with the altar. This is a sobering thought that we will develop further when we get to Chapter Ten.

v14

So also the Lord directed those who proclaim the gospel to get their living from the gospel.

Since he cites something Jesus said, we should go look at what Jesus said. Paul probably refers to part of the Lord’s instructions as he was sending out the disciples in Luke 10.

Read Luke 10:5-7.

In the gospel context, what Jesus says is not a “command,” but, as Fee points out, a proverb. And even though most of our versions (other than the NASB) translate the word in 1 Corinthians 9:14 “commanded,” it doesn’t have to be.

commanded, direct(ed)^{yft, nasb} = *diatasso* = from <G1223> (*dia*) and <G5021> (*tasso*); to arrange thoroughly, i.e. (special) institute, prescribe, etc. ∴ appoint, command, give, (set in) order, ordain. I interpret this word to mean, in this or a similar context, less a strict “you will do it this way (command),” than “I have determined that this is the best and most orderly way to conduct oneself.”

This is an important point because if the word means a literal, strict command from the Lord Jesus, then the apostle Paul is failing to obey his Lord by not accepting support from the Corinth church.

Or it could be, as Fee points out,

As “command” the word of Jesus referred to here does not have to do with *his* (Paul’s) action but *theirs* [the Corinthians]. The command is not given *to* the missionaries, but *for* their benefit.

MacArthur concurs:

The Lord commands his people to offer support to those who minister to them, but He does not command those who minister to accept the support. Paul did not. He had the right, as much as any and more than most. *But for the gospel’s sake, for the brethren’s sake and for love’s sake*, he gladly limited his liberty. He willingly waived his right. (emphasis added)

We should not miss, or misinterpret, the overarching point of this paragraph—indeed the whole chapter thus far. Paul has used up a lot of ink in this chapter making the case for someone in his position to receive either a salary or sustenance as support. Those reading this without benefit of the eyes and ears of the Holy Spirit would discover here authority, even license, to demand recompense for their “ministry.”

But that is not what is going on here. Again, go back to where he began at the top of Chapter Eight: “Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies.” Later, in Chapter Thirteen, he will describe this kind of agape love.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-7.

Here is something the Corinthians—and we—desperately need to hear and apprehend. The highest and best form of love is not gush and mush, or sloppy sentimentalism—nor is it blind, uncritical “tolerance” (v6, “does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth”). It is not taking, but giving. It is not seeking what is best and most convenient for oneself, but that which is best for others. It is not demanding one’s rights, but sacrificially setting aside one’s rights for the benefit of others.

This is what the apostle is preaching in Chapter Nine—indeed, throughout much of this entire letter. Here is a listing of all my rights as an apostle of Jesus Christ and the gospel, he is saying, and here is why I am relinquishing them: because I love Jesus Christ more than my rights; I love His gospel more than my own comfort; and I love you, Corinthians, more than myself.

Here, in a nutshell, is the Christian life personified.

Session 86: Better for Me Rather to Die...

1 Corinthians 9:15

Preface

For the last fourteen verses Paul has been systematically making the case for his rights as an apostle. In v11, drawing the human application from the OT illustration of the ox not being muzzled while threshing (v9), he states, “If we sowed spiritual things in you, is it too much if we reap material things from you?” Others have used this right; do we not have this right all the more? But immediately, in the middle of v12, Paul, speaking of this one apostolic right, declares flatly, “We did not use this right.” That is, none of those on his “team” (plural “we”) availed themselves of this (one) right.

Now at the beginning of v15, Paul switches to first person singular (an emphatic “I”; now not speaking for all his associates or any others) and remains in that voice to the end of the chapter. He also switches to the plural “these things”—that is, he has used none of all his rights as an apostle.

Read 1 Corinthians 9:15-18.

Let me make two points before we dig into this next paragraph. First, a few commentators see a problem with Paul’s statement, “I have used none of these things,” or “I have not used any of these rights,” citing what he writes in Philippians 4 to make the claim that Paul is being less than honest to the Corinthians.

Read Philippians 4:14-18.

Note: “I have received *pas...*” means “everything,” or “all things”—not “full payment,” as in NIVs and ESV, which makes it sound like a contractual obligation, rather than a gift.

Gordon Fee draws the distinction between occasional gifts (which the Philippians sent to Paul) and “patronage.” Patronage, which the Corinthians were probably desiring with Paul, meant that the apostle would have been obligated to the church. Throughout history certain artists or musicians sought patrons to support them, to keep them sheltered and fed in exchange for painting or composing according to the patron’s wishes. In the book of Judges is recorded an instance in which a Bethlehem Levite became a personal, in-house priest for a man named Micah during the time when “...there was no king in Israel; everyone did whatever seemed right to him.”

“Where do you come from?” Micah asked him.

He answered him, “I am a Levite from Bethlehem in Judah, and I’m going to stay wherever I can find a place.”

Micah replied, “Stay with me and be my father and priest, and I will give you four ounces of silver a year, along with your clothing and provisions.” So the Levite went in and agreed to stay with the man, and the young man became like one of his sons.

Micah consecrated the Levite, and the young man became his priest and lived in Micah’s house.

Then Micah said, “Now I know that the Lord will be good to me, because a Levite has become my priest.” (Judges 17:9-13 *Christian Standard Bible*)

Now, does anyone imagine that that priest said or did anything other than what Micah wanted? In our church we have benefit of a body at large and elders (the “patrons” paying the salaries of the pastoral staff) that have commissioned the pastors to declare from the pulpit the whole truth of Scripture, whether it hurts or not. But this is not necessarily the norm; Christendom is filled with churches that demand much less from a pastor. If the pastor takes issue with the situation, there is only one recourse for him: leave. If he stays, he is beholden to serve his patrons in the manner they deem appropriate—which may very well be an abridged gospel.

The apostle Paul would not permit this—with any church. He was called to preach the full, unabridged gospel, and this he could not do if he were the paid employee of a patron church. In this he had “used none of these things.” We have evidence from the two Thessalonian letters, First Corinthians, and Acts that his day-to-day material support came from his own hands. This does not mean that he never received, nor did he fail to appreciate, the occasional gift.

The second point I want to make is, because the following arguments can get a little convoluted—Fee says, “One has the feeling that the argument got away from him a bit”—we need to be reminded that this passage, to the end of the chapter, paints a vivid and dramatic picture of Paul’s “singular passion,” for the gospel, and his unwavering commitment to deliver it undiluted—and free of any charge. His emphasis from here to the end of the chapter is defined by v23: “I do all things for the sake of the gospel.”

v15

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;

We have already well-irrigated the verse’s first sentence, so we needn’t dwell on it. Paul quickly cautions that the church should not assume from all the previous arguments that they have been voiced to substantiate his claim on the rights now. In this and the next two verses he underscores this with five clauses, each beginning with “for” (which invariably means “explanation”—as if Paul is saying, “Here are 5 explanations about what I just said”) :

- 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.

for it would be better for me to die than have any man make my boast an empty one.

In this first clause we have something interesting going on that is not visible in all our English translations. There is strong emotion behind this statement; literally in the Greek it is “For it is good for me rather to die than—” and then he abruptly stops his dictation. Instead of calming himself before completing the sentence, he explodes with, “No one will make my boast an empty one!”

Sidebar: We have an English word for this break in Paul’s thoughts and words that is a direct transliteration from the Greek: *aposiopesis*, which means “a sudden breaking off of a thought in the middle of a sentence, as if one were unable or unwilling to continue” (Webster’s).

The editors and translators, lacking knowledge of Paul’s thoughts and intentions for the completion of the first part, have simply joined it grammatically to the second part. It is possible that this how he meant to finish the first part, but it seems unlikely considering the break itself, and the vehemence with which the second part is delivered.

If we were to speculate on an ending for the first part (and it could only be speculation), considering the context of this chapter, as well as the immediate paragraph, we might finish it with (as does David Garland), “It is better for me rather to die than to live off the gospel.” For him to “sell” the good news of Christ would indeed nullify (make empty) “his prophetic calling and his reason for being.”

What we see revealed in the Greek of this verse is the humanity of our church fathers. It should comfort us to know that the disciples, the apostles, the missionaries that went out into the Jewish and Gentile world in the name of Christ were flesh and blood as ourselves, capable of great emotion in the delivering of the gospel message.

...than have any man make my boast an empty one.

It makes us a little uncomfortable to hear the apostle say something like this. We naturally think of “boasting” or “glorying” as a negative behavior, something one should not do—bad form, as it were. And we gain little consolation from the Greek.

The word, *kauchema* (kow'-khay-mah), means pretty much what we might think. Paul uses the word quite often, and more often than not in the negative, as he uses it in Chapter Five, when commenting on the Corinthians' acceptance of—and boasting about—a man sleeping with his father's wife.

Read 1 Corinthians 5:6-7.

Yet here it is proposed as a good thing. The prophet Jeremiah (briefly quoted by Paul in Chapter One) gives us the word of the Lord on this business of boasting.

Read Jeremiah 9:23-24.

Gordon Fee: When Paul uses it positively, his “boast” (or “glory”) is ordinarily in things that stand in contradiction to human “boasting/glorying” (Christ crucified, weaknesses, sufferings).

Thus we might say that what makes Paul's boasting acceptable is the ultimate object, or recipient of his boasting. In v1:31 he echoes the passage in Jeremiah: “Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord,” and in v3:21, in reference to the divisions in the church over their various teachers (Paul, Apollos, Cephas), he commands, “So then let no one boast in men.” He is not saying here in v15, Look at me! Aren't I something special for refusing your support? Rather he is saying, as will come out in the following verses, Look at what the Lord is accomplishing through even me, in my weakness. I will then boast in the privilege of serving Him.

John MacArthur: Because it is frequently done in pride, boasting is usually a sin; but it need not be proud and sinful. Paul's boast was not intended to convey arrogance but joy. He was so glad for that spiritual privilege and commitment in which he rejoiced that he would rather die than contradict it. He had his priorities right, receiving his joy from exercising his privilege to restrict his freedoms rather than from using them.

If Paul's boast was to be made empty, or nullified, he may as well be dead, because everything he did, everything he was, was for the gospel of Christ: its furtherance, its effectiveness in saving those to whom he brought it. It was to this he was called—by Christ Jesus Himself; were that to end, what would be the point of living?

Session 87: Portrait of a Slave

1 Corinthians 9:16-18

Preface

It is customary to study the details of a Scripture passage, then follow that with application. Today I would like to reverse that and begin with the application.

Read 1 Corinthians 9:16-18.

If you will permit me, I would like to claim the privilege of the teacher to reveal a personal application. Every follower of Christ is given by Him a gift, a skill—and accompanying marching orders. That is, every believer is given an ability, and then guidance—sometimes the “guidance” is administered with a 2x4—on how to use that ability for the kingdom of Christ. As Paul will delineate in Chapter Twelve, there are many different gifts: all are from God, all are necessary. One person’s gift is not necessarily superior to another’s; all are needed in the body of Christ.

I take this opportunity, if you will indulge me, because in the passage before us I discover myself. Verses 16-18 comprise, in a sense, my biography in the Lord—not that I have the same gift as the apostle Paul, but that his calling from the Lord for the employment of that gift is the same as mine, and perhaps the same as yours (mine is in no way unique).

And to be clear: I did not read this and say to myself, “That’s a good idea. I think I’ll make this the pattern of my life.” No, rather after the Lord implemented it in my life, I discovered the same pattern, the same calling described here in His word in the life of Paul. Several biographical phrases leap out at me from this passage; my guess—and my hope—is that some of you will discover your own biography (or at least parts of it) here as well.

“I am under compulsion” (v16)

That which I do in the name of the Lord I must do. I have no choice. How do I know this?

“woe is me if I do not” (v16)

We discover our “compulsion” by a simple process: When we do not do it—when we purposely stop doing it—we are miserable. We feel it in our bones. We feel it in our spirit and heart. God through His Holy Spirit nags at us until we are back at it, and only then is our misery relieved.

“a stewardship entrusted to me” (v17)

Here is the key realization—and requisite motivation: Whatever the gift, God has selected you, He has selected me, specifically for the task. He has called each of us with a special gift and a special situation, and said, “Here. I entrust this to you.” This is our call, which will become, eventually, our “job description.”

“What then is my reward?” (v18)

Here is where we lose the world; this is the point at which the denizens of this earth just shake their heads in disbelief.

“That...I may offer the gospel without charge” (v18)

This is also where there is a demarcation within the body of Christ. Some are called (as Paul pointed out in vv7-11) to gain their living by their gifts. They put a roof over their heads, they pay their bills, they feed their family by means of the employment of their God-given gifts and calling (marching orders). So long as this is in obedience to the Lord’s call, it is an honorable and appropriate profession.

Others, however, are called to serve “without charge”—and I dare say, in varying degrees this applies to the majority of believers. In my own case I can weave my own biography into this passage:

For if I write and teach, I have nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion; for woe is me if I do not write and teach. 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 serve the Lord with the gifts He has entrusted to me, I may offer these gifts without charge... (substituted words)

Of course very often this realization—the understanding and apprehension of gifts and call—does not happen overnight. We may take a number of wrong turns before the Spirit gets us going in the right direction. This was the pattern, years ago, in my own situation. Whenever I sought recompense for employing my gifts, not only did it not work very well, I was always left feeling a bit queasy about the process, as if there was something unseemly about it. By contrast, whenever I gave away the product of my gifts, I felt much better about it and the Lord blessed the effort. Eventually the Spirit wielded His trusty 2x4 enough times to get it through my thick skull: Like Paul, I was to offer the products of my God-ordained gifts without charge. Period. Full stop.

Read 1 Corinthians 9:15-18.

v16

For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion;

The apostle cannot boast about anything in himself regarding his position because it is not based on personal choice. He is simply obeying the marching orders he received, personally, from Christ.

compulsion = *ananke* = from <G303> (*ana*) and the base of <G43> (*agkale*); constraint (literal or figurative); by implication distress :- distress, must needs, (of) necessity (-sary), needeth, needful; *Garland*: "a pressing necessity"; *ESV*: "necessity is laid upon me."

The prophet Jeremiah offers us a glimpse into the inner workings of such a God-driven compulsion.

Read Jeremiah 20:8-9.

It is important that we keep this in mind: Paul had no choice, no vote in the matter. And not only this, he will hint at in the next verse, and state explicitly elsewhere (Romans 6:15-22), that he and all believers are literal slaves (or bond servants) to God. Slaves do not choose to do something; they are told to do something.

for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel.

As in v15, there is a greater depth and emotion beneath the surface of this clause. "Woe is me" does not mean that he would experience some form of inner distress, or feel badly; there is an eschatological context for this. His life, his destiny is now divinely appointed; were he now to not preach the gospel, he would stand under divine judgment.

Note: Do you see how this helps clarify his use of the word "boast"? There is absolutely nothing about which he can personally boast—Aren't I a great guy for doing all this for free!—since he is simply a slave obeying the orders of his Master. At the same time, however, this is not a picture of a hang-dog slave bemoaning his lot in life, preaching only because he is being forced to. To the contrary, his "woe" is not from preaching, but only comes into play if he doesn't. The "compulsion" Paul speaks of is not arm-twisting obedience suffered under the rod; this compulsion is an inner fire, an unrelenting personal—yet divinely ordained—drive that he is helpless to resist—and does not want to.

v17

For if I do this voluntarily, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have a stewardship entrusted to me.

Taken at face value, I find most of the translations of this verse less than satisfying:

NASB: voluntarily / against my will

NKJV: willingly / against my will

NIVs: voluntarily / not voluntarily

ESV: of my own will / not of my own will

It is not that the translations are inaccurate, but that the English words chosen leave an erroneous impression. Take the NKJV, for example: using “willingly” sounds like “OK, I’ll agree to do this,” and using “against my will” sounds like you’re doing it only because your arm is being twisted, or there is a gun to your head—neither of which represent what Paul is saying here. Probably the NIVs and ESV get the closest to expressing what Paul means, with the ESV the better of the two.

In the two parts of this verse the apostle is contrasting the free person to the slave, with himself being the slave. In the first part the person of free will (“of my own will”) decides to do something, or decides to take a job, and is thus due a wage. The word translated “reward” (*misthos*) means pay for service, wages. One does the work, one is due pay for that work from those for whom the work is done.

In the second part the slave, who works “not of [his] own will,” but of someone else’s (i.e., his master), does not make the decision himself, but does what he is told, and is not due a wage from those for whom the work is done. If the slave is to be paid at all, it will come from his master. The word translated “stewardship” refers to a slave who has been entrusted with a managerial responsibility, in a house or estate, such as Joseph was for Potiphar.

Paul’s point is that as an apostle and slave, he has been given the responsibility as a steward to bring gain to his Master—not to himself. Here is the picture:

R. Horsley: The royal officer or estate steward who has a commission does not get wages from the people he manages, or from the fields and laborers he supervises, but from the ruler or master he serves.

David Garland: Paul cannot receive a “reward” from the Corinthians, who are the field in which he plants. It can come only from the owner of the field, who commissioned him to plant.

And in none of this is Paul “under the gun,” so to speak. None of this implies an unwillingness on his part.

v18

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.

Here’s where we lose the denizens of this world. We expect Paul to reference his future rewards in heaven, but he does not even do that. No, his reward—his wage, his salary—is the privilege of offering the gospel without charge—the free gospel offered for free! The reason? So that he will not misuse what is rightfully his in the gospel.

Conclusion

Let me close by illustrating this for today’s culture—just one example of how it can be done. How might this translate into our present culture? We live in a connected and interconnected society; our “relationships” would be diagrammed like an intricate, dense spider web: one connection leading to several, and each of those connected to a multitude of more connections. An integral part of these myriad connections are dependencies. One modern example of this would be Facebook.

Facebook is a perfect example of today’s interconnectivity, but it relies upon one fragile dependency: Facebook itself. If you have established a presence on Facebook—something more than just a personal “here’s what I am up to” site for friends and family—you are beholden to the powers that be at Facebook—especially if you are a conservative Christian. At

a whim, and in the blink of an eye, they can shut you down and turn you off. Everything you have invested in establishing that presence can be turned off like flipping off a light.

This is what Paul was determined to avoid with the Corinthians. He was not ultimately serving them, but the Lord God, and the gospel of Christ. He could not risk being beholden to any one church, but must remain free to serve all—as well as free to do it for free.

Thinking in terms of “ministry,” what is the online equivalent to the sort of independence Paul needed? Instead of using Facebook you have an independent web site where there are no anonymous pinheads ready to shut you down because they disagree with your doctrine or theology. At my web site there are

- no ads;
- no begging for money;
- no encouraging the visitor to contribute to the site’s upkeep;
- no cross-links to other sites;
- no, you scratch our back, and we’ll scratch yours.

My web site is simply a repository for my work, where everyone and anyone can obtain whatever they like free of charge.

This is how the apostle Paul worked: he was free to do it for free. And his reward? The privilege—and joy—of giving it all away in service to his Master.

Session 88: In Imitation of Christ

1 Corinthians 9:19

Preface

Two weeks ago we looked at vv16-18 of Chapter Nine, in which the apostle Paul passionately described his compulsion, his calling to preach the gospel without charge. Now, in the next paragraph and to the end of this chapter, he describes how he goes about this. In the first part of Chapter Nine he makes the case for his right to be who he is and do what he does; in the second part, beginning with v19, Paul gives specifics on how he does this. In other words, just what does it mean to be, as he says in v19, “a slave to all”?

Read 1 Corinthians 9:19-23.

v19

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more.

Let us first examine and dissect this verse in our typical fashion, but then I want to consider it from a second perspective. In v19 Paul states explicitly that which he implied in v17.

Read 1 Corinthians 9:17.

That verse is fairly opaque, and a little hard to understand without digging beneath the surface—which we did in our previous session. But v19 by itself also does a pretty good job of explaining it.

This verse is part of the skeleton holding together the extended passage that begins with v9:1 and concludes with v11:1. This passage is nestled within his treatise on eating idol food—Paul is still on-topic—but also represents a strong defense of his apostleship. I say “skeleton” because of his recurring notion of [I am] “free,” “[but I have made myself] not free.”

This is his abrupt opening to the passage in v1: “Am I not free?” Then we have this remark in v19: “For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more.” Now skip to the end of this treatise, to 10:31-33.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:31-33.

We will be returning here in a few moments, but now back to v9:19.

For though I am free from all men,

The context of this paragraph makes it clear that he is talking about people, so while the Greek says only “free from all,” the editors can rightly insert “men.” Paul is saying—as we established in our study of the previous paragraph—he is free and belongs to no one; he can take the free gospel to anyone and everyone, free of charge.

free = *eleutheros* = probably from the alternative of <G2064> (*erchomai*); unrestrained (to go at pleasure), i.e. (as a citizen) not a slave (whether freeborn or manumitted), or (genitive) exempt (from obligation or liability) :- free (man, woman), at liberty.

I have made myself a slave to all,

Notice first the verb tense; throughout this paragraph (at least through v22) Paul speaks in the past tense: this is what I have done. All our common translations retain this pattern in v19 except the original NIV, which, oddly, puts it in the present tense with “I make myself.” Meanwhile, the NKJV softens “slave” to “servant.”

Sidebar: Greek grammar aside, I believe that context and modern interpretation of the two words “servant” and “slave,” demand the word “slave.” We enjoy watching the British series *Downton Abbey*. In that program there are menials that labor below

stairs. Yet they are not slaves, but servants, because they are paid a wage (v17: “reward”) Paul has just exhaustively made the case for his working without a wage—if he has any reward at all, it is his right to work without being paid! Who is it that works without receiving a wage? A slave.

so that I may win more.

Paul’s determination to obey his Lord permits him to declare, “I have made myself a slave to all.” Yet we know that, at root, it is the Lord Jesus who has declared that Paul will be a slave, in bondage to Him in order to reach “all”—and, by God’s grace, “win more.”

win = *kerdaino* = from <G2771> (*kerdos*); to gain (literal or figurative) :- (get) gain, win; **make profit or gain advantage**.

Paul is probably making a play on words here: his profit or pay is in souls, not money (again, the “profit” goes to his Master, not himself). But the profit also goes to those who have been “won.”

Read 1 Corinthians 10:33.

A Deeper Revelation

The preceding tells us what Paul is saying in this verse; it reveals his intense level of obedience and devotion to the Lord. What I would like to address now is how much this verse reveals his resemblance to his Lord—which adds a certain veracity to some of his statements, such as the one that concludes this multi-chapter treatise.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:1.

I am sure I am not the only one who has been made slightly uncomfortable by these and similar words by the apostle. On the surface it is very easy to hear a level of arrogance, even pride, in such words, and he has said it before:

Read 1 Corinthians 4:15-16.

It is common for natural man to be influenced by others. The entire fashion industry, for one example, is dependent on that human trait. In the early twentieth century the popular silent film actress, Colleen Moore, bobbed her hair and suddenly every other woman was doing the same. We see models wearing certain clothes in TV ads, so we go out and by the same look—whether or not we have the figure to pull it off. Or on a more positive side, we observe laudable qualities in people we respect, and make an effort to write those qualities into our own life. So even if we do not literally shape our own life after someone else, we are nonetheless influenced by them—which is a form of imitation. In v11:1 Paul says, “Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.” (emphasis added)

In v19 and the entire paragraph, Paul states that he has “made myself a slave to all,” that “I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some.” If Paul is imitating Christ, does this describe Christ Jesus? For a start, Matthew tells us that even the Pharisees considered Jesus to be impartial, egalitarian.

Read Matthew 22:16.

Jesus seemed to pay little heed to the societal rules and norms for his race. We all remember that He accepted invitations to dine with both a Pharisee (Luke 7:36) and a tax collector, the latter becoming one of his disciples (Matthew); with another rich tax collector Jesus invited himself to stay at his house (Zaccheus); against all cultural norms, He sat down and carried on a conversation, alone, with not just a woman, but a hated Samaritan woman (John 4:7-27). Jesus was comfortable speaking with religious leaders and rulers, such as Nicodemus (John 3:1-21), and prostitutes and fornicators—and everyone in between.

In other words, Jesus became, as Paul says about himself in v22, “all things to all men”—that is to say, Jesus met each person seemingly on his own level, without ceasing to be who He was, or jeopardizing His mission. And the supreme example of this selflessness is that He came to dwell in flesh at all! Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, describes not just this remarkable condescension, but encourages us to imitate it.

Read Philippians 2:3-8.

Paul’s emphasis in Chapter Nine of Corinthians—the thread holding together most of this chapter—is captured in v23: “I do all things for the sake of the gospel.” That, too, is a picture of his Lord; as Paul is imitating, no matter who He was around, no matter how He met them at their own level, Jesus never lost sight of His mission: the good news that He had come to offer salvation to all.

So was it arrogance or presumption for Paul to tell the Corinthians (and others) to imitate him? Not at all, because his life and methods were simply in imitation of the life and methods of the Lord Jesus.

Conclusion

Remember that in God’s word “sonship” has more to with behavior than bloodline. One is a “son” (or “daughter”) if one looks like, behaves as his father. That is, a good son’s life points back to his father; the father is recognizable in the son. Every once in a while I will say something, quite unintentionally, and afterward I will realize, “That’s just what my dad would have said.”

It is almost impossible to “imitate” our heavenly Father. We can obey Him, we can worship or praise Him, we can speak to Him. But it is rather difficult to behave or live like a heretofore invisible spirit. This is one reason our Father sent the Son to earth to live in flesh, so that we could live like Him.

Jesus told His disciple Philip, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’” (John 14:9). But it is a pretty safe bet that no one in the Corinthian church had seen Jesus, and it is also a pretty safe bet that many, if not most, had never read the Scriptures. But they had seen Paul, who was imitating Christ Jesus, the Son, who had “imitated” His Father.

The apostle told the Ephesians to “be imitators of God” (Ephesians 5:1), perhaps because they were further along than the Corinthians. For his reasons, Paul told them to “Be imitators of me” because he was the closest example they had; because he was imitating Christ (11:1); and because, like his Lord, he had made himself a slave to all, so that he might win more (9:19).

Session 89: All Things to All Men

1 Corinthians 9:19-23

Preface

In our last session we cued up the paragraph before us by examining v19 by itself, where Paul describes himself as a self-made slave “so that I may win more.” We discovered within that a beautiful picture of the servanthood of his Lord and ours. In vv20-23 the apostle uses three groups of people to illustrate and expand what he just said in v19; all of these groups could be and probably were represented in the Corinth church. The groups are:

1. Jews (those “under the Law”),
2. Gentiles (those “without law”),
3. the “weak”

Read 1 Corinthians 9:19-23.

v20

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;

Because of the division in this verse, some have argued that Paul is referring to two different groups. But “those who are under the Law” can only refer to Jews, so the second portion of his statement just reiterates for emphasis. We might say, “Christians; those who are born again.”

You might protest, “But Paul was a Jew; how could he “[become] as a Jew”? A fair question—which is answered in the second part of the verse: “not being myself under the Law.” Paul was indeed a Jew, from the tribe of Benjamin (Romans 11:1), but as a converted Christian he was no longer “under the Law.” Nevertheless, to win Jews, to win those who were still under the Law, he would—without compromising “the law of Christ” (v21)—participate in certain “Jewish religious peculiarities” (Fee) such as circumcision (Acts 16:1-3), food laws, and special observances. Paul could do this as a “free” man who no longer considered such things as having any bearing on his relationship with God. Earlier in this letter he addressed circumcision to the Corinthians.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:19.

He would permit no believer in Christ to think that circumcision, or any other Jewish rite or ritual, would improve their standing before God. But if his participation in some of the Jewish customs would keep the door open for his preaching the gospel to them and perhaps winning some for Christ, it was worth it.

Sidebar: Note that this demonstrates that Paul did not consider his ministry to the Gentiles to be a hard and fast demarcation, preventing him from preaching to Jews. During his first missionary journey with Barnabas, they made the fateful pronouncement.

Read Acts 13:46.

But then later, upon entering Corinth, where did he go first? “And he was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks” (Acts 18:4).

v21

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.

Verses 20 and 21 in the more literal NASB and KJVs are translated as written: another one of the apostle’s interminable, long-winded sentences. Thus the “I became” that begins v20

is not included in v21; grammatically it was not required, since it is all one sentence. The other translations break it into two sentences and then insert another “I became.” This makes the verse easier to understand, but less faithful to the original text.

Sidebar: Notice, too, one other difference between this verse and v20 that may have escaped your notice. In v20 the Greek text is “the Law” (the NASB capitalizes “Law”); this clearly refers to the Mosaic Law, handed down to Israel from God through Moses. But in v21—as translated in the NASB and KJVs—the Greek text is missing the definite article (“the”), which is why the NASB then uses “law” (lowercase) in v21.

It is a small point, but since Paul left out the definite article, he could have been insinuating that without the Law of God, one is utterly lawless (which is the literal meaning of *anomois*).

Paul here refers to Gentiles—anyone not a Jew. So of course he shapes the gospel message accordingly. To the Jews he could begin with Abraham, Moses and David, leading the audience from them to the promised Messiah, and making the case that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. But to Gentiles, for whom there was no such heritage, he must approach from a different direction.

Read Acts 17:22-25. (the beginning of an utterly un-Jewish sermon)

Alexander Maclaren: The second class to whom in his wide sympathies he is able to assimilate himself, is the opposite of the former—the Gentiles who are ‘without law.’ He did not preach on Mars’ Hill as he did in the synagogues. The many-sided Gospel had aspects fitted for the Gentiles who had never heard of Moses, and the many-sided Apostle had links of likeness to the Greek and the barbarian. But here, too, his assimilation of himself to those whom he seeks to win is voluntary; wherefore he protests that he is not without law, though he recognises no longer the obligations of Moses’ law, for he is ‘under [or, rather, “in”] law to Christ.’

I like the way Paul words this qualification. In v20 he stated that he was not himself “under the law,” but now he clarifies that he is not “without the law of God but under the law of Christ.” Gordon Fee does a good job of explaining Paul’s intricate wordplay.

Fee: As in the previous clause, he begins, “I became as one without the law, though I myself am not without the law.” But he can scarcely resist a play on words. Among Gentiles he behaves as one who is *anomos* (not under Jewish law), but he is not thereby to be considered *anomos* (“lawless” = “godless, wicked”; cf. 1 Timothy 1:9), which point is made by adding the qualifier “toward God.” Indeed, he goes on, I am *ennomos* (lit. “in law” = subject to law) toward Christ. His point is plain: He wishes no misunderstanding of the word *anomos*, which would ordinarily mean to behave in a godless way. To be “as one without the law” does not mean to be lawless.

not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ

The case could be made that the “law of Christ” would encompass everything He said, every precept He handed down while on earth. But the only other place this phrase is used in the NT gives us a clue as to its specific reference.

Read Galatians 6:1-2.

“Bear[ing] one another’s burdens” is very much like the “new commandment” Jesus handed down to His followers in John’s gospel.

Read John 13:34-35.

This fits perfectly into the context of Chapter Nine in the first Corinthian letter. Even though he is “free from all men” and “not...under the Law,” Paul obeys the law of Christ by

going out of his way to deliver the gospel in a way that is understandable to those in these disparate groups. As David Garland writes, “The law of Christ compels his preaching and engenders his desire to make himself a slave to all so that he lives after the pattern of the one who gave His life as a ransom for the many (Mark 10:43-45).”

v22

To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak;

We have now reached a point in the text where I must mention the struggle I had early on while studying this passage. Just who are the people in these groups? That is, Is Paul speaking about Jews, Gentiles, and “the weak” within the Corinth church, or is he speaking about people in the groups at large, outside the church? Here is the nut of the problem: If those within the church, why does Paul speak of wanting to “win” them—a word universally associated with conversion? If those outside the church, then what is the practical difference between Gentiles “without law” and “the weak”? (More on this in a moment.)

For the most part I found the commentators to be of little help with my quandary. So, as is usually a healthy move, I returned to the text and reexamined, specifically, the verb tense throughout this and the text leading into it. In a general sense, Paul spends most of Chapter Nine defending and justifying the way he goes about his job of evangelizing the gospel. Paul sets the tone of the previous paragraph, vv15-18, in the past tense: “But I have used none of these things [rights].” And even though he switches to the present tense as he expands on this statement, the inflection is that he is speaking of the process he has used since he accepted his call from Christ. He is describing his process of “winning” souls for Christ.

As I have pointed out, the current paragraph (vv19-23) is entirely past tense until v23—but then using the present tense only in the same sense as the previous paragraph, still describing his historical method of evangelism. Thus as he is writing to those within the church (Jews and Gentiles alike), he is describing to them the process that heretofore brought them into the church.

So, for what it is worth (I found no commentators who shared this perspective), here is my interpretation: I conclude that “the weak” is not a third category at all, but, just as he referred to the Jews as “the Jews” and then rephrased it as “those who are under the Law,” he is using “the weak” to rephrase both categories above. That is, “the weak” defines both Jews and Gentiles alike, because none of them, prior to conversion (“won”), were under the law of Christ.

weak = *asthenes* = from <G1> (a) (as a negative particle) and the base of <G4599> (*sthenoo*); strengthless (in various applications, literal, figurative and moral) :- more feeble, impotent, sick, without strength, weak (-er, -ness, thing).

The principal commentators I have been consulting are in agreement that Paul is not speaking here of those weak in faith in the church—as in that traditional approach to this letter that sets up the conflict between the weak and the strong within the church. We addressed this some time back, and established that the primary conflict is, instead, between the church and the apostle. No, Paul is speaking about a different category of “the weak.”

Read Romans 5:6.

That key word that describes every person’s condition prior to conversion is the same word translated “weak” in our text. Whether Jew or Gentile, regarding salvation and a right relationship to God through Christ, all are helpless, impotent, without strength.

And Paul, using the same word, says in v22 that in order to “win the weak” he “became weak.” Note: In the three instances where he said a similar thing about Jews and Gentiles—where he says that he “became as a Jew,” and “as under the Law,” and “as without law—here he says something different: “I became weak” (no “as”). We are reminded of Paul’s conclusion after grappling with his “thorn in the flesh.”

Read 2 Corinthians 12:8-10.

No matter who these categories represent in our passage, and no matter whether I am right or wrong in my interpretation, the more important point Paul is making—and our important takeaway from this passage—is that the apostle is describing how and why he has “made myself a slave to all” (v19). The why? “so that I may win more.”

I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some.

To this end he imitates and fashions his life after his Master. There is no better picture of weakness, of helplessness than for the Son of God—second member of the Trinity—to come down to earth as a helpless baby, to take on the weakness and humility of flesh, and to let that flesh be nailed to a cross for the sins of all mankind.

v23

I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.

In imitation of his Lord, Paul “does all things” for the sake of saving others, and thereby become, as it were, a partner with Christ in the endeavor.

M. D. Hooker: Christ became what we are, he was sent into our condition, *in order that* we might become what he is. Paul, in turn, became what the men and women to whom he was proclaiming the gospel were, in order that he might gain them for the gospel.

Session 90: The Prize

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Preface

As we begin our study of this final paragraph of Chapter Nine—which, by the way, serves as an introduction to the following passage in 10:1-13—I would like to place a thought, an image in your mind. We have a saying: “Playing with fire,” which, I believe, fits well with what Paul is saying to the Corinthians. When we tell someone they are playing with fire, we mean that they are dabbling in something that may, if not immediately, will ultimately do them harm.

It is at times difficult to see it, but Paul has not lost his place; he has not left his topic of eating food sacrificed to idols. And though in this paragraph he does not once mention banquets at pagan temples or a slab of mutton that has been previously sacrificed on a pagan altar, though his imagery is drawn from athletic contests and the discipline necessary to compete, Paul has not veered off-topic. He sees this business, introduced in v8:1, of eating things sacrificed to idols as downright dangerous—playing with fire. There is a crescendo built into the text from the beginning of Chapter Eight to the end of Chapter Ten; one gets the impression that the longer he thinks about the situation, the more he says about it, the more alarmed he becomes about it. And his words to the Corinthians are full of caution for us today—including the text before us.

Read 1 Corinthians 9:24-27.

v24

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize?

Paul introduces an athletic metaphor that would have immediately struck a chord with his audience, for Corinth was the sponsor of the Isthmian games, held every second year, and second only to the Olympian. Many Olympian athletes would also have competed in the Isthmian games, which were “extravagant festivals of religion, athletics, and the arts, [with] thousands of competitors and visitors from all over the empire” (Fee). There is also an extra twist to this background. The games were held in the spring of a.d. 51, when Paul was in Corinth. And since there were no permanent structures for housing all that came, they stayed in tents. Paul was, of course, a tent-maker, so would have had plenty of contact with the crowd, and opportunities to share with them the gospel.

And there is one more pertinent factor that we may not realize, but would have been in the minds of the Corinthians. It is possible that the occasion of the games was the spark that ignited this exhortation by Paul in the first place.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:10.

As Garland points out, “The games were a prominent occasion for celebrating the patronage of the gods.” So you are at the games and it is lunch time. You see that the local temple to Aphrodite has erected a pavilion where they are serving meals. Their lamb kabobs look pretty tempting, so you take an available stool and a lovely young temple virgin dressed in her sacramental robes serves you a skewer hot off the altar. No harm done, right? That is until someone from the church sees you...

As in Jesus’ parables, one should not press the metaphor too far. If “the race” represents the believer’s life in Christ, we know that there is more than just one who “receives the prize.” What Paul is saying is that Christians are to do more than just join the race; they cannot just wander out onto the track and amble down toward the finish line eating a sandwich. They are to put forth the effort to finish well.

Run in such a way that you may win.

Here is the punchline to the passage; here is the exhortation Paul wants to leave with the Corinthians: Run to win!

Note: Here the NASB does not have the best translation. The Greek *katalambano* means “to take eagerly, i.e. seize, possess, apprehend, attain, come upon, comprehend, find, obtain, perceive, (over-) take. So the word refers not to the victory, but to what one receives for the victory, as the other translations reflect.

v25

Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things.

The training for the Isthmian games was arduous. Each athlete took an oath that he had gone through at least ten months of strict physical and dietary training. If he failed to do this he was disqualified from competition. One could not win the prize without effort, not just on the field, but in preparation for it.

They then do it to receive a perishable wreath,

The “prize” won at the games was a victory wreath, or crown, made from pine or wilted celery. Of course, the real prize was the fame, adulation, perhaps even monetary gain that would come from being crowned the victor.

but we an imperishable.

Now we take our first step into the most challenging aspect of this passage. Just what is Paul referring to when he says that believers compete for an imperishable wreath or crown? What is this crown and what does it represent? The answer may not be as obvious as you think. As his time on this earth was drawing to a close, the apostle wrote words heavy with emotion to his beloved son in the faith, Timothy.

Read 2 Timothy 4:6-8.

There Paul refers to his “crown of righteousness.” In his first letter, the apostle Peter refers to the return of the Chief Shepherd, at which time faithful elders will receive “the unfading crown of glory” (1 Peter 5:4). James uses the same phrase as his brother, Jesus, when he writes that “those who love Him,” those who have “been approved,” will receive “the crown of life” (James 1:12).

Read Revelation 2:10.

Even in heaven, any “crown of glory” received by the saints still belongs—as does all glory—to the Lord. Whatever reward He has placed on our head we, following the example of the twenty-four elders, give right back to Him.

Read Revelation 4:10-11.

We will develop this further in v27, but the question for which we must seek an answer is this: Is the “imperishable wreath” he speaks of a singular reward, or eternal salvation itself? The answer to this question will be important when we examine the word translated “disqualified.” For now, let us press on.

v26

Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim;

Implicit in vv26-27 is Paul’s exhortation to the Corinthians to do what he does, to follow his example (in v11:1 his exhortation is explicit: “Be imitators of me”).

Following the athletic imagery, he now makes the point personally. Someone who runs “without aim” is someone who has “lost sight of the finish line,” or runs “as one who has no fixed goal.” If an athlete runs an intense, focused course, always keeping his eye on the goal, for a silly perishable wreath of wilted celery, how could a follower of Christ, supposedly pursuing an eternal crown, run his race haphazardly, aimlessly? That’s not how I do it, says the apostle.

I box in such a way, as not beating the air;

Likewise, for a boxer to get into the ring and not even bother to land a blow on his opponent, just whiffing at the air past his ears, would be just as absurd. No, says the apostle, when I fight I mean to land my blows.

v27

but I discipline my body and make it my slave,

discipline, beat^{niv}, strike a blow to^{niv2011} = *hypopiazō* = from a compound of <G5259> (*hupo*) and a derivative of <G3700> (*optanomai*); to hit under the eye (buffet or disable an antagonist as a pugilist), i.e. (figurative) to tease or annoy (into compliance), subdue (one's passions) :- keep under, weary.

This is not a picture, as some have espoused, of self-flagellation, but, as the predominant translations state, “discipline.” It is a picture of doing whatever is necessary—predictably different for each believer—to train for the competition at hand.

The Christian life is a full-contact sport. It is not for wimps, for the lazy, for the disinterested. To pursue Christ-likeness is to come up against, at regular intervals, obstacles, road blocks—and Satan's world, which does all it can to pull us off stride.

so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.

Now here, once again, just like in our last session, we have a troublesome passage. Just what does Paul mean by the word translated “disqualified”? The NIV versions add “for the prize,” which Gordon Fee affirms as a correct addition, but is not in the original Greek. If this is correct, we can see how important it is for us to determine just what that “prize” is, for Paul claims one can be disqualified from receiving it.

On the other hand, instead of referring to the prize, whatever it is, does it mean just what it says in English, that “...I myself will not be disqualified”? That is, not missing out on the prize, but being personally rejected by God—i.e., losing one's salvation.

First of all, we can reject that interpretation. Jesus Himself cleared that up on several occasions, not least one day as He was walking in the temple. To the Jews who asked Him once again if He was the Christ, Jesus said,

“...you do not believe because you are not of My sheep. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one.” (John 10:26-30)

If you are truly born again, if your name is written in the Book of Life, no amount of withering before competition and obstacles—no amount of insufficient effort or “discipline”—will suddenly remove your name from that book, disqualifying you from eternal life with God. We can also reject, for the same reason, the interpretation that makes “the prize” synonymous with salvation—or, in Jesus' words, the “crown of life.” A true Christian will persevere to the end.

If neither of those are valid, and if the disqualification is for “the prize,” then what is that prize? If it is a “crown,” which crown is it? I believe Jesus answers this in His parable of the talents, and the slaves to whom they were entrusted.

Read Matthew 25:19-21.

I think we can be distracted by the word “crown” or even “reward”—thinking of either as something tangible placed in our hands. I can think of no reward more precious and irreplaceable than standing before Christ Jesus and hearing the words, “Well done, good and faithful slave.” Those few words, if I am so blessed to hear them, will be worth more than the finest bejeweled crowns of all the kings and queens of Europe. The late Charles Haddon Spurgeon agreed.

Spurgeon: The Greek word, which is translated “a castaway” [disqualified] is *adokimos*. It might better have been rendered “disapproved.” It certainly has no such meaning as that which has been generally given to it. Paul was not afraid of being cast away by God at the last. What he aimed at was this—as he had entered the lists, as a Christian minister, to fight for Christ, to wrestle against principalities and powers, to seek to win souls for Christ, he must keep his bodily powers and passions so in subjection that, at the last, when the prizes were distributed, he would be found to have won his. This is quite another matter from being “a castaway” from salvation and eternal life. Paul was saved and he knew it; and some of us know, to a certainty, that we are saved; but we also know that there is another crown to be won, which the Lord will give to his servants who win in the great fight with sin. To win this crown is our high ambition and we long to hear the Master say to each one of us, in that day, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant, thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.”

If one in this world lacks discipline with his money, spending it freely and badly, and then goes to the bank to get a loan, he may very well hear other words, something like, “You do not qualify for a loan. You are disqualified.”

If Paul, personally called by the risen Christ into service for Him, had not performed that service to the best of his abilities, running even when tired and sore, fighting against the opposition until bruised and bloodied, he may have heard words from His Lord to the effect, “Enter into your rest, but frankly, I’m disappointed in you.”

The apostle Paul was not afraid of missing out on heaven itself, on eternal life with Christ Jesus. But he was afraid—and wanted those in his charge to be afraid—of hearing on the day of judgment the words, “Frankly, I’m disappointed.”

Session 91: A Warning from the Past, part one

1 Corinthians 10:1-6

Preface

One of the many benefits of reading through the entirety of God's word is that the attentive reader sees clearly the unbroken line from God working in ancient Israel, through the patriarchs—Abram, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David—continuing on through the birth of Jesus, to the birth of the church and the end of all things and the beginning of a new heaven and new earth. There is no place in Scripture where one thing stops and another thing begins out of the blue. It is an unbroken tapestry woven intricately together from beginning to end.

Christianity is not something invented in Matthew Chapter One. Indeed, where does Matthew begin his gospel of the Messiah?

The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham: Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers... (Matthew 1:1-2)

It is an unbroken line from Abraham to the One whose death and bodily resurrection are the basis of our faith in this age—and first-century Corinth. So in the first thirteen verses of Chapter Ten, where Paul points the Greco-Roman believers in Corinth to events in the history of Israel and refers to the principal characters as “our fathers,” he means it. The patriarchs of Israel, the forefathers of every Jew, are indeed the “fathers” of every modern follower of Christ. This does not mean, as some say, that the church has replaced, or is the new Israel, but that the two share a common lineage. The Christian Bible begins with Genesis 1, not Matthew 1.

In the passage before us Paul relates portions of Israel's redemption from Egypt under Moses to the church under Christ. So let's spend a few moments reviewing the pertinent narratives from Israel's ancient sojourn. This will help us understand the imagery of Paul's analogy—as it is described in the exemplary Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament (Editors: Beale and Carson, Baker Academic, 2007, p. 723), “The Israelites' experience of redemption, idolatry, and destruction is used as a lens through which the Corinthians are to view and understand their own situation.”

The Pillar of Cloud and Fire

Not long after leaving the precincts of Egypt and entering the wilderness they camped in Etham (aye-tham') near the Red Sea. In Exodus 13:21 Moses writes that “The Lord was going before them in a pillar of cloud by day to lead them on the way, and in a pillar of fire by night to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night.” When the Egyptian army showed up in pursuit, the cloud moved to protect Israel.

Read Exodus 14:19-20.

Note v24, where the Lord further protects Israel, already heading through the sea, by throwing the Egyptian army into confusion: “At the morning watch, the Lord looked down on the army of the Egyptians through the pillar of fire and cloud and brought the army of the Egyptians into confusion.”

Through the Sea

And of course, from watching C. B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*, we all know well how the Lord gave Israel passage through the Red Sea—but let's read the text anyway.

Read Exodus 14:21-22.

Heavenly Food

Now let's skip ahead in the narrative (Chapter Sixteen) to the wilderness of Sin. Here Israel grumbles and complains that their diet of late does not quite stack up to the sumptuous banquets they used to enjoy when they were in bondage in Egypt. So the Lord graciously supplies them with manna and quail, morning and evening.

Read Exodus 16:9-12.

Water from the Rock

Israel moves on and camps at Rephidim (ref-ee-deem'), where they grumble again because of their thirst, saying, "Why, now, have you brought us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" (Exodus 17:3). So once again the Lord suffers their ingratitude and bad manners, and miraculously gives them water.

Read Exodus 17:5-7.

Now let's read the passage before us in First Corinthians.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:1-6.

As we study this passage, especially vv1-13, we need to keep our eye on the ball. Paul is not setting up some specific equivalency between the exodus events and the Corinthian church; for example, he is not saying in v2 that Israel was "baptized into Moses" in precisely the same way that Christians are baptized into Christ (Romans 6:3). All of this is about idolatry; Paul is setting the table with events from the past to illustrate the very real danger in fooling around with pagan idols—even the danger in such seemingly harmless practices as dining in one of their temples. Chapter Ten begins with an explanation, the grounds for his warning at the end of Chapter Nine regarding the possibility of disqualification.

v1

For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea;

The "For" (*gar*) that begins v1 gives us a clue that once again we have an unfortunate chapter break. This passage follows on seamlessly from the end of Chapter Nine.

When the apostle writes that "I do not want you to be unaware," he means that he has something he imagines that some of the readers may know, but may not fully grasp—not unlike our situation of the moment: Verses 1-5 relate OT events with which most of us have been familiar since Sunday School days sitting before the teacher's flannel graph. But what we may not grasp is how well they illustrate and warn us off everyday evils that could rob us of "the prize."

We are termed "brethren" because we, as Gentiles (which probably most of the Corinthian church was as well) have been grafted into Israel—as Paul puts it in his letter to the Romans:

But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you. (Romans 11:17-18)

Notice all the "all"s in this paragraph—

- all under the cloud
- all passed through the sea
- all were baptized
- all ate
- all drank

which emphasizes the unity and commonality of the experiences.

Some have taken issue with the prepositions "under" and "through," pointing out that the cloud went before and sometimes after Israel, but not over; and that they did not go through the water of the sea, but between walls of water. But this misses the point; Paul is bringing up all these scenes not as an historian, but as a minister and evangelist concerned about the fate of his flock. He wants them (and us) to see how all of these miracles are evidence for the gracious care of a loving God, protecting Israel through the wilderness. This just means that

during the exodus, from beginning to end, Israel was being protected by God—they were “under” His care.

v2

and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea;

We have a similar situation in v2. Precisely how was Israel “baptized”—even “baptized into Moses”—by the protecting cloud and their passage through the parted Red Sea?

Paul is not drawing an equivalency between the ordinance of Christian baptism and the passage of Israel through the sea, but lifting out elements from the exodus to show how the former illustrates what is accomplished in believer baptism. Let’s deal with the “into Moses” phrase first. The exodus was a redemptive event for Israel, as the Lord explained to Moses.

Read Exodus 6:6-7.

The ordinance of Christian baptism does not save, but it is a public demonstration that one has been saved. The act is a picture of the individual believer declaring that not only have his sins been washed away by the blood of Christ, but that his old self has died in/with Christ and that he will one day be raised to resurrection life in/with Christ. It is a picture of the redemption we have in Christ. Moses was a type of Christ who led Israel from Egypt to Sinai, and on to the Promised Land, through their process of redemption.

But even more pertinent to the context of Chapters Eight to Ten is the “covenantal separation” aspect of baptism. In Christian baptism we are publicly identifying with Christ; it is a visible demonstration of how we have been set apart—sanctified—by Him, and are now beginning our walk with Him. And Israel’s passing through the sea was, in effect, a visible demonstration of the Jew’s disengagement from Egypt and the beginning of their life with Yahweh.

Garland: Israel’s deliverance through the sea marked the beginning of their separation from Egypt and their new identity as God’s covenant community, and the term “baptism” fittingly represents that experience.

Session 92: A Warning from the Past, part two

1 Corinthians 10:1-6

Preface

In our last session we reviewed the historical basis for this opening passage of Chapter Ten, and I pointed out that Paul is not setting up some specific equivalency between the exodus events and the Corinthian church. All of this is about idolatry; Paul is setting the table with events from the past to illustrate the very real danger in fooling around with pagan idols—even the danger in such seemingly harmless practices as dining in one of their temples.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:1-6.

In v1 Paul references the protective and guiding cloud that accompanied Israel during its sojourn and their miraculous passage through the Red (or reed) Sea. Paul is bringing up all these scenes not as an historian, but as a minister and evangelist concerned about the fate of his flock. He wants them to see how all of these miracles are evidence for the gracious care of a loving God, protecting Israel through the wilderness. That “all our fathers were under the cloud” just means that during the exodus, from beginning to end, Israel was being protected by God—they were “under” His care.

In v2 the apostle mentions the same two events, but now relates them to Christian baptism. This, in one sense, has reference to our redemption in Christ, as Moses, leading Israel through the sea, was a type of Christ redeeming Israel. But more pertinent is the “covenantal separation” aspect of baptism. In Christian baptism we are publicly identifying with Christ; it is a visible demonstration of how we have been set apart—sanctified—by Him, and are now beginning our walk with Him. And Israel’s passing through the sea was, in effect, a visible demonstration of the Jew’s disengagement from Egypt and the beginning of their life with Yahweh. Now we are ready for v3.

v3-4a

and all ate the same spiritual food; and all drank the same spiritual drink...

Just as the Israelites in the exodus had something analogous to the ordinance of Christian baptism, they also had something analogous to the Lord’s Supper—Communion. As before (vv1-2), this is not a direct correlation; Israel was not remembering the sacrifice of Jesus. Paul mentions this to reinforce his point that all Israel shared in Yahweh’s blessings, in this case the manna from heaven, quail, and miraculous water.

There are three problematic, or at least challenging elements in v3 and v4. The first is the word “spiritual,” used three times in vv3-4: “spiritual food,” “spiritual drink,” and “spiritual rock.” Many ideas have been offered over the centuries for just what Paul means by his use of the adjective, but I think the simplest explanation makes the most sense.

In this passage Paul is painting a picture of the sovereign grace and care of God shown to Israel, and then he is going to use that picture to reinforce his position that the Corinthian’s casual and too-friendly relationship with idols is dangerous for them—and even offensive to the same God who graciously cares for them.

His use of the word “spiritual” points them to that gracious God. The manna and quail did not just happen to appear, but were miraculously sent by Yahweh; the water did not just happen to spring out of a rock, but was supernaturally produced by Yahweh. God is spirit-kind, as Jesus told the woman at the well (John 4:24), thus His acts on our behalf are of a “spiritual” nature.

But the inclusion of this word also suggests that ancient Israel and the more “modern” Corinthians are to view such events from the hand of God from a spiritual perspective—that is, the necessity of living a life of spiritual discernment.

Read Exodus 16:4-7.

Israel was to see God and His glory in their daily sustenance. The Corinthians and believers today are to see the hand of God in all things. We dwell in His creation; we “live and

move and exist” in Him, so we are to see even apparently natural events in the light of His grace. This lesson did not find a purchase in Israel’s sojourn: the food and water the Lord God supplied elicited not gratitude and praise, but complaints. They failed His test.

4b

*for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them;
and the rock was Christ.*

The second and third problematic words are found in the second part of v4. Paul says that the rock from which their thirst was slaked “followed them.” There is indeed a Jewish legend that describes “Miriam’s well,” shaped like a rock, as miraculously and literally traveling with them throughout their journey.

Just as he wants the Corinthians to think spiritually, Paul is thinking spiritually. He is not making the mistake of perpetuating a Hebrew myth that there was a desert rock that traveled along with Israel, miraculously dispensing water like a granite Igloo cooler. He is thinking spiritually, and perhaps remembering the Song of Moses, recorded in Deuteronomy 32.

Read Deuteronomy 32:3-4

Here we have the “rock” imagery voiced by Moses, a most pertinent euphemism for those who have been traveling the desert waste, representing the ageless, solid, dependable Yahweh who had been with them from the beginning—or as described in our passage, “a spiritual rock which followed them.”

Read vv10-11.

But if we read on in the Song of Moses, we discover another reason it may have come to Paul’s mind.

Read Deuteronomy 32:15-18.

Here again we have the warning from antiquity—even the antiquity of the Corinthians. God has been your Rock—and for you, Corinthians, the Rock is (and even “was”) the eternal Christ Jesus. Don’t follow the path of Israel who turned from their faithful God to worship “strange gods”, “abominations” and “demons.” And what happened to them?

v5

*Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased;
for they were laid low in the wilderness.*

Notice first the contrast: Up till now Paul has been emphasizing that all of this happened to “all”—the care and protection, the generosity with food and drink, the grace was to “all.” But not all rebelled; “with most of them God was not well-pleased” (emphasis added). This is a bit of an understatement by Paul, that “God was not well-pleased.” The words *ouk eudokeo* (not well-pleased) means that the Lord did “not think well of,” did not approve of the behavior of most of Israel. Indeed. How many men from the original group made it to the Promised Land? Just two: Caleb and Joshua (Numbers 14:30).

The rest were “laid low”—which is not the best translation. The NKJV and NIVs are better: “scattered in the wilderness.” YLT is best: “strewn in the wilderness.” It is a graphic picture of a desert landscape strewn with the corpses of the Jews who chose to follow after “demons who were not God” instead of the one true God who had brought them out of bondage and taken care of them through a forty-year sojourn through the desert. They demonstrated their lack of faith and trust in Him by fearing they could not conquer those who were in Canaan. They didn’t trust that Yahweh would fight for them. So all but two—just two—were left to die in the wilderness.

Sidebar: One might justifiably point out that the Lord God had to take care of them for all of forty years because it was He who imposed the forty years on them in the first place. True, but one can also see this as an act of grace: He could have destroyed them on the spot; instead he granted them the remainder of their natural lives with family and friends.

v6-7a

We don't need to wonder why Paul is telling us all this in the first five verses. He tells us flat-out in v6 and the beginning of v7.

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;

His underlying purpose was not water baptism, the food and drink of communion, or mysterious rocks that followed Israel through the desert. His purpose was not to regale the Corinthians with the exodus saga. His purpose was—and is—to warn believers of the danger in becoming too familiar with pagan idols.

Don't be too quick to dismiss this as having little relevance for us today, for we are surrounded by idols. I offer as evidence the exalted place organized sports—and, more pertinently, its players—holds in the hearts of many. Take, for instance, the recent tragic deaths of nine individuals in a helicopter crash in California. Here is how one of the initial reports began the story: "Legendary NBA player Kobe Bryant has died in a California helicopter crash, reports said Sunday. He was 41. The retired Los Angeles Lakers star was traveling in his private helicopter over Calabasas when a fire broke out, sending the chopper spiraling from the sky..." (New York Post, 1/26/2020). One reporter opened his article with, "Kobe Bryant's death is unique tragedy." The Lakers General Manager said, the loss of Bryant and his daughter "has been an amputation of part of my soul."

There is no denying that the accident was a tragedy—not just for the Bryant family, but for the families of all nine aboard (can anyone tell me the names of the others?). But there is also no denying that some are speaking of Kobe Bryant as if he were a god—more than two million have signed a petition to place his image on a new NBA logo. Many speak not just of his loss, but speak of him in exalting, glorified terms. This one example reveals that there is little difference between the civilized precincts of Athens or Corinth of the first century and cities today. All were and are filled with images and shrines to idols.

The untimely death of Kobe Bryant has brought to the surface just one instance of modern idolatry—just one of too many to count.

In our next session we will revisit vv6-7 as we proceed into the next paragraph. But for now let us close with this:

- Is there on any of the walls of your house a life-sized image of a sports hero? Would you do the same with a life-sized image of Christ Jesus?
- Is there anything in this world more important to you than Christ and His kingdom?
- Is there anyone in this world more important to you than Christ and His kingdom? (Mark 10:28-31)
- Is there anything or anyone in this world that receives a share of your devotion due Christ Jesus?
- Finally, is there anything or anyone vying for room in the God-space of your heart reserved for Lord Jesus?

Only the individual can answer these questions; only each believer can, in the quiet sanctity of the heart, answer the hard questions of lordship we all must honestly address. We are to exalt, to glorify, to bow down before only the One described by the apostle Paul to the Colossians, who is

... the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything. (Colossians 1:15-18)

Session 93: Heeding the Warning, part one

1 Corinthians 10:6-11

Preface

I would like to publicly thank the apostle Paul for giving us a passage that is so crystal clear in revealing its meaning. There are times when one scratches one's head, trying to ascertain what he is getting at. But not here. And we do not even have to wonder what he is referring to when he says "these things" (vv1-5); it is obvious, and we answered that already last week. So let's dive in.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:6-11.

This passage is also easy to outline, and constitutes an *inclusio* (v6 and v11) to tie it neatly together.

- these things happened as an example for us
 - do not be idolaters
 - do not act immorally
 - do not let us try the Lord
 - do not let us grumble
- these things happened to them as an example for us

Note, too, that just as he specified in vv1-5 that these blessings from the Lord were received by "all," in this passage he replaces that with "some of them." Every Israelite was under the gracious hand of their protective God, but only some of them behaved badly nonetheless (in v5 he says "most of them"). This is not to say that the simple and clear organization reflects a simple message; there is substantial meat here on which to feast.

v6

Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we would not crave evil things as they also craved.

We are familiar already with Paul's position on the value of the OT.

Read Romans 15:4.

In that verse he says that through such OT instruction we may find hope; in the context of Chapters Eight to Ten of First Corinthians, his purpose in citing the OT experiences of Israel is so that we and the Corinthians will be warned.

Sidebar: God's word is almost worthless to us if we do not learn from the mistakes made by some of its characters. That is why the stories are included, why God's word is more than just endless doctrine and precepts, but filled with very human stories. These reveal the benefits of righteous obedience, and the painful, sometimes fatal results of disobedience.

That word translated "craved" in the NASB (*epithymeo*) is captured even better in the KJVs: "lusted," and this cues up and summarizes the four detrimental behaviors that follow. That is, idolatry (v7), immoral acts (v8), trying the Lord (v9), and grumbling (v10) all stem from Israel's craving or lusting—like little children, wanting what they want, and wanting it right now! Only in the first example (v7) does Paul quote Scripture—in this case, directly from the Septuagint; in the others the pattern is to cite the offense or behavior and follow it with what happened to Israel as a result of the offense—that is, the price they paid for their bad behavior.

Paul's choice of this word "crave" is not accidental, but tied to a specific event in which Israel cried out for meat. After the Lord supplied them every morning with manna, they still were not satisfied, but demanded meat.

Read Numbers 11:4-6.

So the Lord said, *All right. I'll give you meat to eat.* But is it just me, or do we hear something more than simple acquiescence in His reply.

Read vv18-20.

Even so, the anger of the Lord was not finished. He sent the quail for Israel to eat, but he did more than that.

Read Numbers 11:31-34.

It is not at all a stretch to imagine that this is the passage that came to Paul's mind when he was looking for just the right word for v6: *epithymeo*, craved. The name of the place, *Kibroth-hattaavah*, means "the graves of the longing," or "the graves of the craving."

Learning (from the text): How many times have we been dissatisfied with God's answer to our prayers? We dare to call Him "Lord," but reject His sovereign will for our lives. If we crave something more, demand something "better" from Him, if we complain about His decisions and acts, we are no better than those who complained about the form of His mercy and grace during Israel's sojourn.

v7

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."

idolaters = *eidololatres* (i-do-lol-at'-race) = an image-servant or image-worshiper.

In the three following examples the form is to cite the sin and God's judgment. But in the first example (idolaters) Paul cites not the judgment, but the biblical setting—that is, "the content of the evil thing" (Fee). And this evil thing is about as blatant an example of the sin of idolatry in supposed Yahweh-followers as is possible.

Read Exodus 32:3-6.

Don't miss that the portion Paul quotes includes feasting—eating and drinking in the company of the graven idol. He could have easily illustrated his command about idolatry by using other passages, but this is the one he chose—which cannot be accidental, considering the context of chapters 8-10: eating meals in an idol's temple.

play = *tsahaq* = a primitive root; to laugh outright (in merriment or scorn); by implication to sport :- laugh, mock, play, make sport.

This verb often refers to cultic dancing, but here (and in the Septuagint of Exodus 32) it carries overtones of sexual play. We find an example of its more erotic connotation in the story of Isaac and Rebekah, when they are in the presence of Abimelech king of the Philistines and, like father like son, Isaac wants them to think Rebekah is really his sister.

Read Genesis 26:8.

Here the same Hebrew word is translated "caressing" (KJV, "sporting").

Learning: We can see in our own culture how idolatry—worshiping something other than the one God—inevitably, if not initially, descends into an absence of ethical and moral integrity, which ultimately includes a licentious sexual component.

Paul's message is clear: The ancient Hebrews ate and drank as part of their worship of the golden calf, and for them this led to gross debauchery. If the Corinthians persisted in dining in the pagan temples, they could expect the same result.

The unregenerate know no better; that which believers call sin is just normal, everyday life to them. Christians, on the other hand, like to rationalize their sin, explain it away as just a small thing, no big deal, won't hurt anything. Paul is making the case that idolatry goes beyond bowing before a pagan idol. Israel did that, but they also ate and drank, "and stood up to play"; they acted immorally, they grumbled and complained, were ungrateful for the Lord's blessings. All of this, and more, is idolatry. "Small things" lead to big things; Israel's grumbling led to selling themselves to a golden calf and declaring it "god." And this led to, for many, their destruction.

Session 94: Heeding the Warning, part two

1 Corinthians 10:6-11

Preface

In this session we continue our examination of the apostle Paul's commands ("Do not...", "Nor let us...") backed up by illustrations from the past ("...as some of them did."). All this is to warn the Corinthians, and us, away from having anything to do with idols.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:6-11.

v8

Nor let us act immorally, as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in one day.

We have several things to look at in this verse; let's take them in order. Paul follows his call against idolatry and "play[ing]" with another reference to the sexual component, but note that he softens the blow by including himself in the warning (v7: [You] Do not... v8: Nor let us...).

All our common translations make this explicitly "sexual immorality" except the NASB, where that is left implied. We must understand that in the ancient world, and specifically in God's word, sexual immorality and idolatry were "two sides of the same coin" (Garland). In a number of passages God uses the language of adultery and harlotry—of Israel being unfaithful in her "marriage" to the Lord—euphemistically to refer to idolatry—i.e., straying from Him to worship other gods.

Read Jeremiah 3:6-10.

The Lord speaks to this again in Jeremiah 13.

**"As for your adulteries and your lustful neighings,
The lewdness of your prostitution
On the hills in the field,
I have seen your abominations.
Woe to you, O Jerusalem!
How long will you remain unclean?" (Jeremiah 13:27)**

God sees Israel, and Christians today, who follow after other gods or idols, as a wife being unfaithful—even openly playing the harlot, the prostitute, selling herself to strangers—unfaithful to her husband and the marriage bed. So in speaking of sexual immorality in vv7-8 Paul is still talking about idolatry.

Here Paul does not explicitly cite the original event, as he did in v7, but we can easily deduce the reference (and most commentators agree) by the judgment he cites. We find it in Numbers 25.

Read Numbers 25:1-9.

In this alarming story of Yahweh commanding Moses and the "judges" of Israel to slay—openly, publicly—the leaders of this abominable idolatry, we have an instance of what Paul referred to earlier of bodies being strewn about in the wilderness. It's not clear the manner of execution, but the word translated "execute" means more than just putting to death.

yaqa = a primitive root; properly to sever oneself, i.e. (by implication) to be dislocated; figurative to abandon; causative to impale (and thus allow to drop to pieces by rotting) :- be alienated, depart, hang (up), be out of joint.

The Lord said it was not enough to "dismember" the leaders, but they were to be "[exposed] in broad daylight" for all to see the penalty for their gross idolatry. In the ancient Middle East, as well as today, such treatment of the dead was considered a curse. To not properly bury someone, and soon after death, was to consider them accursed. Another interpretation of this is seeing the executed leaders as bloody sacrifices, laid out similar to

when the Lord made His covenant with Abram regarding a son (Genesis 15). There it was to affirm a promise; here it may have been to quench the anger of Yahweh against the people.

In the narrative, however, what really stopped the plague was the extraordinary act of Aaron's grandson Phinehas. The level of idolatry had become so brazen that a man brought a Midianite woman into the camp—in full view of Moses and the congregation—into his family's tent, and lay with her (Ronald B. Allen, in his interpretation, suggests an even more outrageous public location for this licentious act). Phineas was outraged, grabbed a spear, and pinned both of them to the ground with one thrust.

Paul's use of this OT event underlines the seriousness of the offense—on two levels. First, the Lord God takes any form of idolatry very seriously; His first and most important commandment is “You shall have no other Gods before Me” (Exodus 20:3); He goes on to say,

“You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me...” (Exodus 20:4-5)

Second, this OT event illustrates what happens—just how far from a holy God these idols can carry us—when we dabble in them. Even just eating in their presence.

Sidebar: I would be remiss if I didn't point out that v8 in our text, referencing the passage in Numbers, includes the famous “Case of the Missing Thousand.” Paul says twenty-three thousand, while Moses, in Numbers, says twenty-four thousand died as the result of the plague. There are some rather fanciful and contortive theories advanced for this apparent discrepancy, none of which, as far as I am concerned, make as much sense as the one they, for the most part, ridicule. To wit, the total number as reported by Moses was twenty-four thousand; the number who were killed “in one day,” as reported by Paul, were twenty-three thousand, with another thousand subsequently succumbing to the plague (as MacArthur, Mare).

v9

Nor let us try the Lord, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the serpents.

Still in the book of Numbers, we find the reference cited in v9 in Chapter Twenty-one.

Read Numbers 21:4-9.

The Numbers passage does not mention trying or tempting the Lord, but the summary of the incident in Psalm 78:18 does.

Read Psalm 78:17-18.

Sidebar: The NASB is the only one of our versions to translate *kyrios* literally: “the Lord.” But every occurrence of “the Lord” (*ton kyrios*) in the NT refers to Christ, hence the other versions. This also ties back to v4, where Paul writes, “they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ.”

To try, tempt, or test the Lord means to test thoroughly, to the utmost. When Israel did this in the wilderness Yahweh sent snakes—“fiery serpents”—to kill many of them.

fiery serpents = *sarap* (saw-rahf') = from <H8313> (*saraph*); burning, i.e. (figurative) poisonous (serpent); specifically a *saraph* or symbolic creature (from their copper color) :- fiery (serpent), seraph. “Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar.” (Isaiah 6:6 KJV).

Fee: It is Christ whom the Corinthians are putting to the test by trying to eat both at the Lord's Table and at the table of the demons.

Session 95: Heeding the Warning, part three

1 Corinthians 10:6-11 (1-11)

Preface

One more ancient illustration remains for us in this passage. Once we have looked at that, I want to back up and make a more wide-angled, contemporary appraisal of the message God is giving us in the first eleven verses of Chapter Ten. In our last session we made a rather detailed, and alarming, examination of vv8-9; now we are ready for v10.

Read 1 Corinthians:10:6-11.

v10

Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer.

There is not a lot of difference between “trying” the Lord (v9) and “grumbling” against Him (v10). Both exhibit not just bad manners and a decided absence of gratitude, but no respect for God’s righteousness and majesty.

In contrast to the illustrations in vv7-9, it is not clear to which OT scene Paul refers, for, from our vantage point about three thousand years later, it seems like the Hebrews were grumbling pretty much non-stop since they left Egypt. The reference to “the destroyer” is also not obvious.

The translators of the NIVs add “angel” to the word “destroying” to show that they believe the apostle refers to at least one of several OT references to an angel who destroys: Exodus 12:23, 2 Samuel 24:16, 1 Chronicles 21:15. This is a possible understanding of this verse, but the word “angel” is not in the text.

Another possibility is that the reference is to Satan. The Greek word translated “destroyer” (*olothreutes* [ol-oth-ryoo-tace']) is related to the word Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 5:5 (*olethros*): “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.” But why would Satan be part of punishing people who are grumbling against God? I would think He would rather applaud their efforts.

In any case, it is more probable that what is really on Paul’s mind is the grumbling the Corinthians have been doing about him. Two likely candidates for OT examples during Israel’s sojourn are Numbers 14 and Numbers 16:41. The entire Chapter Fourteen of Numbers is filled with Israel’s grumbling and complaining—first to Moses and Aaron, then to the Lord. There and elsewhere the Lord makes clear to Moses that when they grumble against him (Moses) they are really grumbling against God, that when they reject Moses’ leadership they are really rejecting the leadership of the Lord God—just as with the situation between Israel and Samuel (1 Samuel 8:7).

v11

Now these things happened to them as an example,

In v11 Paul circles back to wrap up the passage into a neat package. Paul rewords slightly what he said in the first portion of v6, but the meaning, and his purpose, is the same. In v6, as here, he wrote that these ancient events took place so that we could benefit from the lessons. When you think about it, that’s a fairly extraordinary statement: The purpose of future lessons was not an afterthought—as an event recorded in a history book accidentally, or additionally, might benefit a contemporary life—but the event actually took place for this purpose! This is different from what Paul says in Romans.

Read Romans 15:4.

But here in this chapter, in both vv6 & 11, he is saying that the events themselves actually took place for our benefit. God said, I’m going to do this to you, Israel, for the benefit of people who will come thousands of years later. And who can say that He is not doing the same today; perhaps he is putting each of us through certain trials and judgments for the benefit of future generations. Of course He is.

and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.

In addition to this, however, they were indeed recorded for all time for our instruction, as a warning.

instruction^{nasb,esv}, **admonition**^{kjvs}, **warnings**^{niv} = *nouthesia* = from <G3563> (*nous*) and a derivative of <G5087> (*tithemi*); calling attention to, i.e. (by implication) mild rebuke or warning :- admonition.

Then Paul adds a clause further describing his audience: “upon whom the ends of the ages have come,” and Fee seems to capture the essence of this whole verse best.

Gordon Fee: In this sentence one captures a sense of Paul’s view that both the historical events and the inscripturated narrative are not simply history or isolated texts in Scripture; rather, behind all these things lie the eternal purposes of the living God, who knows the end from the beginning, and who therefore has woven the prefigurement into these earlier texts for the sake of God’s final eschatological people.

From His death and resurrection Jesus Christ marks the turning of the ages; the old is on its way out, the new has begun (2 Corinthians 5:17). He has set the future irresistibly in motion; and the new people of God, whether Jew or Gentile, bond or free, male or female, who belong to God by grace alone, are the people of the End.

Retrospective and Application

What are we to take home from this extended passage of 10:1-11? We see part of the answer to this in the succeeding vv12-13, which we will look at in our next session: God’s faithful attendance and control even in the midst of our temptations.

But that is not all we can glean from vv1-11. If we step back and squint at this passage, looking at vv1-5 and vv6-11 in general terms, in the first portion Paul paints a very descriptive picture of Yahweh’s dependable, faithful care of Israel during the forty-year sojourn in the wilderness:

**...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 drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. (1 Corinthians 10:1-4)**

And in the second portion Paul vividly depicts Israel’s rebellious response to God’s protection and grace. The two portions stand in stark contrast to each other—and that is precisely the dire warning the apostle is delivering.

The Active Godhead

In some respects, Paul’s description emphasizes the similarities between OT Israel and today’s Christian. He reveals the activity not just of Father God, but the Trinity in the nation of Israel—even placing Christ Himself on the scene as the “Rock” and in the cloud.

Read Exodus 14:19-20. (OT: “the angel”; NT: “an angel”)

Yet even with the similarities, there is a difference. Clearly the Spirit was active in Moses, perhaps even Aaron, and later, Joshua. But He was not active in the individuals of Israel. Christ Jesus, as the pre-incarnate second member of the Trinity (i.e., “the angel of God”), is their protector and guide, but not in the intimate, personal way he is to Christian believers. And even though they are surrounded by His grace and protection, Israel had no supernatural protection, as Christians do in the blood of Christ, when Father God decides to mete out punishment (as we see in vv6-11).

A Stacked Deck

Just as with “our fathers,” Israel (v1), we all must contend with a deck that is stacked against us. Paul’s first admonition in the second paragraph is that we “would not crave evil things as they also craved.” But that craving is built into us from birth, thanks to the rebellion and fall of our first parents in the garden. This is why we require the stiff warning of this passage—the detailed, at times horrific stories of Israel’s rebellion and rejection of God’s leadership, and the horrific results of His repeated judgments upon them.

Over time, as we mature in the Lord, and with the requisite assistance of the Holy Spirit, we can learn to resist these in-built, idolatrous urges. But so long as we dwell this side of glory, these urges will never leave us.

The Invaluable Flip-side

Happily, by God’s grace we have other “examples.” In vv6-11 Paul offers the bad news: the picture of what happens when one rebels against God, when one gives into these temptations and cravings. But we also have in God’s word the good news: the gospels give us the flip-side of this passage, the righteous example of Christ’s life and teachings; these, along with the epistles, offer us a picture of how good life can be living by His example, rather than the example of ancient Israel.

God Does Not Change

Our God is a powerful, jealous God who does not abide, or share power with, idols.

Read Isaiah 42:5-8.

He is eternal and unchanging.

Read Psalm 102:25-27.

Not just Father God, but also God the Son is unchanging.

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. (Hebrews 13:8)

Therefore we cannot dismiss the examples Paul has put forth as simply acts of the wrathful God of the OT. No, the OT God is the NT God, and He still hates idolatry and sin. That same wrath is still there, and we are shielded from it only by the shed blood of Christ. There will come a day, a terrible day when everyone on earth will see firsthand the wrath of God—as well as the awful wrath and judgment of His Son.

Read Revelation 6:14-17.

We dare not quickly dismiss these disturbing illustrations of what happens when one chooses to serve another god.

Session 96: “A Long Obedience in the Same Direction,” part one

1 Corinthians 10:12-14

Preface

In my library is a book written by the well-respected pastor and author, Eugene H. Peterson, entitled, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. This thin book, focused on the psalter’s “Songs of Ascents” (Psalms 120-134), is his response to a contemporary culture demanding instant answers, instant and painless gratification. That title, which I have brazenly borrowed for this session, is a phrase Peterson borrowed from Friedrich Nietzsche, the nineteenth century philosopher and writer. The fuller quote is

The essential thing in heaven and earth is... that there should be long obedience in the same direction; there thereby results, and has always resulted in the long run, something which has made life worth living.

(*Beyond Good and Evil*)

There is a tendency in those of us who study or just read God’s word to want to immediately apply the text before us to our personal situation—to think, “Ah, here is the answer to the problem I am having with_____.” Our passage in this session is a common case in point—especially v13. We want that verse to speak to our individual, personal temptations and trials. But does it?

By leaping too quickly to the personal application we run the risk of misapplying it by failing to first nail down why the author is saying what he does in its context. The “why” is necessary to understanding the “what.” That is, we can only accurately apply what the Spirit is telling us once we discern why the Spirit is telling us. And one of the “whys” for our current text, in my opinion, is the need for a “long obedience in the same direction” when it comes to enduring temptation or trials. So let us take these steps in turn. We begin by reading our passage, but including the verse before.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:11-14.

It seems a stretch to argue, as some do, that v13, while profitable Scripture in and of itself, does not fit into this context. How can one say that with all the connective tissue included, with all the “Therefore” and “these things happened” with which Paul connects everything in this chapter.

v6: Now these things [vv1-5] happened...

v11: Now these things [vv6-10] happened...

v12: Therefore, [based on what I have just said]... do this

v14: Therefore, [based on what I have just said]... do this

v12

Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall.

First, in v12, Paul delivers a stern warning; then, in v13, he extends a word of encouraging comfort. Permit me to offer a verbose paraphrase of v12: Therefore, based on what I have just said about the disobedience and rebellion and grumbling and complaining of Israel—and the Lord God’s terrible but just response to their behavior—if you think you know it all and are standing on solid, unmovable ground, watch out: you may be about to step off a cliff.

We need to return to Chapter Eight to see how Paul is still on-topic with this. Turn to Chapter Eight. Verse 12 echoes how Paul began this treatise in v8:2.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:2.

Behind this unhealthy situation of eating in an idol’s temple was an arrogant, even condescending attitude that said, “I’m an intelligent, knowledgeable person; I know that an idol is not a real god, so it is OK for me to be eating in its temple.” Paul’s answer to that? “Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies” (v1b). You are not wrong in what you know, but your knowledge

has so puffed you up that you care nothing for those who do not share your knowledge. Paul expands on this further down.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:9-12.

Garland: That presumed “knowledge” has led them to risk idolatrous associations and to think nothing of it [as in v8, referencing the events in Numbers 25:1-9]. They remained oblivious to the fact that it placed them, not to mention the person with a weak conscience, in dire spiritual jeopardy.

How many times, we might imagine, did any one of those thousands of Israelites cry out, in the face of the calamities that befell them, “But we are God’s chosen people!” And how many times have we Christians, in the face of hard and trying times, cry out, “But I’m standing on the Rock; how can this be happening to me.”

When you become so nonchalant (read, arrogant) about your faith in Christ that you think nothing of fooling around with idols, you are playing with fire and (mixing my metaphors) setting yourself up for a bad “fall”—the meaning of which here depends on the true condition of the individual. In arguing the meaning of the word “fall” we can miss the more important point. Whether Paul means loss of reward, or death (as with the Israelites), or loss of faith leading to eternal damnation, is less critical than the warning that you will lose something in your relationship with Christ. Garland’s phrase is apt: you are placing yourself in “dire spiritual jeopardy.”

v13

No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man;

Just as we have seen before, commentators have, over the centuries, stood on their heads trying to explain why Paul says what he does in v13, claiming that it seems to stand apart from the context. Contrary to these learned scholars, I frankly believe that the context helps explain this verse. I believe it fits in just fine. Earlier I said that in v13 Paul offers a word here of encouraging comfort, and that is true. But the verse includes, as well, a subtext of admonition for enduring obedience.

While our response to temptation—our entering into it (Luke 22) or our fleeing from it (1 Corinthians 10:14)—is primarily internal, more often than not the temptation itself is external. The first part of v13 makes it clear that this temptation (*peirasmos*, temptation = “seduction to sin”) has come from outside us. Please turn to James 1.

I think it will be worthwhile—if not necessary—to work this out before we move on. That is, many interpreters of God’s word say that what James states in v14 is that every aspect of temptation and sin begins internally in every person.

Read James 1:13-15.

The word in our Corinthian text translated “overtaken” in all but the NIV is **overtaken, seized** = *eilephen* = something “lying outside their willing or doing” (Fee)

In James, the word “enticed” translates, **deleazo** (del-eh-ad'-zo) = from the base of <G1388> (*dolos*); to entrap, i.e. (figurative) *delude* :- allure, beguile, entice.

and the word translated “carried away,” “drawn away,” or “dragged away,” is a hunting and fishing term, more literally translated “lured” in the ESV.

exelko = from <G1537> (*ek*) and <G1670> (*helkuo*); to drag forth, i.e. (figurative) to entice (to sin) :- draw away.

Here is the obvious fishing analogy: The fisherman baits his hook with whatever he thinks his prey will be drawn to. He casts out the line toward the place in the stream he thinks a fish awaits. From his hiding place the fish sees the bait, and, perhaps in spite of some nagging sense that there might be a sharp object hiding inside, his hunger overwhelms and

grabs hold. He is then “drawn away” (*exelko*) by the bait to a place he does not want to go. In this analogy the bait on the hook is the temptation, the move the fish makes to acquire the bait is the “sin,” motivated by his “lust” for food.

Let me offer another, slightly more human analogy. Let’s pick another “lust” at random—say, gambling. We are all born with a sin nature, but that nature is manifested differently in each person. One has a weakness for one thing, while another has a proclivity for something else.

Overseas for the navy in the early seventies I remember that practically everywhere we went ashore in the far east there were slot machines. Those machines held no allure for me; I could walk right past them and not give them any thought. But others found it more difficult—or even couldn’t resist their pull at all. Now, the person with loose change in his pocket didn’t make the machine; he had nothing to do with its being there when he walked by. But because of his particular nature, because of the specific lust dwelling within him, he was almost helpless to pass it by. Instead, he was “hooked” and “drawn away,” taken to a place he did not intend, nor even desire, to go.

Built into each one of us, because of original sin, is a weakness, a sensitivity, to something—one thing or more that exerts a powerful, at times overwhelming tug away from righteousness. We can certainly try to avoid situations where we know that allure dwells; this is Paul’s counsel to Timothy in his first letter to him: “But flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness” (1 Timothy 6:11). And in the next verse he will tell the Corinthians, “Flee from idolatry.” Because of the pervasiveness of certain allurements, however, some times this is impossible. We can also train ourselves, by the strength of God, to resist. In some cases, by His grace, we may even lose that proclivity all together. But for many of us, and I fear most of us, that specific weakness may be with us until we depart this mortal coil.

In sum, we may not have created or set in place the object of temptation, but the reason it is temptation at all is because of what lies within us. Those slot machines in Hong Kong and Kowloon and Tokyo and Subic Bay were not a temptation for this young sailor—but other things were. And we are responsible for our actions when it is.

We can, in our moments of extreme temptation, think that no one else has ever suffered such a powerful pull as we; we may think that we—certainly we—have just reason for giving in. But Paul says to the Corinthians that all these temptations are “common to man”—common to all of humanity. Here is the beginning of the encouragement: if we stop here in v13 we have yet no word about what—if anything—God will do for us in such situations. But the first word is that we are not unique, nor is our particular weakness unique. Others have dealt with (implied, successfully) such things before. We are not alone. And there is a measure of comfort in that. But as we proceed into v13, we will discover even more.

Session 97: “A Long Obedience in the Same Direction,” part two

1 Corinthians 10:12-14

Preface

The longer I look at this passage, especially v13, the more convinced I am that Paul is combining both temptation—an enticement to do that which is wrong in God’s eyes—and testing or trials—difficult, even painful situations that arise in our lives. As we will see in a moment, the word translated “temptation” can cover both.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:11-14.

v13

No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man;

Let me offer just a bit more on this opening statement of v13.

temptation = *peirasmos* (noun) = from <G3985> (*peirazo*); a putting to proof (by experiment [of good], experience [of evil], solicitation, discipline or provocation); by implication adversity :- temptation, × try.

We see how the two aspects of this word can coexist—temptation and testing—in the temptation of Christ Jesus in the wilderness.

Read Matthew 4:1-4.

tempted = *peirazo* (verb) = from <G3984> (*peira*); to test (object), i.e. endeavor, scrutinize, entice, discipline :- assay, examine, go about, prove, tempt (-er), try.

Jesus was not just “tried” (tested, refined) in this experience, he was also “tempted” by Satan to do the wrong thing. And so it often is for us—and, as we will see, for the Corinthians.

and God is faithful,...

In v12 Paul warned that we should “take heed that [we do] not fall.” Now, in v13, he reassures us that we need not fall. But, first of all, we must be careful how we interpret the word “faithful” in this verse. Don’t read this, “We can trust that God will always be there to bail us out of every challenging situation.” The testing, the temptation, can move in two directions: some in the Corinthian church were not being tested, but were testing God. I’m going to see how close I can get to this idolatrous society to retain my status and contacts in the community while still being a Christian, because I’m smart and can tell the difference between the two. God is first faithful to Himself; He must be who He is. And he probably will not come to our rescue when we have arrogantly created the situation ourselves, thus putting Him to the test.

The almighty Creator of the universe is not a lap dog who comes bounding to our side every time we get ourselves into a sticky situation—and even if He does, there is no guarantee He will respond in a way to our liking. As He is faithful to us—and He certainly is—He must, first, be faithful to Himself.

As evidence for this I would point to the egregious sins committed by King David. God was faithful to David in that He did not kill him on the spot, and he even removed the sin(s) from David’s account. But the Lord also had to be faithful to Himself; He is holy, and a price must be paid for such vile disobedience in the one man He had selected to establish the eternal throne that would be assumed by Christ. Through Nathan God said to David “Why have you despised the word of the Lord by doing evil in His sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the sons of Ammon” (2 Samuel 12:9). Was there a “way of escape,” a “way out”? Of course! Before any of this had transpired, the moment he caught sight of the bathing

woman he could have turned away—he could have fled from the temptation. God had provided the answer to the temptation, but David chose another path. Hence,

**“...the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised Me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife. Thus says the Lord, ‘Behold, I will raise up evil against you from your own household; I will even take your wives before your eyes and give them to your companion, and he will lie with your wives in broad daylight’”
(2 Samuel 12:10-11).**

In this tragic yet avoidable situation, God was faithful to King David; but He also was faithful to His own holiness.

who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able,

Here again we need to interpret this by heavenly terms, not by the soft indulgence of a fallen society. Most of us haven’t a clue how much temptation or trial we are able to withstand, for we invariably give in during the earliest moments—as the writer to the Hebrews puts it.

Read Hebrews 12:3-4.

The writer goes on to put this in the context of learning through discipline: God’s fatherly discipline. As Paul puts it to the Corinthians, we “endure” such trials and temptation, and thereby gain maturity.

Read Hebrews 12:5-7.

Back to our text.

Paul expresses two ways that God is faithful in such situations; that is, in the common trials and temptations of life—not those situations in which we are intentionally trying the Lord’s patience, as were those in Corinth dining in idol’s temples.

Breaking Point

The first way is that He will not allow us “to be tempted beyond what [we] are able.” There is nothing wrong with the word “able” here; the KJVs, NASB, ESV (“ability”), and even YLT so translate the Greek *dynamai*. But I wonder if it doesn’t make it too easy for the well-meaning believer to say, “Oh, I can’t do that,” or “Oh, I can’t take it anymore!” where it comes to withstanding temptation, or enduring trials.

Read that again: “...**God** is faithful; **He** will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear,” (emphasis added) as the NIVs have it. Who is making the decision about our level of endurance? Certainly not us.

The late, venerable theologian Hans Conzelmann notes, “The measure of the bearable cannot be theoretically determined. It shows itself on each occasion in the measure God appoints.” So what is our responsibility? What should be our response when faced with temptation and trials? “A long obedience in the same direction.”

but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.

The Exit

The second way in which God is faithful in these situations is in providing the means of “escape.”

the/a way of/to escape^{nasb, kjvs, esv}, **a way out**^{niv}, **the outlet**^{mt} = ekbasis = from a compound of <G1537> (ek) and the base of <G939> (basis) (meaning to go out); an exit (literal or figurative) :- end, way to escape.

Let us first note the importance of the definite article “the” instead of the indefinite article “an.” That is (as in the Greek), with each specific temptation or trial, God is supplying

the specific—i.e., appropriate to that moment—way out. Each—temptation and way out—is individualized. But there is another possible interpretation of the definite article.

Earlier, in the example of King David spying the bathing Bathsheba, I said that there was indeed a “way out”—i.e., turning away from the sight and going back inside his palace. But there is a better way to understand what is meant by *ekbasis*. Note what Paul is really saying here: “[God] will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it” (emphasis added). Here is what David Guzik has to say about this:

Guzik: The way of escape does not lead us to a place where we escape all temptation (that is heaven alone); the way of escape leads us to the place where we may be able to bear it.

And John MacArthur concurs, who interprets the definite article to mean not a specific way of escape for each different situation, but that there is only one way out of any of them.

MacArthur: In other words, there is only one way. The “way of escape” from every temptation, no matter what it is, is the same: it is *through*. Whether we have a test by God to prove our righteousness or a test by Satan to induce sin, there is only one way we can pass the test. We “escape” temptation not by getting out of it, but by passing through it. God does not take us out; He sees us through by making us “able to endure it.”

We see this being played out in Christ’s temptation/testing in the wilderness. His Father could have, at any moment, lifted the Son out of the unpleasant situation. The Father could have flicked Satan away with a snap of His fingers. But He didn’t. Instead, the Father gave the Son the ability to endure all that He had to pass through. Let’s return to the letter written by James.

Read James 1:2-4. (*peirasmos* = trials or temptation)

In the next verse Paul will tell the Corinthians to “flee idolatry.” They have been tested through temptation, and they are failing the test. There is nothing new here: the situation is as familiar to us as it was to those in first-century Corinth, and it was as familiar to them as it was in the earliest days of Israel’s departure from Egypt. Notice how the word of the Lord to Israel in Deuteronomy fits so perfectly to the situation in Corinth—as well as today.

Read Deuteronomy 13:1-3.

Many members of the Corinthian church were listening to the wrong voices, and as a result, their faith—whether they realized it or not—was being eroded. Verse 13 does not speak of a magical “Get out of Jail Free” card that grants us the ability to avoid any and all temptations or tests—a secret doorway offering escape from any insistent temptation, or unpleasant trial.

Rather, the take-away from this verse for believers is that we have an extra blessing, a grace, from God that unbelievers do not. For both the saved and the unregenerate, temptation does not cause us to sin; we sin because of what is inside us. The temptation is only that—something tempting, enticing us to sin, but not forcing us to sin. The Christian, however, has something the unbeliever does not: God at his side. It is from Him—and Him alone—that we gain the ability to endure through the temptation or testing, which is something the unregenerate do not have.

As always, it is all of God.

v14

Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.

Our examination of vv12-13 has caused us to dig into ourselves, our personal history of failures against temptation and trials. But v14 not only begins a new paragraph, it snaps us back to the present for the apostle: the context of first-century Corinth.

Why has Paul been saying all this? Because two things have been happening in the Christian community in Corinth:

1. They have been giving into the temptation to mix freely with the pagan society, even dining on meat sacrificed to idols in their temples.
2. They have been arrogantly (or, at least, ignorantly) tempting/testing God Himself, playing fast and loose with His grace, by seeing just how far they can go back into the pagan society and still call themselves “Christians.”

His command? Stop it! Get out of those idol temples!
Here is where we will begin in our next session.

Session 98: The Fellowship Meal

1 Corinthians 10:14-17

Foreword

This world, at present, is passing through a peculiar time (i.e., COVID-19). Because it dwells, for now, in this world, the church too—the body of Christ—has been passing through the same strange time. We, however, answer to a different Voice than the rest in this world; the Holy Spirit guides us, He counsels us, He shares with us the mind of the Father.

When all this began, when our local church in obedience to the authorities, ceased gathering on Sundays, I ceased as well our studies in First Corinthians. I realized at the time that, just like the pastor's messages, this too could continue on-line, but then we would not have the intimate fellowship of the classroom. Better to wait a few weeks, I thought, for the storm to pass by, then resume as before.

While there have been indeed a few glimmers of sunshine through the fog, there remains no firm end in sight. This week the Spirit has been prodding me, even in slumber, that this is not a healthy situation—that we need to get back into our study of Paul's letter to the Corinthians—even if by long-distance.

So that is what we are doing. This session, #98, is the one that had already been prepared for March 15 (a month earlier)—the Sunday when everything was canceled at the last minute. I would encourage you—no, I would implore you—to at least do a quick review of session #97 before continuing into this session. Meanwhile I will be uploading new sessions—both written notes in PDF and audio versions—every Friday.

I dare say we all look forward to the day when we can gather as family in the same room, but for now let us pray that the Lord would pour out His blessings and grace even on this long-distance study.

Preface

In vv1-4 of this chapter, the apostle emphasizes the attention and protection God afforded Israel while they were in the wilderness. Nevertheless (v5), "...with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness." In vv6-10, he itemizes their "crav[ing] of evil things." In spite of God's grace and protection, Israel turned against Him: worshiping idols, and participating in drunken orgies; flagrantly breaking His laws; fraternizing with people of pagan nations; grumbling and complaining about just about everything. In v11, as in v6, Paul makes the point that not only were these events recorded, but they actually happened by God's design so that we would learn from the mistakes they made and not do the same.

After the cautionary statement of v12, paraphrased, If you think you are smarter and better than they, and are convinced you're standing on firmer ground, watch out, for you may be about to step off a cliff, Paul adds a reassuring word—though perhaps not as comforting as we once might have thought: When we are tempted or tried the Lord God will be there with us (just as He was with Israel through their travails), to give us the ability to endure, to stay with Him as we pass through whatever is confronting us.

v13: An Additional Note

...with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.

Before we proceed into the next paragraph, I would like to add just one more note about v13. Some of us, especially those who have grown up with the more convenient interpretation of this verse, may be struggling to picture just what it looks like for the provision of a faithful God through the temptations and trials of life, rather than His providing an escape hatch from them.

For that illustration I would suggest the first ten verses of this chapter. It can't be coincidental that Paul prefaced v13 with the tales of Israel in the wilderness. Geographically speaking, Canaan was a short hop from the Nile delta in lower Egypt (the site of the city of Rameses). Yahweh provided, initially, "the way of escape" from the Egyptians through the Red Sea. He did that; He provided that. But when Israel was ready to cross over into Canaan, and

Yahweh was prepared to do the same thing by providing a dry way through the Jordan waters, Israel blew it. The Lord was faithful to Israel, but they failed to place their trust in Him and take Him at His word. Hence he turned them away from Canaan and sent them back into the wilderness to remove by attrition the unfaithful generation, and replace it with one hardened by the trials and temptations of the desert. All the while the Lord God was sustaining Israel through these trials, until the day came when they could, at last, cross Jordan “through” the waters, by His grace.

All of this has been background for the remainder of the chapter—some of Paul’s strongest words to the Corinthians, and the conclusion to his extended treatise on “concerning things sacrificed to idols” (8:1). This conclusion begins with a short verse that everyone of us should pin to our shirt every day when we rise.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:14-17.

v14

Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.

Paul loves these people and wants only what is best for them, best for their relationship and walk with Christ. To that end, and based on everything he has been saying, he tells them to Run!

flee = *pheugo* = apparently a primary verb; to run away (literal or figurative); by implication to shun; by analogy to vanish :- escape, flee (away).

Thus Paul reprises a theme—in places word-for-word—he employed in Chapter Six, regarding a different but equally destructive situation in the Corinthian church. ([chart from Garland.](#))

Comparing 1 Corinthians 6:12-18 to 1 Corinthians 10:14-31

10:14	Flee from idolatry	6:18	Flee (sexual) immorality
10:16-17	The Lord’s Supper represents that we are one body with Christ	6:15-17	Your bodies are members of Christ; you cannot become one body with a prostitute
10:23	All things are lawful, but not all things are helpful	6:12	All things are lawful, but not all things are helpful
10:31	Do all to the glory of God	6:20	Glorify God in your body

A recurring theme expressing the impossibility of successfully bridging the idolatrous and profane with a Christ-like life.



v15

I speak as to wise men; you judge what I say.

wise = *phronimos* = from <G5424> (*phren*); thoughtful, i.e. sagacious or discreet (implying a cautious character; while <G4680> (*sophos*) denotes practical skill or acumen; and <G4908> (*sunetos*) indicates rather intelligence or mental acquirement); in a bad sense conceited (also in the comparative) :- wise (-r).

The Corinthians may be listening to the wrong philosophies, and they have a habit of thinking too highly of themselves, but Paul acknowledges their developed intellect, and appeals to it.

v16-17

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?

Some have tried to make this passage about the Lord's Supper be something more than what it is. Paul is not expounding deep theology here, nor is he outlining liturgical doctrine and practice in the church—just as he was not playing the historian in the first ten verses of this chapter. Here he is using the example of the Lord's Supper as part of his argument against eating idol offerings. As David Garland puts it,

As the Lord's Supper is a sacred meal that represents and creates a fellowship of believers in the worship of Christ, who is considered to be present, so pagan meals represent and create a fellowship of worshipers of pagan deities who also are considered to be present.

The comparison is powerful; this passage reiterates a recurring theme we have seen not just in this letter to the Corinthians, but one I keep running into in my personal studies. To wit, At some point you must choose. The follower of Christ cannot straddle the fence, with one foot in the Kingdom, and one in the world. Is Christ Jesus Lord or not? If He is, then get your foot out of the world. This is what Paul says later in v21—

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.

—and what Jesus said in His Sermon on the Mount—

Read Matthew 6:24.

—and what Joshua so eloquently stated shortly before his death:

"If it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."
(Joshua 24:15)

The Christian cannot have it both ways; either Christ is Lord of your life, or He is not—and if He is not, then someone else assuredly is.

Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ?

As Garland's quote, as well as Paul's language, makes clear, the overriding theme of vv16-17—indeed, the whole paragraph—is fellowship. Using the Lord's Supper to illustrate his point, Paul asserts that the meal is a ceremony, an enactment, representing, first, our fellowship with Christ. Lying beneath the words of our various English translations—share, sharing, sharers, partake, communion, participation—is a thread that is all about *koinonia*: a spiritual fellowship. All those words translate either *koinonia* or the verb *metechein* (a synonym for *koinonia*). That word, that concept, is all about one person sharing in, participating in, the life of another. The biblical concept of fellowship is not about drinking coffee together and talking about the weather (although, by extension, it can include that), but

is far deeper, a concept far more profound than just chatting about last night's game. It involves bearing one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2), accepting one another (Romans 15:7), being devoted to one another in brotherly love (Romans 12:10), loving one another (1 John 4:11), praying for one another (James 5:16). But Paul's first point is that the Lord's Supper (Communion) is an enactment of the fellowship believers have with Christ Himself: a sharing in His sacrificial blood in the cup, and in His body with the bread.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:24-25.

Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ?

Second, Paul notes the aspect in the Lord's Supper of fellowship or communion in and with the "body of Christ"—the Christian family.

In the first-century social setting of those receiving this letter, Paul's use of the Lord's Supper in an extended treatise on the error of eating meat "sacrificed to idols" would be immediately obvious. This was a society (Greco-Roman) in which a shared meal "incurred obligations." Here, as in most other urban settings, there was a common and active patronage system at work. As today, shared meals were a common, even vital, social element of the society. However, it was understood that one did not dine with one's patron and also dine with one of that patron's rivals; to do so would be tantamount to switching sides: switching patrons. Thus, "participating in a patron's meal display[ed] one's solidarity with that patron" (Garland).

Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread.

A Christian "breaking bread" in the precinct of and with the supplicants of a pagan idol had the visible, social effect of "switching sides." And if that was not the believer's intention, then he was trying to have it both ways—which does not work. Participation in the Lord's Supper is, along with a remembrance of Christ's life and sacrifice, a periodic reaffirmation of one's place in—and solidarity with—the fellowship of the body of Christ: His church.

In our next session we will press further into this paragraph, but I would also like to reserve the right to revisit vv16-17, for there is a rich bounty here to be harvested, and we don't want to miss any of it.

Session 99: We Are What We Eat, part one

1 Corinthians 10:18-22

Preface

In this study we move from the example of the Christian “table of the Lord”—that is, Communion—in vv15-17, to the example of Israel and those who sacrifice to (and eat with) an idol that is not God. Let’s begin by reading the entire paragraph, vv14-22.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:14-22.

v18

Look at the nation Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices sharers in the altar?

Sidebar: The KJVs have the most literal translation of this verse with, “Observe Israel after the flesh.” For that word translated “nation,” or “people” in the rest of our versions, is the Greek *sarx*, which is literally flesh, or the meat of an animal. David Garland bases his minority interpretation of this passage on this word, claiming that Paul here refers to the rebellious, sinful, “unfaithful Israel,” since Paul typically employs this term when speaking of man’s sinful nature, as he does throughout Romans and Galatians, for example. Most commentators, however, do not subscribe to that interpretation.

Even after all these years, it continues to amaze me how easy it is to miss something one has read many times. How often have you been reading along in the Bible and suddenly remark, “I didn’t know that was there!” Born and raised in the church, attending Sunday School, sitting under countless preachers, having read through the Bible many times—and I still can be surprised on occasion. How many times have I read in the OT about the various temple sacrifices and festivals, yet it was only within the last few years I realized that sometimes it was more than the priestly tribe that ate from the meat sacrificed on the temple altar.

Most of us understand that when the tribes of Israel were apportioned land and rights of inheritance in Canaan, the tribe of Levi—the priestly tribe—was not granted a section of land. They were granted pasture lands around the cities, and they were given forty-eight cities, six of which would be designated “cities of refuge” for those accused of murder, but they were not given tribal territory (Numbers 35:1-7). Their portion would be the Lord. In Numbers 18 the Lord told Aaron what would be theirs.

Read Numbers 18:18-21.

What I missed until recently was that the common people as well, when they brought their sacrifices, their tithes and offerings to the temple, they too, after the priests, would “eat before the Lord [their] God.”

Read Deuteronomy 12:5-7.

Paul’s point here in our text is that not just the priests, not just the Levites, but anyone in Israel who ate from the altar—that is, food sacrificed to Yahweh—was thus a “sharer” or “participant” in the altar. We understand the true depth of this statement when we see the Greek beneath it.

koinonos = from <G2839> (*koinos*); a sharer, i.e. associate :- companion, × fellowship, partaker, partner.

The root word for these words—*koinos*, *koinonos*, *koinonia*, etc.—is, curiously enough, *syn*, which is almost always translated “with.”

syn (soon) = a primary preposition denoting union; with or together (but much closer than <G3326> (*meta*) [accompaniment] or <G3844> (*para*) [near, alongside]), i.e. by association, companionship, process, resemblance, possession, instrumentality, addition, etc. :- beside, with. In comparative it has similar applications, including completeness.

Years ago I sat in a Sunday morning service in the family church of quite a few of Linda's relatives in Alden, Iowa. They apparently had communion every Sunday, so at a point in the middle of the service they passed the plates with the elements. Every one ate and drank dutifully; I do not recall any mention from the pastor of what it meant, why we were doing this. The whole procedure was mechanical, done by rote, then we moved on.

My guess is that some in the Corinthian church were also conducting this holy ordinance mechanically, by rote. This is why Paul, in v16, so stridently grabs them by the collar and shouts,

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?

Don't you get it? He rails. Don't you see that when we partake of the wine and the bread we are declaring ourselves in union, in fellowship (koinonia) with Christ? It means something!

Then Paul cites the example of Israel: "...are not those who eat the sacrifices sharers in the altar?" Priests, Levites, common worshipers—probably as guilty as that church in Alden and the one in Corinth, guilty of it becoming just an empty, mindless ritual. But even if in their own minds it meant nothing, in reality, on a deep, spiritual level, it meant something profound. Partaking of a holy meal—one from "the altar"—links one with the deity behind that altar. One is then associated with that deity; whether you intend it or not, you become partnered with that deity.

v19

Then, in v19, the apostle anticipates their riposte.

What do I mean then? That a thing sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything?

This was already in the mix; back in Chapter Eight, when he opened this portion of his letter, Paul answered an argument the church had probably sent him in writing.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:4-6.

The Corinthians were saying that eating food that had been sacrificed to idols, even within the precincts of the pagan temple, meant nothing, because that pagan "god" did not even exist. In Chapter Eight Paul agreed with that—in principle. You're right: that god does not really exist. There is only one, true God, "...the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him" (1 Corinthians 8:6).

What the Corinthians had failed to realize (at least as they presented their argument to Paul) was that, as Fee puts it, "To say an idol is not a god does not mean that it does not represent supernatural powers. Indeed, it is quite the opposite." Just as there is more to Communion than just sipping wine and eating bread, just as there is more to partaking of the meat from Yahweh's altar than just sitting down to a good meal, so there is more to eating meat sacrificed to idols than being polite, or establishing business contacts. And now, to the end of this paragraph, Paul heads toward his most powerful argument against their position.

v20a

No, but I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God;

Just as the chariot race in *Ben-Hur*, without question the dramatic climax of the film, comes well before its end, so too Paul brings to a climax what he has been working toward for three chapters, before the end of the last chapter. In vv23-33 of Chapter Ten he lays out his practical counsel on how to behave as followers of Christ in a pagan world, but the climax, the punchline, comes in v21.

In v20 Paul gets one step closer to his powerful, climactic conclusion of v21. In this paragraph (vv14-22), the apostle has been systematically setting up a modified “if-then” statement: If this is true, and if this is true, and most certainly if this is true, then, logically, this must be true.

- In v16 he presents the Christian side of the equation, that by sharing in the ordinance of Communion the believer is spiritually, mystically joining with the blood and body of Christ Jesus.
- In v18 he points out that if that is true for Christians, it is and has been true for Jews: When they share in food and meat from the altar, they are associating themselves with, joining with the God whose altar that is.
- In the first part of v20 Paul establishes the third “if” in the “if-then” statement: Christians are partakers of Christ, Jews are partakers of Yahweh, and Gentiles—because they share in neither Yahweh or Christ—are sharers in demons.

demons = *daimonion* = neuter of a derivative of <G1142> (*daimon*); a dæmonic being; by extension a deity :- devil, god.

Gentiles, pagans = *ethnos* = probably from <G1486> (*etho*); a race (as of the same habit), i.e. a tribe; specially a foreign (non-Jewish) one (usually by implication pagan) :- Gentile, heathen, nation, people. *Although throughout the Bible ethnos is used for any nation that is not Israel (Hebrew, goyim), here and elsewhere Paul can use ethnos in a broader sense to refer to anyone who, by faith, has been “grafted into the rich olive tree” (Romans 11:17) that is the children of Abraham, by virtue of his faith in Jesus Christ. Paul has already revealed this distinction in Chapter Five: “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” (1 Corinthians 5:1, emphasis added).*

Logically that is all that is left; if there is only one true God, worshiped by Christians and Jews, then that leaves only beings who are “not-gods” (i.e., “demons”) for them to worship. This connection was established by Moses, back in his “Song” of Deuteronomy 32.

Read Deuteronomy 32:15-22.

Lange: To partake of a Jewish sacrifice as a sacrifice, and in a holy place, was an act of Jewish worship. By parity of reasoning to partake of a heathen sacrifice as a sacrifice, and in a holy place, was an act of heathen worship.

v20b

...and I do not want you to become sharers in demons.

There is a generous dollop of humanity in what Paul adds at the end of v20. As a writer, I wouldn’t do it; stylistically it weakens the run-up to v21. But Paul’s thoughts are not on stylistic writing; his thoughts and his heart are all on the welfare of the Corinthians. So he must put down what is on his mind at the moment: Oh, please, Corinthians, don’t do this. Don’t become sharers in demons!

In our next session we will revisit v20 before we examine the most powerful v21, and the rest of this paragraph.

Session 100: We Are What We Eat, part two

1 Corinthians 10:18-22

Preface

Let me prepare us for this study by setting up a hypothetical situation. Linda and I are working on our fiftieth year of marriage. Let us assume that for the last forty-nine years I have loved her, been attentive to her needs, behaved toward her in a gracious, respectful manner—I have been, by any definition, a good husband to her.

During this fiftieth year, however, she learns that I have doing much the same with another woman for the last ten years. Though not legally married, I have loved this other woman, been attentive to her needs, behaved toward her in a gracious, respectful manner and, in a practical yet unofficial capacity, have been a good “husband” to her.

Shocked and saddened by this news, Linda confronts me with the evidence, demanding an answer. My response? “Haven’t I always been everything you could expect from a husband? Have you lacked in anything? What does it matter if I do the same for another woman, if I meet all my obligations to you?”

Would any wife, any woman in my hearing be satisfied with that response and that situation? I think not. Some in the Corinthian church, however, were doing this with their devotion to Christ. They were saying—if not in words, their actions—that so long as they gave due diligence to Christ by attending church and partaking of the Lord’s table, what did it matter if they also attended a pagan temple and partook of that idol’s table? In our text today Paul gives them a direct, unequivocal answer.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:14-22.

v20

Before we leave v20, we need to get down into the weeds a little bit. We have run into similar anomalies in other passages, other studies, and we need to point it out again here.

In v20 Paul is clearly drawing from Deuteronomy 32:17, which we read near the end of our previous study. Look at v20 as I read 32:17 and you will immediately see the connection:

**They sacrificed to demons who were not God,
To gods whom they have not known,
New gods who came lately,
Whom your fathers did not dread.**

You will note that in both v20 and Deuteronomy 32:17 the word “God” (Greek: theos, Hebrew: eloah) is capitalized. In either language the word can refer to the Deity (“God”) or a deity (“god”). The oddity which we have run into before is that almost without exception all the commentators remark, as Gordon Fee puts it,

[Paul] does not intend to say that “the pagans are not sacrificing to God,” meaning the God whom we Christians know and worship. That would be irrelevant at best. Paul means either “not to a god,” or “to demons, even to one who is no-god.”

Yet—and this is what leaves us lowly amateurs scratching our heads—every one of our common translations renders this “God,” capital G, even though the word in the Greek allows the lowercase g.

v21

What we now have before us, in v21, is what I believe to be one of the most powerful, most important verses in God’s word. I consider it of utmost importance because of its obvious application and relevance to the believer’s ongoing sanctification. It has deep, foundational ramifications far beyond just the immediate context of Chapter Ten—i.e., the eating of food sacrificed to idols.

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.

Even before he opened his present topic in Chapter Eight, Paul was saying much the same thing he says here, in Chapter Six, on the topic of visiting temple prostitutes.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:15-20.

And he will continue in his second (extant) letter to the church, this time on associating with unbelievers.

Read 2 Corinthians 6:14-18.

This tells us that the topic was important to the apostle—and that he considered it of vital importance to the spiritual health and sanctification of the church. But let's get back to our text. In Chapter Ten the setting is not visiting temple prostitutes but Communion—the “table of the Lord.” As he has since the beginning of this chapter, Paul is contrasting the Lord's table, in which the believer identifies with Christ Jesus, with the idol's table, in which the diners—even if they do not realize it—identify with demons.

Notice first the verb: “cannot”; not “I wish you wouldn't” or “you shouldn't” or “you'd be better off not to.” No, it is impossible to “drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons”; it is impossible to “partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.” One cannot split one's devotion; one cannot subdivide the soul.

Back in the very early eighties, after a period in the wilderness, in practical terms ignoring the God of my youth, the Spirit pulled me back into the fold. After a while, I found myself parting company with some friends and colleagues I had had during those wilderness years—not purposefully, not under any command to do so; those friendships just faded away, as we now had little in common. I was now spending more time with those in the body of Christ, and those earlier relationships just didn't feel right. We were now out of sync with each other. I was on one path; they were on another.

You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons;

There is a lot going on at the Communion table; it would make for a useful and edifying study on its own. But let's focus on just two aspects to what we call Communion—the two aspects Paul brings out in this paragraph.

First there is the vertical aspect, embodied in the cup, which represents the blood of Christ. It is not His blood literally, of course, it just represents it. By drinking from the cup the believer—as Paul puts it in v16—shares in the blood of Christ. The word is the familiar *koinonia*; the believer solidifies within himself, as well as signifying to those in witness, that he associates himself with the sacrifice of blood Christ made upon the altar of the cross (for the Christian the table is not the altar; the “altar” is the cross upon which Christ died for his sins). The drinking of the cup represents the individual's fellowship with Christ's sacrifice.

you cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.

Second is the horizontal aspect, embodied in the bread, which represents not just the body of Christ Jesus, but the “body of Christ,” the church. As with the cup, the bread is not literally Christ's flesh (against the Catholic belief in the transmutation of the bread and wine, by the priest, into the literal flesh and blood of Jesus). In v17 Paul writes, “Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread.” Here is pictured the fellowship of the church—breaking bread together—around the body and blood of the slain Lamb of God.

Both vertically and horizontally the Lord's table represents, and is a regular reminder of, the sacrifice Christ Jesus made, out of His love for us, shedding his blood upon the altar of the cross. He commanded us to “do this in remembrance of Me” (1 Corinthians 11:24-25); our participation in the Communion table is our obedience to His command. And it also associates us with Him; one might say, it “brands” us as Christians for all to see.

Beyond this, however, and the reason I believe this verse to be so important, so foundational, is that it speaks to the issue of lordship. If we return to the Song of Moses, a little further into it we see the Lord God speaking to this issue.

Read Deuteronomy 32:36-39.

A Lampel paraphrase of vv37-38: *So you find yourself in a spot of trouble and you come crying to Me for help? But you have been making sacrifices to other gods—cry out to them and see if they help you, because you're not getting any from Me. You've made your bed; now lie in it.* In 1 Kings 18:21,

Elijah came near to all the people and said, "How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the LORD [Yahweh] is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him." But the people did not answer him a word.

And then, of course, Jesus was on the same page.

Read Matthew 6:24.

I cannot love my wife and be wholly devoted to her when I have someone else on the side. It is impossible; something snaps deep in your soul if you try that. Likewise the soul cannot have two Gods and two Lords. You have to choose one—and only one. And this is fundamental to faith, fundamental to our walk with Christ. You can only fellowship with, associate with, be identified with one Lord. To straddle the fence in even a seemingly harmless way is to corrupt both.

v22

Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy?

Paul is still referencing the Song of Moses when he poses this rhetorical question, which Fee paraphrases, "Or will you continue eating at both meals, and thus arouse the Lord's jealousy?"

It is true that Paul's focus here, though citing the OT, is not Yahweh but Christ Jesus. It is also true that like first-century Corinth, we are in the church age, the age of grace through the sacrificial blood of Christ. Yet God—who the Son of God is—does not change. He is the same today as He was when He told Moses on Mount Sinai,

"You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments." (Exodus 20:4-6)

We are not stronger than He, are we?

The meaning of this closing line is not immediately clear, but I think Fee's interpretation is probably correct.

Gordon Fee: Most likely this is the final warning that God's "jealousy" cannot be challenged with impunity. Those who would put God to the test by insisting on their right to what Paul insists is idolatry are in effect taking God on, challenging Him by their actions, daring God to act. Secure in their own foolhardiness, they think of themselves as so "strong" that they can challenge Christ Himself. But their folly, implied in an earlier exhortation (9:25) and given in the preceding warning (10:12), is that they will thereby fail to gain the final eschatological prize.

Here are sobering words from the apostle—words that should convict us to daily examine our actions, our thoughts, our proclivities.

- Are we making room in our life for a competing "lord"?
- Is there anything or anyone in our life vying for the throne upon which there is only One worthy to sit?
- Are we permitting demons to invade where only God should be?

Session 101: Liberty, Edification, and Conscience, part one

1 Corinthians 10:23-26

Preface

Once more, in the passage before us, we are confronted with a way of living—a pattern for life—diametrically opposed to the ways of the society in which we presently live. Today's culture is based on the individual's (or the group's) right to have his way—to the extent that the rights of another (or another group) must be destroyed if it gets in the way. We are living in the era of “I have my rights, and I demand my rights.” But it is actually worse than that. In this era the watchword is “I have my way, and I demand my way.” And it doesn't even stop there; it has now progressed (actually digressed) into “I have my way, I demand my way—and I demand that you adopt my way.”

Nothing could be further from a biblical way of living—and especially espoused by the apostle Paul in our text. This has been a running theme throughout his letter from the beginning. Follow along with me:

- v1:10 be of like mind; stop erecting barriers between you
- vv3:1-3 you are still behaving like the rest of the world
- v4:6 I want you to work together, as fellow servants
- v4:16 (after describing their selfless serving of others in vv10-13)
- v6:7 (after reprimanding them for suing each other)
- v8:1 far more important than knowledge is love for each other
- v8:13 my brother's spiritual health is more important than my liberties
- v9:12 we gladly forfeit our rights for the sake of the gospel of Christ

Read 1 Corinthians 10:23-33.

For myself, I need look no further than my mom for an earthly example of this philosophy. One illustration has always stood out. I was too young at the time to remember the details now, but at some point during my childhood Mom was having some mental or emotional problems, solutions for which were sought at the Iowa City hospital. During the counseling she was receiving the doctor told her that for her own good she must start thinking more of herself than her family. This counsel was not just rejected by her, but she quite soon thereafter returned home, and back to selflessly serving not just her family, but anyone in need. To think of herself first, before others, was to her a hateful philosophy.

v23

All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify.

Paul's counsel and strict commands since the beginning of this chapter have been addressed to our fellowship with other believers. Now in this next paragraph he speaks to what our behavior should be toward those outside the church. The previous was focused on the situation introduced in Chapter Eight—i.e., eating in an idol's temple—while the next paragraph focuses on situations on the street and as a guest in someone's home. And he begins by repeating something he said in Chapter Six, there in the context of the believer's physical body, and a different set of “rights.”

Read 1 Corinthians 6:12.

The NIVs and ESV remind us (by the insertion of quotation marks) that, as in Chapter Six, Paul is quoting back an axiom cited by the Corinthians themselves, which Paul agrees with—in principle. In general both passages are making the same point: “Truly Christian conduct is not predicated on whether I have the right to do something, i.e., whether it is to my own benefit or not, but whether my conduct is good, meaning ultimately helpful to those around me” (Fee). But in v23 he adds a twist at the end. Let's quickly note the differences between the two passages:

- The operative words in the first sentence of the verse are identical: “lawful” = permitted, allowed, and “profitable” (in the negative) = to bring together (for good). In the first, however, he adds the words “for me.” The KJVs include “for me” in 10:23, but the oldest manuscripts do not have that in the Greek. (The NIV2011 of v23, while not necessarily inaccurate, is more paraphrase than translation, and almost embarrassingly so.)
- Paul changes the last phrase from “I will not be mastered by anything,” to “not all things edify.” The first (6:12) seemed to suggest that by claiming the right to visit prostitutes, that right would result in handing over to a whore mastery of one’s body. In 10:23, however, Paul’s switch to edification is explained in the next verse.

v24

Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor.

This sentiment points directly back to the beginning of this treatise on food sacrificed to idols.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:1.

Personal rights, that which is lawful, that which is permissible—these have little standing in whether a course of action should be pursued. Of far greater importance is whether that course will build up or tear down another—and here, specifically, whether that course brings glory to God and the gospel of Christ. The standard is not be “rights,” but love for (in this case, the soul of) another.

The word translated “neighbor” in the NASB and ESV is *heteros*, which simply means “other”—someone other than oneself. If Paul here was referring to someone in the church, I think he would have used, instead of *heteros*, *adelphos*—brother or brethren.

Note: In 1611 the KJV’s insertion of “wealth” in “another’s wealth” may have been understood to mean, as intended, “well-being.” Today, however, that word sends us entirely in the wrong direction.

How might this injunction be applied in this context? Paul offers two illustrations: the first in the common marketplace where one is purchasing food for one’s table (vv25-26); the second when one is sitting down to a meal in a friend’s house (vv27-30).

vv25-26

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.

By quoting Psalm 24 in v26, the apostle immediately supplies the rationale behind his command in v25. Setting aside for just a moment that all of Scripture is God-breathed, in Psalm 24 it is David speaking, and in Psalm 50, penned by Asaph, it is God Himself confirming this.

Read Psalm 50:10-12.

Cattle, sheep, goats, chickens, and fish are not religious. If they are handled by priests who dedicate their flesh to an idol (demon), it’s not their fault.

There is physical and documented evidence that the marketplace in the first century had an intimate relationship with the local temples and the leftover food from their sacrifices. Some have concluded that in practice the (pagan) priests were the city’s butchers, supplying not only the meat for the sacrifices, but meat for the shops in the market.

This is not hard to imagine. Since the handing down of the Mosaic Law, the Levitical priests were the ones who knew how to butcher an animal properly according to that law. Even in Orthodox Jewish society today rabbis oversee, through the on-site supervision of a mashgiach (who may also be a rabbi) the ritual slaughter by a God-fearing Jew all meat certified as kosher. So everyone knew that most of the meat in the market of the first century came from one temple or another.

It is not the animal but the belief system that renders something unclean or restricted. If that meat or food is set apart from that belief system—and the Christian shopper is unaware of the connection—then no offense has been committed against a holy God who, after all, created “every beast of the forest.” We are reminded of Peter’s dramatic dream prior to meeting the centurion Cornelius.

Read Acts 10:9-16.

What does Paul mean by the phrase “for conscience’ sake,” used here and twice more (v27 and v28)? As the setting changes in the second illustration, how Paul uses this word (*syneidesis*) changes as well. Opinions vary, but I agree with Fee and Garland that in v25 Paul is saying that in this setting conscience should not be a factor at all; that “this matter lies outside the concerns of conscience altogether” (Fee).

Since it is improbable that any of us will find ourselves in a situation of purchasing meat sacrificed to idols, how are we to apply this to our walk with Christ today? Perhaps we can take our cue from something John MacArthur writes.

MacArthur: The third principle for using Christian liberty to the Lord’s glory is that of following liberty over legalism. To some degree this principle counterbalances the previous one [v24]. The true welfare of others should be our first concern, but their standards should not rule everything we do. As much as possible we should keep from offending the...consciences of fellow believers, but we should not go to the legalistic extreme of making great issues out of everything we do.

It may not be the best illustration, but what comes to mind is something that occurred many, many years ago when my older brother was in Little League—or maybe he was just at a game; like I said, a very long time ago, in the fifties or early sixties. One of our uncles, who was a G.A.R.B. pastor, was visiting at the time and was sorely exercised that my brother was wearing shorts to the game. He was doing a lot of frowning, and later had something to say to our mom, his sister.

Should my brother have asked our uncle for his list of acceptable clothing articles before dressing for the game? At the first scowl from our uncle, should he have raced home to change? No, to both. My brother was under no constraints to bow to the absurd legalities of our uncle’s belief system. And by doing so, by compromising his Christ-paid liberty, the Lord would not have received one more ounce of glory from the situation. Remember what Paul wrote to the Galatian church.

Read Galatians 2:3-5.

Session 102: Liberty, Edification, and Conscience, part two

1 Corinthians 10:27-29a

Preface

How practical is God's word, how timely, how real. In the brief passage before us in this session the apostle offers an illustration, variations on which probably occur every day to every believer who is out in the world. Here is another example of, what I term, our God "getting his hands dirty" in our lives. Our God is not some distant, uncaring potentate, dismissive of the lowly Plebeians at his feet, but a gracious, loving Father intimately interested in the lives of those who call upon His name. As such, and because "He Himself knows our frame" (Psalm 103:14), His word is filled with practical counsel to assist us in our becoming more like His Son in a fallen world.

It is important that we consider this passage from the perspective of two bookends included in this chapter. The first is v24:

Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor.

The second is the last part of v33:

...not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many, so that they may be saved.

Here is Paul's overriding theme: the believer, the follower of Christ, must approach every situation with the good of the other person as a priority. More than that, as Paul makes clear in his Philippian letter, when we are focused on ourselves, we are not serving Christ.

Read [Philippians 2:20-21](#).

Let us once again read the entire two paragraphs for context.

Read [1 Corinthians 10:23-33](#).

v27

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.

We now move from the marketplace to someone's—an unbeliever's—home. If we stopped here the situation—and the believer's response—is almost identical to the illustration of the marketplace in v25: "Eat anything that is sold in the meat market without asking questions for conscience' sake." And here he uses that annoyingly flexible (Garland: "slippery") word "conscience" in the same way. That is, Paul is saying that in this setting conscience should not be a factor at all; that "this matter lies outside the concerns of conscience altogether" (Fee).

For the Christian food is food. To use a Greek word, food is *adiaphora*—something spiritually neutral, neither commanded nor forbidden. And in our text, "the food's history matters only when it matters to someone else who considers it sacred" (Garland). So when you are invited to someone's house, and you sit down around the dinner table and the meat and potatoes and vegetables are brought out from the kitchen, there is no reason at all to inquire about the source of the food. There is no matter of conscience involved—yet.

v28-29a

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;

The rules change when we otherwise learn that what we are about to consume has a pagan—demonic—connection. Then, because we now know, we must not partake of the tainted food.

The jury remains split on precisely who gives the game away. Based on the traditional interpretation of the situation in Corinth—i.e., a conflict between those strong of faith and those weak of faith—many have said that the one who declares (or leans over and whispers in

the ear), “This is meat sacrificed to idols,” is a weaker brother, and for his sake the “stronger” one is not to eat. But we long ago dispensed with that interpretation of the local church and Paul’s letter to them.

The best conclusion is that the speaker is a nonbelieving fellow guest at the meal, and the evidence for this is hidden in the Greek beneath our text, for it reveals that the guest speaks from a pagan point of view. Look at v19, above.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:19.

Note that it is Paul speaking. The phrase “thing sacrificed to idols” translates one Greek word.

eidolothyton = neuter of a compound of <G1497> (*eidolon*) and a presumed derivative of <G2380> (*thuo*); an image-sacrifice, i.e. part of an idolatrous offering :- (meat, thing that is) offered (in sacrifice, sacrificed) to (unto) idols. *Paul, as would most Jews and Christians, uses this word because it labels the meat or item as idolatrous—i.e., pagan, demonic.*

Someone who actually worships before a pagan god would not use this derogatory term. However, in v28, the phrase “meat sacrificed to idols” translates a different Greek word—one that would be used by what we would term a pagan.

hierothyton = offered in sacrifice, a more generic, non-accusative term for making a sacrifice to a god.

And now we see how this fits neatly within our two bookends: “Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor,” and “...not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many, so that they may be saved.” Why should the believer refrain from eating the meat he now knows has been sacrificed to idols?

...for the sake of the one who informed you, and for conscience' sake; I mean not your own conscience, but the other man's;

The focus is all on—and the consideration for—the other person. And once again we gain insight from the Greek beneath the text. The word translated “informed” (*menyo*) implies private communication. So here is how we can reconstruct the situation: You have been invited to a meal at an unbeliever’s house. Several of his friends and business associates have been invited as well, who are, as one might expect, also unbelievers. You are the token Christian. We’ll give the host the benefit of the doubt that his intentions are honorable; perhaps he is fascinated by and interested in a belief system that follows a crucified Messiah. Some reclined around the table are less generous about your bizarre faith, but at one point, just before the meal is set out, the man to your left leans over and quietly informs you that the meat had been earlier sacrificed in the local temple. As many still did at that time, he perceives the Christian faith as basically a Jewish sect, and everyone is well aware of the strict dietary regulations followed by the Jews. His remark is intended as a kindness, a friendly warning.

Here, in contrast to his earlier counsel, Paul’s use of “conscience” is operative—as is clearly explained in v29a: “I mean not your own conscience, but the other man’s.” We must ask: How so? Here is how Gordon Fee explains it:

Fee: The clue lies in the meaning of “conscience,” which is not to be understood as “a moral arbiter” but as “moral consciousness.” The one who has pointed out the sacrificial origins of this meat to a believer has done so out of a sense of moral obligation to them, believing that Christians, like Jews, would not eat such food. So as not to offend that [thoughtful] person, nor their moral expectations of a follower of Christ, and precisely because it is *not* a matter of a believer’s moral consciousness, one should forbear under these circumstances.

That is, seeking the good of his neighbor and seeking his profit so that he might be saved (v24 & v33), the believing guest is not to eat that which he knows to have been sacrificed to

idols. If anything a Christian is to be a “moral” person, and he owes it to the unbelieving informer to respect his moral choice, and to witness to the unbeliever, Christian behavior that just might win him for Christ.

All this is getting more than a little circuitous and possibly confusing; since surely none of us will find ourselves in identical circumstances, permit me to offer a more contemporary illustration of the point Paul is making.

Quite a long time ago we were looking for someone to paint the exterior of our house. When one painter showed up to look the house over and make his bid for the job, he clumsily tried to witness to me as a Christian. To our later profound regret, we hired him for the job. The man was a brute who mistreated his hired help. He, I learned later, had earlier stiffed the paint companies, so that they required cash up-front before they would sell him paint. His work was of poor quality, and took longer than expected. When he approached me for an advance on the balance to be paid at the completion of the job, I refused, based on his behavior up to then. From then on he continued working, but with sullen, sometimes verbal anger. Finally, having reached my limit, I approached him, threw at his feet a check for the balance, and ordered him and his crew off our property.

At the start of the job I had pointed out some areas that required caulking and, handing the man three tubes of caulk I had purchased, asked him to do the job—which he agreed to do. By the time I paid him off and ordered them to leave—though the painting was not yet completed—he had not done the caulking (which, of course, needed to be done prior to painting). So as the crew members were loading their tools into the boss’s truck I approached them and requested back the three tubes of caulk I had given him earlier.

They could only find one of them, so suggested I take two tubes that belonged to the painter. I answered no, those were his; I only wanted back what were mine. At that point one of the crew said words to the effect, “Boy, you’re a better Christian than I am.”

Whether I was or not is beside the point. In that moment I did what I thought to be morally correct as a Christian: not to take the property of someone else. What I realized later, however, was that I had just witnessed for Christ to those men. Their boss had loudly made the claim that he was a Christian, even tried to proselytize me. But his subsequent behavior and language bore no resemblance whatsoever to “the fruit of the Spirit.” I could have easily accepted those two tubes of caulk, and no one in the present company would have faulted me—by their standards. But, knowing they belonged to someone else, I refused, and that refusal left an impression on those who had witnessed for the last several days the very un-Christian-like behavior of their boss.

Like the Christian in Paul’s scenario, I did without something for the sake of someone else (unwittingly, in my case), as well as for the cause of Christ.

We have a Savior who is the supreme example of this way of living. Let’s close by returning to the second chapter of Philippians. Even though the immediate setting for the passage beginning with v1 is the church, the fellowship of believers, I think it has application to our passage in First Corinthians, as well as any time we find ourselves in company with unbelievers.

[Read Philippians 2:1-11.](#)

Session 103: The Balancing Act

1 Corinthians 10:29b-33 (11:1)

Preface

Let's begin this study by reading just the first portion of our text. Then we will circle back and read its entirety.

Read 29b-30.

It does not take a biblical scholar to notice that vv29b-30 seem to be awkwardly placed and, in the context, difficult to understand. Taken in isolation the passage makes sense, but we are confused by its placement: Why does Paul say this here? Just before this he described a situation where the believer must purposely relinquish his freedom for the sake of (in our interpretation) an unbelieving fellow guest. Now, at first glance, he seems to contradict what he just said.

Here we have what scholars term a “notorious crux” (you can tell they just love to use that phrase). This just means, in layman's terms, that the text is sufficiently difficult to interpret that there is a multitude of opinions on what it really means. So the studious layperson is left to decide which of the various positions makes the most sense. As with science, the interpretation of God's word is not necessarily based on “consensus”; one does not take a vote on the composition of the air we breathe, and one does not necessarily go with the majority on the interpretation of Scripture. For example, many commentators read this passage in light of their predisposition for the historically common “strong Christian/weak Christian” approach to the Corinthian letters. One might even say that is the “consensus” position. But if the interpreter establishes firm evidence against that position and for a superior position, he cannot then run back to that “consensus” position to explain a tough passage of text—such as the one before us. Mixed into all of this—and unique to the study of Scripture, as opposed to the study of the composition of the air we breathe—is the accompanying and necessary breath of the Holy Spirit. He must inform both the trained scholar and the studious layperson.

In my own study of this passage the interpretation that made eminent sense is that vv29b-30 pick up from v27 after the parenthetic interruption of vv28-29a (David Garland). This can be illustrated—without altering the text—by the insertion of parentheses.

**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? (1 Corinthians 10:27-30)**

Another way to illustrate this is to change the order of the text—again, without changing the words themselves.

**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.
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?
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; (1 Corinthians 10:27-30)**

One reason this interpretation makes sense is that it happens all the time in spoken conversation. We say something that ignites an immediate thought that interrupts our intended flow of words. Paul dictated this letter to his amanuensis; it makes perfect sense that something like this would occur, and to my mind this explanation makes more sense than others put forth. Now let's read our entire passage, backing up and including v27.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:27-33.

vv29b-30

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?

Just as we have the two bookends of v24,

Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor.

and the last part of v33,

...not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many, so that they may be saved.

to inform us of Paul's horizontal priority in this passage, we also have v31 that expresses his vertical priority:

Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

The Christian walk of faith is like no other. Part of our ongoing sanctification is a continual balancing of our freedom, our liberty in Christ with the good of our neighbor. And although there are a number of passages that speak to this, we needn't leave the two Corinthian letters for examples. As to liberty, Paul speaks of this in his second letter to the Corinthian church, where he describes the release, the openness, the boldness we enjoy in Christ.

Read 2 Corinthians 3:12-18.

In Christ the believer enjoys a freedom—the removal of the veil—that the ancient Jew under the old covenant never knew. At the same time, however, also in Christ we have the obligation to watch that our liberty does not impair the faith of another.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:7-13.

The earnest follower of Christ is always endeavoring to strike the correct balance between these two. We care about our brothers and sisters in Christ and have no desire to do anything that might obstruct or hinder their process of sanctification. Yet Christ has freed us from the constraints of the old covenant—and from the legalistic strictures of some sects today. We are not to become slaves to the vagaries of others. We revel in the salvation by grace of Christ, but we are also called to express grace to our fellow believers.

The “freedom” Paul speaks of in v29b is probably best understood to refer to freedom “from the power of idolatry” (F. Jones). As the apostle agreed earlier, “there is no such thing as an idol in the world” (v8:4), and for the Christian, “food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat” (v8:8). Chrysostom makes the excellent point that the uncleanness resides “not in the food but in the intentions of the sacrificers and the attitude of the receivers.” Paul's point: Why should my intentions be judged according to the intentions of someone else? If I am ignorant of the source of the meat (v27), then my conscience is clear, no matter what someone else thinks about the meat.

But of course, as our text makes clear (v28), once we are no longer ignorant of its source (and that source is pagan), our priority becomes a consideration for those around us, whether believers or not.

If I partake with thankfulness, why am I slandered concerning that for which I give thanks?

Paul's outburst in v30 could be paraphrased, “Why should anyone denounce such behavior by a Christian who genuinely gives thanks for this food and has no intentional connection with idolatry” (Garland). Here he clearly refers back, not to v28, but to the two situations in vv25-27. And it also seems clear that he is responding, once again, to criticism of his behavior coming from some in the Corinth church.

v31

Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

As we have noted before, there is a close connection between what the apostle writes about sexual immorality (*porneia*) in Chapter Six, and what he writes about idolatry (*eidolothya*) here in Chapters Eight to Ten.

6:12 All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable.

10:23 All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable.

6:20 ... glorify God in your body.

10:31 ... whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

The Christian cannot live two different lives, nor can the Christian construct different rooms (or closets) in his life to isolate one behavior from another. In this room I go to church and read my Bible, but in this room I visit prostitutes. In this room I worship Christ, but in this room I dine in idol's temples. That may succeed for a season, but ultimately that way of life collapses under its own weight. As Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth" (Matthew 6:24). And in both situations—sexual immorality and idolatry—Paul states flat-out, the Christian's highest priority and determining responsibility is to glorify God. When? How much? How often? Which activities? Answer: "...whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

The world would see in this restrictive bars and handcuffs, but for the Christian it brings all the complexities of dwelling in this fallen world (and in our fallen flesh) down to the simplicity of one clarifying question: Does what I am about to do bring glory to God the Father and His Son Jesus? If the answer is yes, we do it; if no, we don't.

vv32-33

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.

The common translation, "Give no offense," of the Greek *aproskopoi*, in all but the NIVs while not inaccurate can be misleading, since "give no offense" sounds like "don't offend anyone" or even "don't hurt anyone's feelings." That's not what it means. The NIVs capture it with, "Do not cause anyone to stumble."

aproskopoi = from <G1> (a) (as a negative particle) and a presumed derivative of <G4350> (*proskopto*); act. inoffensive, i.e. not leading into sin; passive faultless, i.e. not led into sin
:- none (void of, without) offence.

Paul uses a related word (*proskommah*) in Chapter Eight, a parallel passage to what he writes here, which we read earlier:

But food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. (1 Corinthians 8:8-9 emphasis added)

David Garland: In the context of his arguments about idol food and idolatry in chapters 8-10, Paul is concerned that the Corinthians' cavalier behavior might cut the ground out from under a fellow Christian who is already wobbly in the faith or solidify the ground on which an idolater stands in resistance to the gospel's message of one God and one Lord. Being blameless with respect "to the church of God," then, means doing nothing that might cause Christians to founder in their faith by giving them license to revert to idolatrous practices. Being blameless with respect to "Greeks" means doing nothing that might validate the legitimacy of their resistance to God. Being blameless with respect to "Jews" means doing nothing that might give them the impression that Christian teaching condoned idolatry and that becoming a Christian would entail abandoning the basic confession of one God.

...just as I also please all men in all things,

Again, we need to read this as it was intended. Paul was not a “man-pleaser” as his Galatian letter explains.

Read Galatians 1:10.

As one enslaved to Christ, the apostle serves all regardless the cost to him—just as he said in the previous chapter: “For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more.” (9:19)

11:1

Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.

Yet again we have an unfortunate chapter break, for v1 clearly attends to what came before, not what comes after. Concluding his long treatise on “things sacrificed to idols,” Paul summarizes the three chapters by entreating the church to follow the example of Christ Jesus—which he, as a faithful apostle, strives to do in all things. As we have pointed out before, this statement is not arrogant or self-serving; it all points to Christ, for “he [Paul] is to be followed only insofar as he adheres to the divine standard set forth by Christ” (Garland). And what was that standard set by Christ?

Read Romans 15:1-6.

Just as Christ gave Himself that we might be saved, we are to give of ourselves for the salvation and edification of others. And in this both Father and Son are glorified.

Session 104: Preeminence

1 Corinthians 11:2-3

Preface

It may be with a sigh of relief that we now view in our rear view mirror the lengthy discussion of “things sacrificed to idols” in Chapters Eight to Ten. It has been a long, rewarding, but at times tortuous journey through a passage that has taught us about the importance of our witness, and the priority of protecting and nurturing the faith-walk of others over our inherent rights in Christ.

Now, as we approach this new topic in the first sixteen verses of Chapter Eleven with the same fear and trepidation we are becoming accustomed to in our study of this letter, we observe Paul again using a discussion of a pragmatic situation to make his point about a spiritual reality.

If the subject of proper deportment in public worship for both sexes—but especially women—was an issue in the Corinth church, it would have to be categorized as a potentially explosive issue today. I can imagine even just the reading of the first half of this chapter in some churches today would spark a physical uprising. In others—such as those in which the “pastor” is a homosexual woman—it surely will have been forcibly removed from the canon forthwith. Any passage containing such phrases as

- man is the head of a woman (v3)
- But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying disgraces her head (v5)
- For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God (v7)
- but the woman is the glory of man (v7)
- man does not originate from woman, but woman from man (v8)
- for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake (v9), etc.

is going to be at least challenging, open to a multitude of interpretations, if not downright controversial—even inflammatory. Thus we will, in this study, tread cautiously, respectfully, but with unblinking courage. We cannot limit our study to only those passages that we readily understand and heartily affirm; we cannot shy away from those passages that cause us to squirm with discomfort during the process of discovering the truth. So let us soldier on to discover what God has to say to us in every portion of His word.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:2-6.

v2

Now I praise you because you always remember me and keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you.

As he introduces this new topic, Paul does what most of us do from time to time: he extends a gracious, encouraging “atta-boy” to soften the bite of what follows. He praises them for not forgetting what he has taught them; if we were of a cynical nature, we could point out that they had to remember his teaching to be so critical of it! But I wouldn’t presume to place that thought in the apostle’s mind. There is no indication that he is being ironic or sarcastic.

The word translated “traditions” (*paradosis*) needs a little clarification, since when we hear that word we can often have in mind age-old, locked-in habits of behavior that may have lost all meaning or relevance. But that is not what Paul means here. “Traditions” refers to the transmission of precepts—as David Garland puts it, “historical facts related to the gospel story and doctrine drawn from them.” In other words, by citing “traditions” he is not saying, “This is the way we do things here,” but “This is the truth we believe.” In his letter to the Thessalonians Paul was more explicit about the meaning of this word.

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:15.

The NIVs “teachings” is perhaps a more descriptive (and helpful) translation. Thus he opens his next topic by graciously commending the Corinthians for remembering and holding to what he has taught them.

v3

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.

Let’s address a couple of details before we wade into the meat of this verse. First, the “But” with which this verse begins in all but the early NIV almost certainly keys off v2. That is, I commend you for this, but now I must straighten you out on something else. Nonetheless it is a softer approach than how he opened Chapter Ten (“I do not want you to be unaware...”) and the even stronger wording used ten times in this letter, “Do you not know?”

Second, the masculine term *aner* (an’-ayer) and the feminine term *gyne* (goo-nay’) may be translated either man and woman or husband and wife. Most of our translations stick with the more generic man/woman, but the ESV slips back and forth repeatedly between the two for the woman (woman/wife), and once for the man (“her husband”) in this verse. The generic man/woman is probably best here, but we can also agree that some (but not entirely) of what is in mind here is the relative positions within a married couple. Yet more than that—and more important to Paul—are the relative positions between Christ and man(kind).

Before one can digest v3 one must determine how Paul is using the word translated “head” (*kephale*), which is used in the extended passage in more than one way. How is it used here? We are no longer surprised to learn that there are varying opinions on this from reputable scholars. The essential challenge is that so few of the positions can be fit comfortably into all three clauses: “Christ is the head of every man,” “the man is the head of a woman,” and “God is the head of Christ.” For example, let’s take one of the more common interpretations for “head” in v3: the head as “source”—that is, source of life, or origin (as Fee).

We can understand that man is the source of a woman when we think back to the Garden narrative. This position is reinforced with what Paul writes in vv8-9.

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.

This clearly refers back to the narrative regarding the creation of the first woman.

Read Genesis 2:18, 21-23.

We can also understand that Christ is the source of man, for, as Christians, our “life” is in Him. The apostle John so eloquently credits Christ “the Word” as the creator of all things.

Read John 1:1-4.

Add to this the powerful truth of Colossians that even after creation, all things “hold together” in Him.

Read Colossians 1:16-17.

But this position for the meaning of *kephale* in v3 skews sideways a little when we consider God to be the source or origin of Christ, for Christ did not emerge out of Father God as Eve did from Adam, neither was he granted eternal life by the Father, as we were in Christ. All members of the Trinity are eternal and self-existent, and none had what we would term a “beginning.”

In my opinion the position that makes the best sense is that by “head” Paul means, as A. C. Perriman states it, “that which is most prominent, foremost, uppermost, preeminent.”

We need to be precise when we define Paul’s use of “head” (*kephale*) in this way. To be preeminent—i.e., the most prominent—does not necessarily denote ultimate authority or leadership, although it may by extension.

It also does not denote “source,” and it is not linked to ideas of obedience or submission. It simply means to “occupy the position at the top or front.” J. Delobel notes that “in each of these relationships there is one who has the priority as head, and one who comes in second place...but second place does not connote inferiority, since both man and Christ have a head.” Let us see, then, how this would apply to the three clauses in v3.

Christ is the head of every man

This is easy. If we return to Colossians and continue from the passage we read before, we see it right away.

Read Colossians 1:17-18.

the man is the head of a woman

In God’s sovereign economy every individual has someone who is superior to him. In this church, for example, my immediate superior is the pastor; I answer to him; he is my “boss.” Along with him would be the elder board. But they, too, have a superior: Christ Jesus, the Head of the church. They answer to Him. As we delve further into this passage we will flesh out the relationship between man and woman, husband and wife, but for right now let me cite David Garland.

Garland: Paul’s primary intent, then, is not to assert the supremacy of man and the subordination of woman. Instead, it is to establish that each has a head and that “what one does or doesn’t put on one’s physical head either honors or dishonors one’s spiritual head” (Blomberg) [vv4-7]. It establishes the need for loyalty to the head.

Perriman: The point seems to be...that the behavior of the woman reflects upon the man who as her head is representative of her, the prominent partner in the relationship, or that the woman’s status and value is summed in the man.

God is the head of Christ

The Son of God, second member of the Triune Godhead, is co-equal with God the Father. Both are God; both are self-existent and eternal, dwelling outside of time as we know it. Nonetheless, the Son is the second member of the Godhead and the Father is the first. And Christ Jesus, especially as the incarnate Son, declared Himself to be subordinate to the Father.

Read John 14:28.

Even in the day of judgment, as Paul writes later in this letter, this order remains in place:

Read 1 Corinthians 15:22-28.

As we used to say in the sixties and seventies, this is pretty heavy stuff, and it cannot all be addressed in the first few verses. So stay tuned.

Session 105: The Covering, part one

1 Corinthians 11:4-6

A Concern

Let me share with you my biggest fear regarding this passage, beginning with an illustration from my deep dark past.

Many years ago, in another time and place, I was regularly visiting a therapist who was in the process of writing—and before we parted company, published—a book entitled, *The Mind of Your Newborn Baby*. In this book the psychologist made the case for the active mind not just of the newborn, but the unborn. Some of his journal articles are titled, “The Prenatal Psyche: Evidence for a New Perspective,” “Communicating with the Mind of a Prenate,” “Prenatal Body Language,” and “Babies Don’t Feel Pain: A Century of Denial in Medicine.” Throughout his book, which I read but then immediately passed along to someone else, this doctor (now deceased) made a strong case for the active mind and body of the unborn. But then, when one turned the page to the very last chapter, which deals with the subject of abortion, the author runs screaming back to his liberal/leftist roots, putting his stamp of approval on a procedure that destroys the life of that thinking, understanding child that—as he affirms—has memories and does feel pain!

My biggest fear is that after we have read, studied, and digested thoroughly the text before us in the first sixteen verses of Chapter Eleven, doing our best to discern faithfully the word of God—we will then run for safe, comfortable shelter within the societal norms of today. So in my own study and preparation, even as I juggle the differing positions of the scholars whose minds are superior to my own, I remain determined that our conclusion and application will be substantiated not by societal norms, but by the text itself.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:2-9.

Preface

In our last session Paul, in v3, established the principle of “headship”—the fact that for every person—even Christ Jesus, but excepting God the Father—for every person there is a “head” (*kephale*), someone who occupies the position above or in front of the individual.

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.

Because even Christ has a “head” (God the Father) the position under a head does not connote inferiority. For example, look at how Paul balances the relationship between man and woman. In v3 he states that “the man is the head of a woman”; yet look at vv11-12.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:11-12.

To help us understand this, let me quote Gary Crandall from his paper on this passage, who begins by citing Stephen Bedale, who writes that authority is connected with headship “not because of a controlling influence of the head over the limbs, but because of the idea of priority. A chief authority in social relationships is largely dependent upon his ‘seniority,’ or ‘priority,’ in the order of being.”

Crandall: Thus, Christ is the head of every man because of His priority in time and position as the *active agent in creation* (“through whom are all things, and we exist through Him,” 1 Corinthians 8:6, Colossians 1:16). The man is the head of a woman because of his priority in time and position, “for man does not originate from woman, but woman from man,” (1 Corinthians 11:8). God is the head of Christ because of a priority in position ([but] not time, for Christ as God is eternal) in that as the Second Person of the Godhead He is subordinate to the Father in function.

Any intent to use this passage as proof-text for the superiority of man over a sublimated, inferior woman is misguided. Paul’s purpose here is not to assert the supremacy of man over woman, but to establish that each has a head, and to point out that each has an obligation to honor that head—principally in, but also beyond, corporate worship.

v4

Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying disgraces his head.

The jury is out on the reason Paul is raising this issue. Our regular commentators in this study reach different conclusions as to Paul's motivation. Gordon Fee understands the problem lying "with a breakdown in sexual distinctions," which is not off-topic in the Corinthian letter. David Garland sees the threatening influence of idol worship—which continues from the context of Chapters Eight to Ten—as the primary reason for this topic. Both are feasible, and we will consider each in their turn.

As before we need to deal with a few definitions before we proceed. It is obvious right away that the word translated "head" (*kephale*) is being used more than one way in this verse and in v5. "Every man who has something on his head" refers to the person's physical head, while "disgraces his head" refers not to the physical head, but the one who is over and above him—in the case of the man, that would be Christ Jesus.

The phrase "while praying and prophesying" leads us to conclude that Paul is speaking of a setting of public, corporate worship—specifically the word translated "prophesying" (*propheteuo*, prof-ate-yoo'-o). That word includes the idea of proclaiming openly, publicly, out loud.

This word is delineated from teaching in the first-century church, but in our time is blurred together with teaching, since we consider the prophetic gifts to be at an end.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:6.

Here is how to think of "prophesying" in the context of this letter: It is not foretelling the future; it is not speaking in tongues. It is instructional teaching, probably by a pastor, but differs from regular teaching in that the Holy Spirit has a stronger role.

Illustration: There are times, as I am searching for some old text in the archives of my publications, when I am amazed by something I wrote. My immediate response is, "Who wrote this? This is beyond my abilities." Yet, clearly I did write it. For me that is evidence of the Spirit more actively working through me—to the extent that I was little more than the pen in His hand. By that I do not mean it is "Holy writ," worthy of being included in the canon of Scripture; just that in that moment of composition the Spirit of God took firmer control. The Spirit assists me every day; I could not do my work without Him. But some times he takes greater control than at other times.

We must ask the question: Why would a man have something on his head in corporate worship? In our present time, few individuals of either sex have "something on their head" in church. When I was a little kid back in the fifties most men wore a hat (a fedora) to church, but took it off in church. In fact, the coat racks in the Baptist Temple had individual stations for the man to place his hat above his coat before entering the sanctuary. Women, on the other hand, wore a hat to church and in church. Frankly, that had more to do with fashion than doctrine. Women just wore hats in the fifties—and often gloves. Nonetheless, there would seem to be at least some connection with our text, for in that time and place, it would have been a shameful thing for a man to leave his hat on while in church, whereas it was perfectly respectable for a woman to be so attired.

Times change. This is not the fifties—nor is it the first century, when this letter was written. What was the situation in Roman Corinth at the time? Again we begin with the word, or, in this case, the phrase translated "something on his head," or "with his head covered" (*kata kephales echon*). This phrase literally translated from the Greek is "having down from the head."

Those who look at this from the "breakdown in sexual distinctions" perspective, interpret this to mean long hair on a man. That is, the man should look like a man with short, rather than long hair as a woman would wear. This, at first, seems a reasonable interpretation, but it breaks down as we travel deeper into this passage.

The better interpretation for "down from the head" is as some kind of material covering the head. We know from the first ten chapters of this letter that much of the surrounding

culture was seeping into the church: in their divisions; their infatuation with eloquent, charismatic speakers; their winking at sexual immorality; suing each other in civil courts; and, in the most recent chapters, flaunting their “liberty” to the detriment of others in the church. And here again we may have a situation where practices of the pagan society in which the church dwelt have seeped into their worship.

Garland: Wearing the toga over the head at pagan sacrifices was a familiar practice. “The practice of men covering their heads in a context of prayer and prophecy was a common pattern of Roman piety and widespread during the late Republic and early Empire” (Oster). The toga pulled up over the head and hanging down from it fits the language “having down from the head.”

Sidebar: This is one of those passages where we wish we could cover everything all at once, for the various portions effectively inform each other. So, for example, v4 informs vv5-6 and v7, but those later verses also inform v4. Since it would be impossible (especially in thirty-minute increments) to deal with everything at once, it is incumbent on all of us—no less the teacher—to keep our wits about us, and be willing to read and reread, review, and trust—trust that something mentioned in one session will be validated in subsequent sessions.

Paul’s mention of this situation with some men in the church is probably hypothetical, and being used to contrast with the women. And regarding the aforementioned “trust,” we will see evidence in our next session that the overarching motif of this passage is shame. Back in the fifties it would have been a shameful thing for a man to leave his hat on during the worship service and in the first century Paul said that for a man to cover his head with a portion of his toga in corporate worship was a shameful thing, bringing dishonor, disgrace upon his “head,” Christ Jesus.

Why? Because of where the practice came from. It was in pagan worship that one covered the head, and nothing of that idolatry should be part of the church. How shameful it would be, how disgraceful for a man to worship the Lord God and His Christ using the same practices that are used to worship pagan idols.

There is another, more important reason that the man should not cover his head (v7: “For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God”) and, again, we will be discussing that in detail later.

But for now I’d like to leave you with something Henry William Soltau, the author of *The Tabernacle, the Priesthood, and the Offerings*, writes. Soltau was born in 1805 and died in his native England in 1875. Of the man it is said, “His teaching was remarkable, not only for its clearness and depth, but also for its close adherence to Scripture, thus proving how much he lived in communion with God.” Here is what he draws from this passage about the man being uncovered and the woman covered in corporate worship.

In the New Testament, the woman is directed to cover her head (1 Cor. 11:3-10) because “the head of the woman is the man;” whereas the man is to be uncovered, because he is the image and glory of God. In the assemblies therefore of the people of God, the woman, standing as a representative [or type] of the Church in subjection to Christ, covers her head; the man, being a type of Christ Himself as the Head of the Church, uncovers his head.

I take from this support for something that has been my soapbox for many years. That is, all things in the corporate worship of God should point to God, should glorify Him and Him alone. If, in the first century, a woman’s head was uncovered in the assembly of the church, attention would be drawn to her, and away from the Lord. This is why, for example, during specific worship I prefer to keep my eyes closed as much as possible, for I want my attention and thoughts to be upon the glorious throne of God, and not on what others are doing or wearing. It is also why Linda and I do not applaud any performance during the worship service; all praise in that moment should be vertical, not horizontal.

I believe we can draw many applications and imagery from this text. Henry Soltau offers us one. We will discover more as we progress through this challenging but fascinating passage.

Session 106: The Covering, part two

1 Corinthians 11:4-6

Preface

There is a powerful scene in the 1970 film, *Ryan's Daughter*, set in a small Irish coastal village during World War I. It has been found out that Rosy, the young wife of the straitlaced village schoolteacher, has been having an affair with the British Major from the local garrison—which means she is also accused of informing to the the British against her own people, Irish Catholics.

The people of the village come and drag the young woman from her house, overpowering and restraining her defending husband. The film does not show what the women of the village do, but afterwards Rosy's clothing is strewn about and all her long hair has been brutally cut off.

From ancient times through even recent history (and still in some cultures) the shaved head of a woman is a sign of disgrace and shame, identifying the woman as an adulterer or, at the least, brazenly immodest. Tacitus, a Roman historian writing in the first century, describes a husband of an adulterous wife who cuts off her hair, strips her, and banishes her from the house.

Here in our passage, the apostle Paul draws on this imagery to make his case about the propriety of a woman covering her physical head so as not to disgrace, or dishonor her spiritual head—i.e., the man, or husband.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:3-6.

Before we dig into vv5-6, let's first make sure we understand the setting. I pointed out in our previous session that the word translated “prophesying” (*propheteuo*, prof-ate-yoo'-o) makes it clear that Paul is not referring to someone alone in their prayer closet, but probably in corporate worship—i.e., in the company of others. It may be pertinent to our understanding of why Paul is bringing this up to remind ourselves that in first-century Corinth the church would not be meeting in a large building with a large number of people, but in someone's home with a small group of people. The first-century church would have more in common with our Sunday evening small groups, than a Sunday morning worship service. Why this may be a factor we will examine in a bit.

We must admit, however, that Paul does not explicitly reference corporate worship. Although I still think this is implied, as John MacArthur points out, no mention is made here “of the church at worship or in the time of formal teaching. Perhaps he has in view praying or prophesying in public places, rather than in the worship of the congregation.”

Another component of the teaching in this passage we will briefly acknowledge here, but table discussion for a later time. There is an apparent conflict between v5 and 14:34-35. The first tells women who pray or speak in the assembly to have their heads covered, while the second tells women they are to remain silent in the churches. The astute reader would then ask, “Well, which is it?” We will look at this later.

v5

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.

Most commentators suggest there is little point in trying to determine Paul's reason for bringing this up. We simply do not know, and the text includes few clues. So we will focus on understanding what he does say. Exacerbating our task is that while local culture plays a critical role in this, in first-century Corinth we are dealing with several different cultures: Jewish, Roman, and Greek. Women from all three were in the church, yet, surprisingly, there was some commonality among them on this topic.

It was a disgraceful thing for a Hebrew woman to be out in public with her head uncovered, for the covered head was a sign of modesty. The Greco-Roman culture in Corinth agreed; it was taken for granted that respectable women wore a head covering in public. Here

and in subsequent verses Paul amplifies this injunction by comparing a woman's uncovered head "while praying or prophesying" to a woman with a shaved head. He is not suggesting there were women in the church with shaved heads; he is simply drawing this association to make his point—to say, This is as bad as...

An important point to keep in mind with all this is that while over the centuries the physical signals may have changed, the principles behind them have not. In all three cultures a woman with a shaved head would have been labeled—just as in the film *Ryan's Daughter*—as an adulteress. It publicly shamed her as an immoral, deceitful woman who had brought shame and dishonor upon her husband and her family. Similarly, a woman out and about with uncovered (and especially loose) hair sent sexual signals. Just as the woman's covered head conveyed the message that she was innocent, virtuous, (and thus) untouchable, a woman without a covering conveyed the message that she was not innocent or virtuous—perhaps even a prostitute.

A. Roussele: Respectable women did nothing to draw attention to themselves... A veil or hood constituted a warning: it signified that the wearer was a respectable woman that no man dare approach without risking...penalties. A woman who went out...unveiled forfeited the protection of Roman law against possible attackers who were entitled to plead extenuating circumstances. Women who went uncovered in public gave nonverbal clues that they were "available."

When Linda and I were dating in high school our pastor came into the youth group one evening to discuss teenage morals. As I recall, to show his "hipness" he combed his hair down and addressed us sitting cross-legged on the floor in the youth room. This would have been in the late sixties. I have never forgotten something he said; paraphrasing his remarks to people who were dating, "If you hold hands in public people will wonder what you must then be doing in private." I questioned the value of that restriction at the time, and even more so today.

The signals have changed, but the principles have not. For both men and women, how we dress, what we look like, how we behave and speak in public—and no less in the assembly of the church—casts either honor or dishonor, exaltation or shame upon our respective heads: for the men, Christ; for the women, the man or husband.

I do not think it is possible to divorce this teaching from time and place. We must focus on the principle Paul is espousing, and not get hung up on the ever-changing signals. For example, during the Victorian era (late nineteenth century) a woman would never attend church services (or, frankly, any public venue) in any dress that revealed her ankle; modesty panels were employed on furniture to shield her ankles from prying eyes while she sat in the pews. And if the occasion and place—such as cycling or the beach—called for shorter or less voluminous attire, opaque stockings, preferably black, were required. One need not go into detail to acknowledge that times have changed—and not necessarily for the better. But what else does Paul say about the public appearance and behavior of women and men, and especially within the assembly?

Read 1 Timothy 3:1-4.

respectable^{nasb,nivs,esv}, **good behavior**^{kjvs}, **decent**^{mt} = *kosmios* = from <G2889> (*kosmos*) (in its primary sense); orderly, i.e. decorous :- of good behavior, modest.

The same word is used in the letter for how women present themselves.

Read 1 Timothy 2:9-11. (**proper**^{nasb}, **modest (modestly)**^{kjvs,nivs}, **respectable**^{esv})

The root of *kosmios* is *kosmos*, from which we have the word "cosmos," to refer to the well-ordered universe; also "cosmetics," by the application of which some women (and actors) bring order to their countenance. As applied to our Corinthians text, and if we differentiate the principle from the signals, the apostle lays out the orderly and respectable presentation of a man before his "head" (Christ), and the orderly and respectable presentation of a woman before her "head" (man/husband).

Along with Creation itself, the Lord God created an order—an economy—for those who call upon His name. In function, the Father is before the Son, the Son is before man, and the man is before woman. None of this affects the individual's worth or rights; it was created to ensure that family life—both personal and in the congregation—is conducted properly, modestly, respectably. The woman is not to dishonor the man, the man is not to dishonor Christ, and certainly Christ never dishonors the Father. But this order does not move in just the one direction. In his letter to the Ephesians Paul states the case as he does to the Corinthians, but then he changes the direction.

Read Ephesians 5:22-30.

We are all of one body, and the love, the respect, the honor move in both directions. Christ loves and honors the Father, but he also loves the church. The woman does nothing to dishonor the man, but the man also does nothing to dishonor the woman. That is, mirroring Christ, just as he loves his “head,” he loves the one whose “head” he is. Is it the same for the one at the very top: the Father? Indeed it is. We see the love and honor flowing in both directions in something Jesus said in reply to the Jewish leaders in John's gospel.

Read John 5:19-23.

That same reciprocity travels throughout the church—even down to the relationship of parents to their children. And it begins with the relationship between the ultimate “head,” God the Father, and the Son. Their mutual love supplies us with the template for our relationships with each other—not just between husband and wife, but between brothers and sisters in Christ.

There are deep theological points Paul is making here regarding the men and women of the church: headship, the hierarchy of the church, inter-personal relationships and marital relationships, propriety and modesty, honor and respect, appropriate behavior for both sexes in the assembly and in public. There is much to consider in this remarkable passage, and by God's grace before we are through we will cover it all.

Session 107: Orderly Worship, part one

1 Corinthians 11:7-10

Preface

Let's begin this session at the beginning: the Creation epic in Genesis. [Turn, please, to Genesis 1.](#)

Man (as in “mankind”) is different; human beings are set apart from the rest of Creation, because, for one reason, they were created in a manner different from everything else. When we look at the Creation account in Genesis 1, the emphasis is on God (plural) speaking into existence all the component parts of the universe and this earth. We see that at the beginning of each day:

Day One: “Then God said, ‘Let there be light...’”

Day Two: “Then God said, ‘Let there be an expanse...’”

Day Three: “Then God said, ‘Let the waters...’”

Day Four: “Then God said, ‘Let there be lights...’”

Day Five: “Then God said, ‘Let the waters teem with...’”

Day Six: “Then God said, ‘Let the earth bring forth...’”

But when later on that sixth day God made man, it is stated slightly, almost imperceptibly different. Instead of “Then God said, ‘Let there be man...’”, it is “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image...’” (emphasis added). Two things: Nothing else in all creation was made in the image of God, and, as this verse suggests but Chapter Two confirms, man was not spoken into existence, but was made by God—and intimately so.

Genesis 1 looks at the Creation narrative as a forest of trees; most of Genesis Two (from v4) backs up and examines in greater detail one of those trees: the creation of the man and the woman.

Although it is impossible to say with authority from this great distance, I believe the creations of first man, then woman were remarkably different from the creation of everything else. I believe the text describes a profoundly intimate manner of creation when it came to human beings. Note that from v4 on even the reference to the Creator has changed: So far it has been “God” in the plural (*elohim*), suggesting the participation of the triunity of God. But now, beginning in v4, it adds “the Lord God,” adding the personal name of God: *Yahweh*, or Jehovah. And just look at how *Yahweh* created man.

Read Genesis 2:7.

That word translated “formed” in all our translations is

yasar (yaw-tsar') = probably identical with <H3334> (*yatsar*) (through the squeezing into shape); ([compare <H3331> (*yatsa*)]); to mould into a form; especially as a potter; figurative to determine (i.e. form a resolution) :- × earthen, fashion, form, frame, make (-r), potter, purpose.

The Lord God did not speak man into existence; He reached down into the dust of Eden and personally fashioned him, as a potter would fashion a clay vessel. Then He breathed life into him with His own breath. Here we have the account of God creating not man as in mankind, but the first male of the species: so named Adam (v20) as the man is in the process of naming the beasts of the field.

Thus far, however, the Lord God could not declare the man “good,” as He had the rest of His creation. Instead of immediately declaring Adam “good,” He said, “It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him” (v18). The man was not yet complete. Listen to how Gordon Fee eloquently describes this.

Fee: Adam by himself was not complete; he was *alone*, without a companion or helper suitable to him. The animals will not do; he needs one who is bone of his bone, one who is like him but different from him, one who is uniquely his own “glory.” In fact, when the man in the OT narrative sees the woman he “glories” in her by bursting into song (2:23). She is thus man’s glory because she “came from man” and was created “for him.” She is not

thereby subordinate to him, but *necessary* for him. She exists to his honor as the one who having come from the man is the one companion suitable to him, so that he might be complete and that together they might form humanity.

The Creation narrative makes clear that out of everything already created there could be found no suitable—that is, no corresponding—helper for the man. Why? Because in all of creation only the man had been made in the image of God; he would need a mate of the same kind. In the first account, in Genesis 1, it is stated that both male and female were made in the likeness of God; note the plural references.

Read Genesis 1:26-27.

Yet the woman was made in a different way; she was made from “out of” man: hence, woman.

Read Genesis 2:21-23.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:7-12.

Chapter Eleven is organized into two parts, both dealing with orderly worship. The first part (vv2-16) addresses how the worshiper presents him- or herself—that is, dress. The second part addresses how the worshiper behaves around the table of Communion—the Lord’s Supper.

In v3 the apostle stated his thesis that “Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ.” Then he applies this to the setting of corporate worship, the gathering of a community of Christians met to worship and hear God’s word. In the ensuing verses Paul contrasts honor with dishonor, glory with shame in such a setting. He first points out that which brings shame and dishonor upon one’s spiritual head (vv4-6): when the man’s anatomical head is covered, or the woman’s anatomical head is uncovered. In vv7-10 he restates this assertion more positively, emphasizing that which brings honor and glory to one’s spiritual head in the assembly.

vv7-9

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.

The word translated “ought” in all our translations—both here and in v10, regarding the woman—means to owe.

opheilo (of-ay'-lo) = or (in certain tenses) its prolonged form *opheileo*, of-i-leh'-o; probably from the base of <G3786> (*ophelos*) (through the idea of accruing); to owe (pecuniarily); figurative to be under obligation (ought, must, should); morally to fail in duty :- behave, be bound, (be) debt (-or), (be) due (-ty), be guilty (indebted), (must) need (-s), ought, owe, should. See also <G3785> (*ophelon*).

In other words the man has a moral obligation, a debt owed, not to cover his head in worship, and the woman has a moral obligation to cover her head in worship.

Why should the man not be covered? Because “he is the image and glory of God.” Does this mean that the woman is not the image of God, as Paul leaves this word (*doxa*) out when referring to the woman? No, we know from Genesis that both the woman and the man were created in the image of God. Positionally, in relation to God, she is no less the vessel of His image and glory. But here Paul is stressing the difference between the man and woman in earthly, corporate worship—their different roles. In God’s economy, the man reflects, represents the glory of God (and thus is obligated to remain uncovered), while the woman reflects, represents, completes the glory of man (and thus is obligated to be covered). This is a tricky concept to digest, which is why I have created and included a diagram that I pray will illustrate the various relationships and positions in worship. [\[see the last page in this session\]](#)

As said before, reputable scholars and students of God's word have voiced different positions on what Paul is saying here. Beyond that, some of the words and phrases in this passage can be interpreted and expanded in a number of ways, making it almost impossible to restrict them to just one. For example, take the phrase, "the woman is the glory of man."

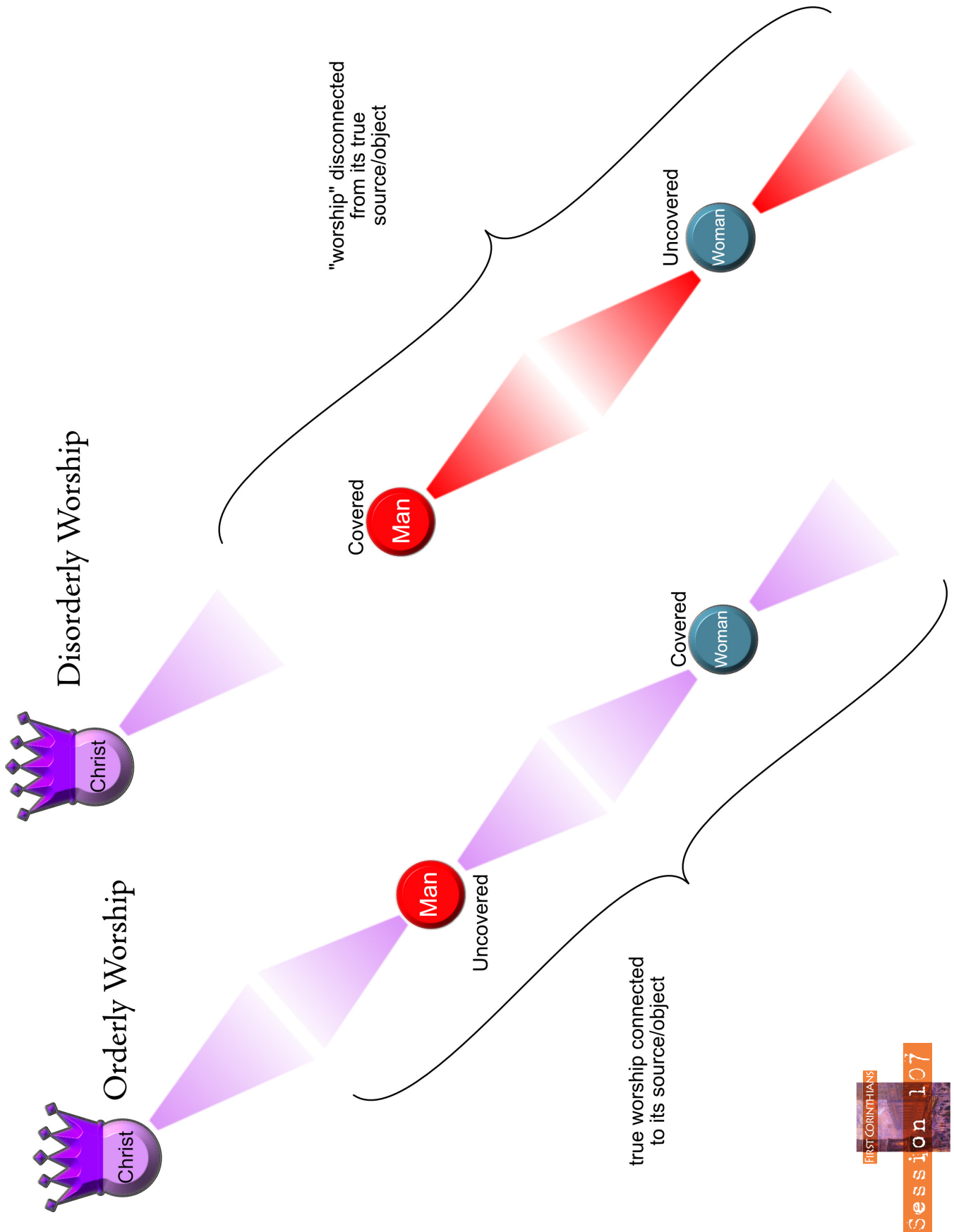
- Does this mean she is nothing in herself, and what glory she has comes from the man? Does it mean she has none of God's glory in her?
- Or does this mean it is she who supplies the glory to the man?
- Does it mean she reflects the man's glory back to him, or projects his glory out to others—or both?
- And just what does Paul mean by "glory"?

Some have interpreted this passage to mean that, "The man stands before God uncovered because of his spiritual subordination to Christ, so the woman should stand veiled because of her spiritual subordination to her husband" (as Orr and Walther). In the context of this chapter, which is clearly about proper attire and behavior in worship, that pulls us off-track a bit (and in my opinion doesn't even make sense). Paul is not really addressing "subordination"—especially since he will, in a moment, balance out the two roles (vv11-12).

Paul says that the woman reflects ("is") the glory of man, not of God. Because of the context of proper, God-honoring worship, here is what Paul is saying (as illustrated in the handout): "The man stands uncovered because he reflects the glory of God; the woman must be covered because she reflects the glory of man."

Garland: In a worship setting, where persons are to give glory only to God, Paul reasons that a woman must cover her anatomical head, which reflects man's glory, who is her metaphorical [or spiritual] head. If a woman were to appear in worship with her head uncovered, the splendor of her tresses (v15) would bring honor to her husband when all ought to be concerned with glorifying God alone. Such misplaced honor would redound only to her husband's shame before God. [Paul's] main point is that both man and woman are the glory of another. Man, whose head is Christ and who represents the glory of God, is to be uncovered in worship. Woman, whose head is man and who represents his glory, is to be covered in worship. To do otherwise brings shame to their respective heads.

Paul's purpose, as always, is to exalt and glorify Christ Jesus and Father God. There is no more important situation in which to do this than corporate worship, which must be conducted in an orderly, God-honoring fashion. In such a setting only God and His Son are to receive glory and honor—and not anyone sitting in the pews.



Session 108: Orderly Worship, part two

1 Corinthians 11:7-10

Preface

Every generation has established limits. In these liberal days (say, in contrast to the more formal 1950s), we like to think we are freer to “be ourselves,” to dress as we like. Certainly how some dress for worship today would have been shocking in the 50s, but is accepted and considered acceptable today. But whether we like to admit it or not, even today there are limits. For example, would it be acceptable for a couple to attend worship in their respective swim suits—or would it be a distraction? Would it be accepted for the pastor of an evangelical protestant church to wear a monk’s robe, or the vestments of a Catholic priest? Closer to our text, would it be appropriate for a woman in the same evangelical church to attend wearing a *burqa*, covered from head and face down to her feet?

Could the wearing of any of these be termed a contribution to “orderly” worship?

Read 1 Corinthians 11:7-10.

Without breaking them out individually in our previous session, we effectively covered vv8-9 in our text by beginning our study in Genesis and the Creation account regarding the man and woman (Genesis 1-2). So we are ready for v10.

v10

Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.

NIV2011: It is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority over her own head, because of the angels.

We now come to a verse so vague in its writing that no one in Christendom can claim to have an authoritative interpretation. Commentators invariably list all the possibilities cited by others, but then conclude by shrugging their shoulders in hopeless defeat. Thus I will do the same: I will present what I believe to be one of the more feasible explanations, but then conclude with a resigned, “We really don’t know for sure what Paul meant.”

A possible reason for this confusion is that the apostle probably knew that the members of the Corinthian church could easily fill in for themselves the pieces missing for us in this opaque sentence—sort of like how a husband and wife can eventually communicate in shorthand with each other because the mate can easily fill in the blanks on his or her own. From some of his teaching to them (of which we have no record), or from some of their local traditions or vernacular, they could easily understand his counsel with fewer words. Lacking what they had, we require more than what is here.

Several of our common translations have staked out their position by not just their choice of words, but their insertion of words modifying the original text. Key words in the text which impact our interpretation are

- *exousia*, translated authority, right, or power, which is often modified, as in the NASB, NKJV, and ESV, with the insertion by the editors of “a symbol of,” or “a sign of” in the original NIV (even YLT inserts the decidedly un-literal “a token of”); and
- *epi*, translated “on,” “upon,” or “over.”

Of these two, *exousia* is the more critical, the interpretation of which will affect our interpretation of *epi*. The original text has no modifier.

exousia = from <G1832> (*exesthi*) (in the sense of ability); privilege, i.e. (subject) force, capacity, competency, freedom, or (object) mastery (concrete magistrate, superhuman, potentate, token of control), delegated influence :- authority, jurisdiction, liberty, power, right, strength.

I am fascinated by how the cross-reference resources treat this verse: NASB, nothing. ESV, nothing. Most fascinating, however, is the Treasury, which for this word includes only three OT references, the last of which is revealing.

Rebekah lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac she dismounted from the camel. She said to the servant, "Who is that man walking in the field to meet us?" And the servant said, "He is my master." Then she took her veil and covered herself. (Genesis 24:64-65)

The Greek of our verse, however, only says *exousia* = power, authority. If one inserts the modifier, the picture is inescapably of the woman wearing something "on" (*epi*) her head that acknowledges or represents her submission to the man—i.e., her husband. Gordon Fee includes the following in a footnote:

Fee: The original NIV, with no textual or linguistic evidence of any kind, had rendered this "sign of authority on," a false understanding perpetuated also by the ESV ("a symbol of authority"), as if that could possibly be wrested out of Paul's Greek. The difficulty that some have with the plain meaning of the Greek goes way back, as evidenced in some early versions and Fathers, who variously substituted the word "veil" for *exousia*—with neither textual nor linguistic warrant.

Both Fee and Garland translate this "the woman ought to have authority over her head," and the newer NIV2011 is the only translation that concurs (adding its own modifier to "head.")

It is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority over her own head, because of the angels.

Let's look at an earlier passage in which Paul used the word *exousia* to make his point, this time about food sacrificed to idols.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:4-13.

It is v9 that includes *exousia*, translated "liberty" or "right." Paul is saying here, Yes, in yourself you have the right to eat whatever you want, but for the sake of your weaker brother, it is better to abstain from this right. In fact, knowing this, when you do not abstain you are sinning against Christ. [\[back to Chapter Eleven\]](#)

This then helps us understand v10—at least under this interpretation. Similar to what he says in Chapter Eight, we read v10 to say to the woman, Yes, you have the right—the authority—to dress any way you like. But, for the sake of orderly, God-honoring worship—and for the sake of the angels—you should cover your (anatomical) head so as not to corrupt the worship of God with the glory of your spiritual head (the man).

...because of the angels.

Now of course we have one more hurdle to cross before we leave this verse: What in the world is this about angels? Again, I will not take up our time with a listing of all the somewhat fanciful theories on what Paul is referring to by bringing up the angels. I will just share the interpretation that seems to track the best.

Paul, as well as other writers in the canon have intimated that the righteous angels of heaven (as opposed to the fallen angels that worship and serve Satan) are involved in, or at least observers of, the affairs of human beings. On the important matter of the selection of elders in the church, Paul counseled Timothy.

Read 1 Timothy 5:21.

And in our letter he included the angels in those to whom the apostles have become a spectacle.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:9.

So it follows that certain angels would be present in our worship, and because they are, literally, “messengers” of God, it is important that our assemblies be conducted in an orderly, proper and righteous manner.

Paul has a little more to add on this topic, in vv11-16, but he has stated his thesis, and now may be a good point in which to summarize this teaching and apply it to today.

In our entire Chapter Eleven the apostle’s overarching topic is orderly worship. As subtopics to this, he addresses, first, how men and women are, or are not, to be attired—with a focus on their anatomical head (vv2-16). Second, he addresses the behavior of some in the assembly during “the Lord’s Supper.” Praying, prophesying (vv4-5), and the ordinance of Communion (v20) are all elements of corporate worship.

Paul begins with the order of hierarchy in the church, the order of progressive headship that flows upward from woman to man, from man to Christ, from Christ to Father God. For orderly, God-honoring worship the recognition of this hierarchy is essential, for it hearkens back to the very moment when God created the first man and woman, and the fact that man was made first, and the woman was made from man to be his companion, helper—more than that, however, she completed man, supplying what was missing in him, together comprising a complete “one.”

As the handout in our previous session (#107) illustrated, in corporate worship man represents (signifies, reflects, illustrates, etc.) the glory of God, while woman represents the glory of man. What is right and proper for orderly worship is that both man and woman do nothing to disrupt (or distract from) the one “head” which is to be the true object of worship: God (the Father and Son, Christ Jesus). So man should not “cover” the glory he represents (God’s), and the woman should “cover” the glory she represents (man’s).

I believe vv4-6 in our passage are key to understanding how to be obedient to Paul’s injunction today.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:4-6.

I would contend that the principles behind Paul’s teaching have not changed, but the signals have. The principle is this: For both men and women, how we dress, what we look like, how we behave and speak in public—and especially in the corporate worship of the church—casts either honor or dishonor, exaltation or shame upon our respective heads: for the men, Christ; for the women, the man or husband. Each person in attendance either contributes to authentic, orderly worship, or distracts from it as an obstacle or stumbling block. Let’s examine, first, the setting in first-century Corinth.

- Verse 4, regarding the man, states that the man is not to have his anatomical head covered; to do so disgraces his head (Christ). This means that the man should not be wearing a cap, or turban, or have his outer cloak pulled over his head.
- Verse 5 states that a woman in worship (specifically, “while praying or prophesying”) who has her head uncovered is the same as “the woman whose head is shaved.” That is, in the first century a woman revealing her hair in the assembly was the same as a woman caught in adultery, or some other licentious act.
- Verse 6 reinforces this with the counsel that if she refuses to cover her hair, then she may as well have it all 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.” In that time it was disgraceful to appear in public so shorn; it would bring disgrace upon her husband, her family, upon her.

I do not believe it is possible to transfer this teaching verbatim to our time, because while the principle remains, the signals signify different things now—or nothing at all. If you are walking down the street and see a woman completely bald or with just scraps of hair on her head, what is your first thought? Probably that she is undergoing treatment for cancer. Likewise, if you see a woman in corporate worship with her full head of hair revealed, what is your first thought? Probably nothing at all, since the hair of every other woman in the assembly would be so revealed.

Some signals remain, however. If you see a man sitting in the church sanctuary wearing a Stetson, what is your first thought? Probably, Shame on you. Take your hat off in church! Your response might be based on simple custom and tradition, but in the back of your mind you might also be thinking that the man is being disrespectful to his God.

David Garland points out that this passage contains only one direct command, that in v6: "...let her cover her head." It is not out of order for the translators to put this in the context of the anatomical head, for that it clearly is. The Greek text, however, does not include the word "head," but is just "let her cover herself."

With time and locale the signals change, but the principle remains. Paul here defends the principle that since we serve and worship a holy and righteous God, our worship of Him is to be holy, orderly, modest, conducted with propriety, and as much as possible free of anything that might turn our attention away from its object: the Lord God. This applies to both sexes, but, of course, in different ways. Invariably it falls more often than not on the woman, because from time immemorial, the woman shows and the man looks.

In the Greco-Roman and Hebrew culture of first-century Corinth, and Middle East in general, a woman in public with her long hair down and unfettered was a scandal, and she would be labeled a prostitute—or at least immoral, licentious. That is not the case today. In Paul's time there was a sexual component to long, flowing hair; thus it was reserved for the husband, or at least within the walls of a private home.

Today it is not remotely a sign of shame for a woman to have her head uncovered in worship—it does not shame her husband, it does not steal glory from Christ (as it might have in the first century), nor does it represent a barrier to respectful worship. However, a woman who came into an evangelical assembly wearing a garment that draped over and down from her head would be an immediate oddity and distraction. Fair or not, attention would be drawn to her.

The woman, like the man, has the "right" (*exousia*) to dress any way she likes, but in the orderly economy of the church, giving due deference to her Lord and her husband (as her husband gives due deference to his Lord) takes precedence over her personal tastes. Both man and woman are to present themselves for worship with not just their Lord, but the integrity of Christ's body in mind. Remember the illustration of the handout: Even if the man is personally pleased when his wife presents herself in such a way that she turns every male head, her behavior brings shame upon him before the Lord. Every person gazing upon her is not worshipping the glory of the Lord.

For us as individuals to be obedient to the principle set forth by the apostle Paul in vv2-16, every one of us—man or woman—is to ask him- or herself the same question when dressing for corporate worship: Does my appearance say, "Hey, look at me!"

That question is timely and pertinent no matter the century, no matter the locale. Are we presenting ourselves as hindrances to worship, or are we, as we bring honor to our respective heads, facilitating worship of the Lord God and His Christ?

Session 109: Balance

1 Corinthians 11:11-12

Preface

Last week we read the passage from Chapter Eight that included v6. I would like for us to read that verse again, as it—aside from being profound theology—plays into our study today.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:5-6.

In all this about covering and not covering, man and woman, anatomical heads and corporate or spiritual heads it is easy to lose what should be our proper perspective. From time to time Paul reminds us, as he does in 8:6:

In all this about food sacrificed to false gods—gods in heaven, gods on earth—remember, for us there is but one God, our Father. Everything there is—everything we know, everything we don't know—is from Him. Our lives and our living is from Him and for Him. And for us there is but one Lord, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Everything there is came into being by His agency, and our lives and living, as believers—as well as our life in the Father—are because of Him.

We must, from time to time, deal with the vagaries of living on this earth—even important details like how to properly, earnestly worship the Lord. But we should never forget, as Paul points out in v12 of our text in the context of balancing the roles of the sexes, that all things are from God: man, woman—even our worship and praise—are from Him. That is, we are to think and live “other-worldly,” as people who think and live in a manner different from those who do not know the Lord.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:8-12.

v11

However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman.

From our previous session our conclusion was that v10 speaks of a woman's fundamental authority over her own anatomical head (NIV2011). Her ultimate priority, however, is not the exercise of her personal rights (as in 8:9), but that she should do whatever is necessary in her dress to facilitate orderly and undistracted worship of the Lord. It goes without saying that this would apply to everyone in attendance—not just the women. All in attendance should be focused on the glory of the Lord, and not on each other.

One gets the impression in v11 that Paul anticipates the many ways some people and some sects will run wild with this passage—and perhaps already were in Corinth. It seems that just about every time we are at the local grocery store I notice some woman in the aisles dressed all in black, a shapeless dress down to her ankles with a white cap pinned to her hair. She wears no makeup and, frankly, looks a bit whipped. If there are young children with her, as there usually are, they will be dressed much the same. What is striking is that on those rare occasions when the husband accompanies one of these dowdy women, he is dressed in a more normal, contemporary fashion—much like any Midwestern farmer. And one is left with the unmistakable impression that in their belief system the woman must adhere to strict, even demeaning regulations, while the man is free to do whatever he likes.

Here once again we have a passage and verse that turns this temporal society on its head. Let's take v11 in order. The “however,” or “nevertheless” (*plen*) that opens the verse means that what follows is a caveat to, or qualification of the discussion that preceded regarding women's head covering. It emphasizes that that discussion was just about head coverings in worship, and not setting down a larger principle regarding women's submission to men. What follows is introduced to balance the previous statements. And what follows is truly radical when compared to the common philosophies of this fallen, groaning world. But first Paul qualifies the qualification.

in the Lord

By this he means “in the sphere of” life in Christ. What he is about to say does not pertain to those outside of Christ Jesus. And now, according to the lights of our present culture, the apostle really goes off the rails.

...neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman

The KJV translates this more literally: “without.”

independent, without^{KJV} = *choris* = adverb from <G5561> (*chora*); at a space, i.e. separately or apart from (often as preposition) :- beside, by itself, without.

chora = feminine of a derivative of the base of <G5490> (*chasma*) through the idea of empty expanse; room, i.e. a space of territory (more or less extensive; often including its inhabitant) :- coast, county, fields, ground, land, region.

Paul is not declaring that everyone must be married, but that in a union of man and woman they are interdependent of each other. One might even extend this beyond marriage to men and women in the church: each has a role, each is important (which Paul will address in Chapter Twelve). Even with their different roles, whether in marriage or the church, man and woman each need the other to make a whole. I believe this statement, again, hearkens back to Creation.

Read Genesis 2:22-25.

Sidebar: Out of the commentators at my disposal, it was David Garland who made the best case for our interpretation of v10—as the NIV2011 has it, “It is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority over her own head, because of the angels.” But it is Gordon Fee who points out how v11 substantiates that interpretation.

If v10 was speaking about man having authority over the woman, we would expect v11 to begin (to qualify that statement in v10), “However, man is not independent of woman...” But he qualifies v10 by beginning with the woman in v11: “However, woman is not independent of man...”

In fact, the sequence “woman/man” makes almost impossible the view that what has preceded has to do with the man’s having authority over the woman... The fact that he says, ‘woman is not independent of man’ indicates that he is qualifying her use of *exousia* in some way. (Fee)

In Christ, man and woman are inextricably bound to each other, each playing different roles, but needing the other, and neither superior to the other.

v12

For as the woman originates from the man, so also the man has his birth through the woman; and all things originate from God.

I favor the lean clarity of the KJV for this verse, which reflects better the sparseness of the original text. In fact, my typically favorite NASB is my least favorite translation of v12.

KJV: For as the woman is of the man, even so is the man also by the woman; but all things of God.

Paul has based much of his argument for man being the “head” of the woman in this chapter, on the Creation epic that man was created first, and that woman was then made from the man. Here he balances that out by offering as equivalents the Creation order and the birthing order. Man was created first but once, but every man since has been “created” out of woman.

...and all things originate from God.

I've said it before: Prepositions are important, and this is one of the reasons I favor the KJV for this verse. Not only does it keep it lean, like the original Greek, but its prepositions are best. Others may consider it nitpicking, but even small, two-letter words can offer important shades of meaning.

It is easy to read “originate from God” (NASB), and the more common “come from God” as a one-time receipt. By that I mean, if I get a package in the mail, it might be something I ordered from a company in Kalamazoo. It came from them, so, as far as I am concerned, that company is the source. But I have no relationship with that company; that company in Kalamazoo has no bearing on my life in general. I just got a box and its contents from them.

The two-letter word “of,” however, speaks volumes—just like its close cousin, “in,” as in “in Christ.” All things are not just from God, they are of God. This gives us a far more expansive picture. The Lord God does not just deliver things to us, then turn away, disinterested in the results. Nor is he simply a delivery boy; God inculcates Himself in all those who are “in the Lord” (v10). What He delivers is not just things, but Himself.

God in His genius has given woman to man, and man to woman, and when these two are “in” Him through the sacrifice of Christ Jesus, Father God then gives Himself, comprising a perfect union—a perfect “one” bound together in Him. They are not just from Him; they are of Him. Fee concludes:

Both man and woman, not just the man, are from [of] God. The one was created from dust, the other through the man, and now finally both through woman. This seems clearly designed to keep the earlier argument from being read in a way that would subordinate women to men.

The implementation of God's genius for male/female relationships has repeatedly been corrupted by, predominantly, the male of the species. In Christian homes and Christian churches throughout history men have interpreted NT teachings as license to subordinate—even abuse—women. As a result, some women are placed in a position where they are taught to exalt the man, rather than to exalt the Lord God. And very often when the woman tries to rectify the situation, her efforts lead not to balance, but to her rebellion—not just against the husband, but against God's true order. David Guzik quotes (Alan?) Redpath:

Redpath: A man who can only rule by stamping his foot had better remain single. But a man who knows how to govern his house by the love of the Lord, through sacrificial submission to the Lord, is the man who is going to make a perfect husband. The woman who cannot submit to an authority like that had better remain single.

As always, the answer for both man and woman—the answer for the home family and the church family—lies in a thorough understanding of God's word, and an unabashed obedience to its teaching.

We dwell in a world that does not acknowledge biblical authority in such matters. Thus we are left with the confusion, resentment, and bizarre relationships common today. The apostle teaches God's balance in male/female relationships—a mutually respectful balance that recognizes the presence and exaltation of Creator God in both sexes.

Read Romans 11:33-36.

Session 110: Self-evident Truths

1 Corinthians 11:13-16

Preface

Just a short while ago we celebrated our Independence Day, the day we commemorate the signing of that foundational document, The Declaration of Independence, which declared our separation from Great Britain. Its second paragraph begins, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” That is, these truths are evident from nature itself; they were not invented by man, or by a committee, by a government, and most certainly not declared true by a king. They are self-evident; they require nothing else to substantiate them.

In the passage before us the apostle Paul employs the same argument, that nature itself teaches what he has been saying from v4 on—meaning it is obvious to all. And what is obvious is that, by design, God created two sexes, and they are to be distinctive in their appearance—especially when gathered to worship the Lord—because they were made distinctive.

After the parenthetical passage from our last session (vv11-12) in which Paul reminds the Corinthians of the balance of the sexes in God’s economy, he now returns to this original thread of thought to cap it with a final argument.

Two things to keep in mind as we examine this closing passage:

1. His discussion of hair in these verses does not mean that hair was the topic in vv3-10. It simply doesn’t work to use vv13-16 as proof that Paul has been talking about hair itself—rather than an external covering—all along, as some commentators try. Here he uses natural hair as an illustration, as an analogy to the earlier argument regarding “coverings” for the woman.
2. Contrary to his practice elsewhere, Paul does not close this topic with a direct command to the Corinthians. There is no, “Based on what I have just said, do this” in v16. For example, back up to Chapter Ten. After Paul’s lengthy dissertation on “things sacrificed to idols” (8-10) he closes with a summary commandment that he expects the Corinthians to follow.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:27-28, 31.

Paul does not do that here.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:13-16.

v13

Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?

To challenge the Corinthians to “judge for yourselves” is tantamount to declaring that it is “self-evident” that the proper way for a woman to pray to God is with her head covered. He puts the challenge in the negative, expecting a negative response. No, it is not proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered.

v14-15a

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?

Paul does not use the word “nature” (*physis*) as we might understand that word.

Gordon Fee: For him this is not an appeal to Nature, or to “natural law,” or to “natural endowment” (after all, what “nature teaches” comes about by an “unnatural” means—a haircut); nor is Nature to be understood as pedagogic (actually “teaching” these “laws.”) Rather, for Paul it is a question of propriety and of “custom” (vv13, 16), which carries with it [either] “disgrace” or “glory.” Hence this is an appeal to the “way things are.”

NIV: Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him...

In that Greco-Roman society of Corinth it was dishonorable for a man to have long or overly styled hair. This is not something to be determined by specified lengths, but whether or not there is a blurring of the sexes. The Lord God created only two sexes, and there is to be a visible difference between the two. In that first-century culture, men were to have short hair and women long. And, as Solomon wrote and I have repeated ad nauseum, there is nothing new under the sun.

Philo was a Jew living in Alexandria, Egypt, and a contemporary of Jesus and Paul in the first century. He offers us an account of a situation very familiar to those of us in the twenty-first century.

Philo: Moreover, another evil, much greater than that which we have already mentioned, has made its way among and been let loose upon cities, namely, the love of boys, which formerly was accounted a great infamy even to be spoken of, but which sin is a subject of boasting not only to those who practise it, but even to those who suffer it, and who, being accustomed to bearing the affliction of being treated like women, waste away as to both their souls and bodies, not bearing about them a single spark of a manly character to be kindled into a flame, but having even the hair of their heads conspicuously curled and adorned, and having their faces smeared with vermilion, and paint, and things of that kind, and having their eyes pencilled beneath, and having their skins anointed with fragrant perfumes (for in such persons as these a sweet smell is a most seductive quality), and being well appointed in everything that tends to beauty or elegance, are not ashamed to devote their constant study and endeavours to the task of changing their manly character into an effeminate one... And some of these persons have even carried their admiration of these delicate pleasures of youth so far that they have desired wholly to change their condition for that of women, and have castrated themselves and have clothed themselves in purple robes, like those who, having been the cause of great blessings to their native land, walk about attended by body-guards, pushing down every one whom they meet.

God gave both men and women hair on their respective heads. Left alone, members of either sex would have long, unkempt locks. It is society that dictates the acceptable appearance of hair, and this, like dress, fluctuates wildly throughout history. But what has not fluctuated in all of Creation's millennia is the order God set forth: there are two sexes only—man and woman—and they are to be distinguishable from each other. In any society or culture, at any time in history, man is to be unmistakably male, and woman is to be unmistakably female.

Again, Paul is citing the difference in men's and women's hair simply to illustrate how they are to properly appear before the Lord in worship. So in contrast to the man, the woman of the first century in that culture was to have long hair. It was her "glory." And here is the distinction demonstrated: for man, long hair is dishonor; for woman, glory. Since it is used here as the opposite of dishonor, Paul probably means it as distinction, or honor. Her long hair does not give the woman her glory, but it functions as something that distinguishes the splendor of the woman (Fee).

Read Exodus 28:1-2.

The NIV translates this "dignity and honor." These splendid ("holy") garments were to distinguish the priests, to set them apart from others. At the same time they gave them dignity and honor for the sacred task assigned to them (Fee).

We might still struggle with the meaning of the phrase "it is a glory to her"; just what does the hair atop a woman's head have to do with glory, with dignity and honor. But if we just accept the statement and imagery as it is, it lends a certain poignant majesty to a couple of scenes in Scripture. Take, for example, the dinner scene at the Pharisee's house, when an immoral woman was "standing behind Him at His feet, weeping, she began to wet His feet with her tears, and kept wiping them with the hair of her head, and kissing His feet and anointing them with the perfume" (Luke 7:38).

Gary Crandall quotes H. A. Ironside: “It is precious to think of Mary of Bethany and of the poor woman in Luke 7 who washed the feet of Jesus and wiped them with their hair. They cast their glory at His feet.” Would that we all would so freely spend whatever small glory we have in such abject adoration of our Lord.

15b

For her hair is given to her for a covering.

This would seem to reinforce the position of some that Paul has been talking about the hair throughout—and that three-letter word “for” just before “a covering” would seem to nail that argument down.

for = *anti* (an-tee') = a primary particle; opposite, i.e. instead or because of (rarely in addition to) :- for, in the room of. Often used in composition to denote contrast, requital, substitution, correspondence, etc.

It is true that the word “for” can mean replacement, “one thing instead of another” (this for that)—i.e., the woman has been given long hair as a replacement for an external covering. But *anti* can also mean “that one thing is equivalent to another” (either this or that)—i.e., the woman’s hair represents or illustrates the covering she needs. Thus the woman has been given long hair as a covering to point to their need to be covered when praying or prophesying (Fee). Substantiating this, the word translated “covering” is

peribolaion (per-ib-ol'-ah-yon) = neuter of a presumed derivative of <G4016> (*periballo*); something thrown around one, i.e. a mantle, veil :- covering, vesture.

One does not typically throw one’s hair around oneself.

v16

But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God.

inclined^{nasb, esv}, **seems**^{kjvs}, **wants**^{niv} = *dokeo* = a prolonged form of a primary verb *doko*, dok'-o (used only as an alternate in certain tenses; compare the base of <G1166> (*deiknuo*)) of the same meaning; to think; by implication to seem (truthfully or uncertainly) :- be accounted, (of own) please (-ure), be of reputation, seem (good), suppose, think, trow.

contentious = *philoneikos* = from <G5384> (*philos*) and *neikos* (a quarrel; probably akin to <G3534> (*nikos*)); fond of strife, i.e. disputatious :- contentious; quarrelsome.

To our ears this sounds a bit cryptic; just what is Paul saying here? Well, something similar to what he has said before—just another topic.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:18.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:2.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:37.

Each of these three other verses refer to something certain individuals in the Corinth church were doing that required correction from the apostle. And the verse before us, worded the same, is meant to convey the same. Apparently there were some women in the church who were doing without covering for their hair—beyond that, Paul anticipates that they will try to argue the point with him (“inclined to be contentious”).

we have no other practice,

The word translated “practice” (*synethia*) was used in Chapter Eight in the discussion about things sacrificed to idols: “...but some, being accustomed to the idol until now...” The noun form in 11:16 means custom or habit.

nor have the churches of God.

That is, neither the apostles and teachers or the rest of the Christian churches have or observe a different way for women to present themselves in corporate worship. There is no alternative for the woman but to cover her head in public—and *I don't want to hear any arguing about this!*

Conclusion

Though Paul has been emphatic and detailed on this topic, even this last passage makes it clear that his conclusion does not constitute a commandment; he is not here establishing canon law. Even more so than in the first century, the Christian church today encompasses a vast multitude of cultures spanning all continents on earth. Dictating a common dress for all men and all women is impossible—and unnecessary. The point is this: Based on the habits and customs of the local community, the attire for both men and women in corporate worship is to be conservative, modest, and not draw attention to the wearer. The sole object of attention, praise, and worship is to be our “head,” Christ Jesus and God the Father. Anything that distracts from that is improper.

Paul's approach with this topic—appealing to shame, propriety, and custom—stands in contrast to his approach with the next: attack and imperative, and calls for immediate change without qualification. What the Corinthians were doing in regard to the Lord's Supper “cuts at the heart of both the gospel and the church” (Fee).

Session 111: A Decided Lack of Love, part one

1 Corinthians 11:17-19

Preface (1)

I hope that every one of you by now has been made painfully aware of the damage being done to the body of Christ during these strange times—and how we must redouble our efforts to minimize the damage, and restore the fellowship we once enjoyed. One of the most insidious problems before us is the lethargy that has enveloped the church. One illustration:

A couple of months back my good friend out on the left (very left) coast was surprised to learn that the numbers at my web site had declined. Faced with the inability to meet together for worship and study, he had expected my numbers to actually rise, as people searched out online resources to replace what they were missing in person.

The sad truth is that instead of a hunger for God and His word, this pandemic, I fear, has instilled a seeping lethargy into the ranks of the church. For some of us, instead of hungering for what once was, we have become inured to what is, complacent and accepting of that which, in God's eyes, is unacceptable—just as God, through the apostle Paul's pen, declared unacceptable what was going on in the assembly in Corinth.

When the church fails to meet together—or, as in Corinth, when it meets together improperly—it is not just the threads connecting its members that are broken, but the threads connecting its members to God, and it becomes too easy to forget. As a result, the power of the Holy Spirit in the church and in its individual members is weakened.

Let us view the damage being done in the assembly in Corinth as a warning, a cautionary tale, for us today. The situation, while different from ours, was having much the same effect, of dividing and weakening the body of Christ.

Preface (2)

I always hated getting stuck at the children's card-table annex at any family or social meal. It made one feel like a second-class citizen—which of course, in the fifties, a child was.

Much the same thing was going on in the Corinth church when they would hold their "love feasts" (modern: potluck dinners) with Communion—we gather the second immediately following the first. Whether held in a separate building, or in a home of one of the church's more affluent members, the wealthy and prominent were reclining in the best room with most of the food, while those in the lower social strata were consigned to the cheap seats (sitting) elsewhere, probably with only the meager rations they could afford to bring.

It was hardly a "love" feast. Here we have one more case of the Greco-Roman culture and societal habits being practiced in the church. The rules of societal strata at play in the city—the wealthy looking down on their lessers—were being generously applied within the church.

In the following passage (vv17-34) Paul will make the point that the church's coming together for their "love feasts" and Communion was not just being poorly done and a waste of time (v17: "...not for the better but for the worse."), but was actually doing harm to the body and the individuals that comprised it. Paul itemizes these in the third section. Their behavior was placing them in a position where they

1. would be liable for the body and blood of the Lord: v27. (*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.*)
2. might incur condemnation: vv29 & 32. (*For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly... But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world.*)
3. were beset by sickness, even death: v30. (*For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep.*)

It is not hard to imagine the impact this situation would have had on the apostle, who had written to the church in Galatia a couple of years earlier,

For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew

nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:26-28)

Instead of unifying the church, the practice in Corinth was doing just the opposite, as David Garland writes, “The Lord’s Supper should accent and intensify group solidarity; the Corinthians’ supper accented and intensified social differences.”

Let’s read the first section of this extended passage that will take us to the end of Chapter Eleven.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-22.

Paul had already cued up this topic in Chapter Ten in his discussion of idolatry.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:16-17.

v17

But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse.

The preponderance of scholarship interprets “this” (*houtos*) as referring to what follows, not to what has just been written. This is helpfully (but far from literally) rendered by the NIVs and ESV, “in the following directives/instructions.” Here Paul contrasts how he introduced the previous topic in v2—“Now I praise you because...”—with, “I do not praise you.” He reiterates this at the end of v22: “Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you.”

Why? “...because you come together not for the better but for the worse.” The purpose of the agape feasts, one purpose of the Lord’s Supper—indeed, one purpose of the church as an institution—was and is for its members to love and support each other into Christ-likeness as they dwell in a fallen world this side of glory.

Read Ephesians 4:15-16.

In this and, as we know, other situations in the Corinth church, its members were not conducting themselves with love to their brothers and sisters in Christ. And now Paul will get down to particulars.

v18

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.

This is where we came in! The first thing Paul addressed at the top of this letter was the detrimental factionalism running rampant in the church.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-12.

In Chapter Eleven, however, Paul refers to a different flavor of “divisions.” In Chapter One he was addressing, as it were, theological schisms, while divisions here are more socioeconomic—a gulf separating the haves from the have-nots. David Garland quotes from Murphy-O’Connor’s *Paul: A Critical Life*.

The potential for dissension within the community is evident. Most members have in common only their Christianity. They differed widely in educational attainment, financial resources, religious background, political skills, and above all in their expectations. A number were attracted to the church because it seemed to offer them a new field of opportunity, in which the talents whose expression society frustrated could be exploited to the full. They were energetic and ambitious people, and there was little agreement among their various hidden agendas. A certain competitive spirit was part of the ethos of the church from the beginning.

Paul has all along been hinting at the importance of love—or, if one prefers, not just agape but civility, consideration—in the church, because it has been demonstrated that it is sorely lacking in Corinth. He introduced his previous three-chapter treatise on things sacrificed to idols with the importance of love.

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

From the outset in this letter Paul has been nibbling around the edges of this, and in Chapter Thirteen he will burst forth on the topic in some of the most glorious prose in Scripture. How it must have broken his heart to see and learn of the Corinthians' lack of love for each other. And how it must break the Lord's heart when he sees it in us.

The phrase, "when you come together as a church" tells us that, just as in the first sixteen verses of this chapter, the setting is the corporate assembly of the church—its members coming together for worship, for instruction, for prayer, and for fellowship (*koinonia*: a sharing of lives). And (what should be to their shame) Paul reveals that he has heard from others (Chloe's people?) that "when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you."

divisions = *schismata* = from <G4977> (*schizo*); a split or gap ("schism"), literal or figurative :- division, rent, schism.

and in part I believe it.

The apostle could easily see this taking place in Corinth—he had already heard of similar things going on. He allows that either the report was not balanced, or that not everyone was behaving the same—or this partial "belief" is tied to what he states in v19.

Sidebar: The ESV makes this phrase ("And I believe it, in part,") the beginning of the next sentence completed in v19. All other of our common translations make this phrase the end of the sentence in v18. This difference has no effect on our interpretation of the text.

How ironic this is! At the very time and place that they should be encouraging, supporting, loving each other, they are erecting barriers and digging deep trenches within their ranks. The Lord's Supper is when we are to remember and commemorate Christ's sacrifice of His very life for others—sinners all. Yet these people were using the occasion as an opportunity to alienate their fellow believers, to keep them in their place, and deprive them of even a share of their food.

v19

For there must also be factions among you, so that those who are approved may become evident among you.

There is a minority interpretation for this odd verse that says that "this statement provides the evidence for Paul's dismay in the previous verse. It explains why he cannot praise them." That is, "he expresses bitter irony about these factions" (Garland). This is possible; Paul has done it before.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:8-10.

There is much to commend, however, the majority interpretation that Paul is making another of his "now-not yet" eschatological references here.

Sidebar: "For there must also be..." is not necessarily synonymous with "It is a good and righteous thing that there is..." Paul is not changing his mind here, and now in favor of factions and schisms within the church.

It is not that factions and schisms are necessarily healthy for the church, but God can still put to good use even unrighteous behavior. When such situations occur in a church, it can be a “now” illustration for the ultimate and final “not yet” judgment in which Christ (“the Son of Man”) will separate the sheep from the goats.

Read [Matthew 25:31-33](#).

We need not exercise too many gray cells to guess the group in Corinth from which we might find the “approved” (ESV: “genuine”). It probably would not be from those reclining in the best room in their fine apparel, feasting on the delicacies they have brought exclusively for their own consumption, not sharing any of it with their poorer brothers and sisters in the cheap seats outside.

It is not that poverty automatically makes one righteous or a “genuine” Christian. But those self-described elites who are unwilling to share with the brethren are displaying behavior that just might put them on the left with the goats on The Day.

Session 112: A Decided Lack of Love, part two

1 Corinthians 11:20-22

Preface

Let's begin by reading from the letter written by James.

Read James 2:1-13.

As in our last, in this session we have once again a minority interpretation and a majority interpretation of what was going on during the Lord's Supper as it was being celebrated in the Corinth church. Since both support Paul's overarching point about what should be going on, it does no harm to the passage to consider both.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-22.

In short, the majority interpretation of our passage, as reflected in almost all of our common translations, is based on a temporal (or time based) rendering of the verb *prolambanein* in v21, translated "first," or "beforehand," or "take before."

Verse 33 offers an important clue for the interpretation of vv20-22. Following the temporal rendering, in most of our translations it corresponds with something like "wait for one another," or "eat together" (NIV2011). That is, instead of "eating before" others arrive, wait so that all may "eat together."

Read 1 Corinthians 11:33.

A pretty good case can be made, however, for the minority interpretation as reflected in the more recent *Christian Standard Bible* from Holman (publishers of the NASB) but not the earlier *Holman Christian Standard Bible*. Verse 33 in the CSB reads, "Therefore, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, welcome one another." So correspondingly, v21 reads, "For at the meal, each one eats his own supper. So one person is hungry while another gets drunk!" Note the difference:

NASB v33	wait for one another (temporal)
CSB v33	welcome one another

NASB v21	each one takes his own supper first (temporal)
CSB v21	each one eats his own supper

v20

Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper,

It is important that we get a picture of what was going on in the Corinth church during these occasions—love feasts, or common meals—because they would have borne few similarities to ours. It would have been nothing like our typical celebration of Communion.

To begin, it would have been held not at a church building, but at someone's home—and one with room for the entire group, so by definition the home of someone with means. Indeed, it is quite certain that the church did not have a church building, but regularly met at a home.

We are accustomed to separating the communal meal from the "Lord's Supper," as if first one takes place, followed by the other. But typically in the NT they followed the pattern set by the Jewish Passover meal, elements of which Christ Jesus apprehended for the institution of His "new covenant" in the bread and the wine. We also are accustomed, I believe, to think that on that night of his betrayal and arrest, all Jesus and His disciples consumed was the bread and the wine. But they probably followed the same Passover pattern, which is described in the *New Bible Dictionary* (1984):

After candlelight search for the forbidden leaven, and other careful preparations (cf. Mk. 14:12-16 and parallels), the Paschal supper proper was taken reclining. It included the symbolic elements of roasted lamb, unleavened bread, bitter herbs, some minor condiments and four cups of wine at specified points. The stipulated ritual hand-washings

were carefully observed. The table (more probably the floor) was cleared before the second cup of wine, the story of the Egyptian Passover and Exodus recounted in a dialogue between father and son (or some suitable substitutes). The dishes of food were then brought back, part of the *Hallel* was sung, the second cup of wine followed. Then came the breaking of bread. In the Last Supper, it was probably at this point that Judas received the sop, and departed into the night to betray his Master (Jn. 13:30). On that fateful night, it may be assumed that the institution of the Lord's Supper or Eucharist was associated with the third cup of wine. The singing of the *Hallel* was completed with the fourth cup [of wine], doubtless the hymn of Mt. 26:30.

From this we see that the meal and the rite of the bread and wine—even during Christ's Last Supper—were blended together.

What Paul had learned was that typically in Corinth this occasion—not a celebration of Passover, but a Christian “love feast” or common meal that included the Lord's Supper (Communion)—had devolved into something more akin to a pagan bacchanal. Rather than a time of holy fellowship, dedicated to the Lord, focused on Him and the fellowship of the church that bears His name, it had become little more than an indulgent revelry—and primarily for those who could afford to supply the more lavish and expensive food. It is proposed by some that the more well-to-do members of the congregation consumed the food, while their lessers received only the bread and wine portion of the meal, that which we refer to as Communion.

v21

for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk.

This is why Paul says, paraphrasing v20, *Gimme a break. You're not really celebrating the Lord's Supper—it's just another occasion for a party.*

Here is where we run into the two interpretations of the situation. Whether it is a matter of eating before the others, or just eating by oneself, the effect is the same: Too many in the church were corrupting the very purpose behind the supper. The picture of the traditional interpretation (temporal) is that the wealthy people in the church would show up early with all their fancy food and begin the meal before the more common individuals could arrive. The working folk could not arrive until they got off work, so by the time they showed up the wealthier folk were already stuffed and drunk, having consumed most of what they brought for themselves. The less-common interpretation, as in the Christian Standard Bible, “For at the meal, each one eats his own supper...,” is a picture of all the people being together in the same venue, but just eating whatever they brought for themselves, and not sharing with the others.

Thus the setting was not at all like our traditional potluck events where all the food brought is spread on the table and everyone takes from it whatever they like. Hence the injunction of v33 in the *Christian Standard Bible*, “Therefore, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, welcome one another.” That is, greet one another, share your food with one another—be a church! Compare what was going on in Corinth to the picture of the even younger church, as described in Acts 2.

Read Acts 2:41-47.

...each one takes his own supper first;

What a contrast! But here again it is another example of the secular culture invading the church. It was not the custom of the time to share with others. Even if an individual or couple were invited to someone's residence, they might typically bring their own food.

Garland: The practice of “basket dinners,” or *eranos* (contribution) dinner parties, in which persons make up a dinner for themselves and pack it into a basket to go to another's house to eat, was well known.

That Paul was appalled by this behavior in the church is clear from the last verse in the paragraph.

v22

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.

Once again we require historical context to understand Paul's reference here. About as close as we can get to our own time for a reference would be Edwardian England, around the turn of the nineteenth century and before the first World War. Wealthy landowners would live in stately homes, catered to by a small army of servants. Every evening dinner would be a formal, sumptuous affair with multiple courses, served by attendants who would stand motionless in the background, obediently awaiting the next request from the members of the family. While it is true that these servants were paid a salary, did not go hungry, and, for the most part, welcomed the opportunity to serve, their meals below-stairs were more simple and pedestrian than those of their betters.

In first century Corinth there was an even greater divide between the haves and have-nots. When Paul rhetorically exclaims, "Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink?" (obviously directed toward the "haves" in the church), he means this quite literally: the wealthy or even middle class had homes with kitchens where they took their meals, while the regular folk in the city depended on public facilities. They did not have kitchens, but either prepared their meals in public kitchens, public bakeries where their bread was baked, or they ate at fast-food shops. They did not even bathe at home, but used the public baths in the city.

Even at meals where the classes were mixed at the same table, the custom of the day was that the elite would be served the better, more refined food, while the lower class guests would be served the pedestrian fare. Historian Paul Veyne writes, "Guests of different rank were served different dishes and wines of different qualities, according to their respective dignities." The upper class thought nothing of consuming their rich fare in the presence of those who were limited to gruel. That was the custom. At the same time, for those in the lower social strata the opportunity in the church to take a common meal with fellow believers would be for them a hugely important sign of their new life in the church. Nothing would validate better the fact that they truly were brothers and sisters in the Lord than to sit down to a common meal and partake together of the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. Instead of embracing the lower classes as brethren, these Corinthians were blithely superimposing the customs of the secular community on the church. Instead of embracing the new order of life in Christ, they were "despising" it; instead of embracing their fellow believers, they were "shaming" them.

This brings me back to a point I have made before. At some point the earnest believer intent on growing into Christ-like maturity must—*must*—decide which voice will lead him or her. Will it be the voice of this fallen world? Or will it be the voice of Christ and God's word? It cannot be both; to be mature in faith one must choose.

This was the root failing of the Corinthians. They were listening to the voice of this world rather than the voice of the Savior. They were incorporating the ways of the contemporary culture rather than the ways of the gospel. They were paying greater heed to the philosophers of the day rather than the teachings from Christ's called apostle.

If you are a Christian, you cannot have multiple lords. If you are a Christian, you have one Lord—and one Lord only.

Even Jesus the Christ.

Session 113: Proclaiming the Lord's Death

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Preface

What Paul tells the Corinthian church in vv17-22 of his letter—and surely in person when he was there—regarding their behavior during the church's common meal and Lord's Supper was a revolutionary concept for those who had been raised in a Greco-Roman culture, and now living in a multi-cultural, cosmopolitan city. It was so revolutionary that it would be tantamount to telling a southern democrat cracker in the early sixties that he had to sit next to a black man at the lunch counter. But just as did Martin Luther King in the fifties and sixties, Paul was trying to get them to understand that they were now brothers—and sisters. In the Lord there are no longer the divisions set by this fallen world. In the next chapter Paul will expand on this.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-14.

To the Galatians Paul will write much the same thing.

Read Galatians 3:26-29.

We now begin the second section of the three that comprise the second half of this chapter:

vv17-22: Paul describes the problem with the Lord's Supper in Corinth

vv23-26: What the Lord's Supper is to mean

vv27-34: Paul's commands regarding the Lord's Supper

John MacArthur: These verses are like a diamond dropped in a muddy road. One of the most beautiful passages in all of Scripture is given in the middle of a strong rebuke of worldly, carnal, selfish, and insensitive attitudes and behavior. The rebuke, in fact, is of Christians who have perverted the very ceremony that these verses so movingly describe.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:23-26.

v23a

For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you,

Paul ties this verse to the previous with *yap*—in all of our translations, “For.” Look at v2 of this chapter.

Read v2.

There he praises them because they remember and “hold firmly to” the traditions he delivered to them. But in v17 and v22 he says, “*I do not praise you*” *for what you are doing with this tradition I left with you.* And in v23 he begins his “why.”

Paul's source for what he “received from the Lord” was not the written gospels, most of which, at best, were in the process of being written about this same time. Neither did he receive it by means of a supernatural vision, as on the road to Damascus. Here he simply states in a little different way what he had said earlier in Chapter Seven. Go back to Chapter Seven. There he draws a distinction between his considered opinion as an apostle, and what he instructs or commands as something passed down from the Lord. We see the first in v6 and v12.

Read v6 and v12.

But what he says in v10 is from “the Lord.”

Read v10.

So Paul opens this section by explaining that what follows is not his opinion, but a command from the Lord. He also states that he has told them this before.

Sidebar: As he has previously in this letter, Paul does not include this paragraph as an historical account, nor is he teaching the Corinthians anything new. One could get lost—and many scholars have—in the minutia about how vv23-26 differ from the gospel accounts of the Last Supper, but that misses the point. Paul raises this as the means to illustrate what should be going on at their suppers. His purpose is not historical, but to remind the church that Jesus Himself established the tradition that they are presently violating.

23b-24a

...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,

Everything up to the middle of v24—the words of Jesus—is customary for any Passover meal: the taking of the bread, giving thanks for it, the breaking of it for its subsequent consumption. What is not at all customary, indeed revolutionary, is what Jesus says about the bread at this point.

24b

“This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me.”

Literally, “This of mine is the body which is for you.”

There is nothing in the text to warrant the Catholic position of transubstantiation—that the bread (and wine) literally become the body (and blood) of Christ. *From Life in Christ: Instructions in the Catholic Faith* (1966):

It has been the constant, infallible teaching of the Church that in the Eucharist the body and blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ are contained under the appearances of bread and wine.

To whom did Jesus give the power of changing bread and wine into his body and blood?

Jesus gave this power to the apostles at the Last Supper. He gives it to his priests in the sacrament of Holy Orders.

What happens when the priest pronounces the words, “This is my body; this is my blood,” over the bread and wine?

At these words the actual bread and wine cease to exist. In their place is the body and blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ.

Are both the body and blood of Christ present under the appearance of bread alone?

Yes. It is the living Christ who is present in the Eucharist.

Gordon Fee: The identification of the bread with the body is Semitic imagery in its heightened form (as seen in 1 Corinthians 10:4, “the rock *was* Christ,” and Galatians 4:25, “Hagar *is* Mount Sinai”). As in all such identifications, he means “this signifies/represents my body.” The presence of Jesus with them as He spoke these words would have made any other meaning impossible.

David Garland puts it pithily, “Arguments about transubstantiation and consubstantiation have no substantiation in the intention of the text.”

Sidebar: “broken”

A. T. Robertson: Which is for you (*to hyper humon*). *Klomenon* (broken) of the *Textus Receptus* (King James Version) is clearly not genuine. Luke (Luke 22:19) has *didomenon* (given) which is the real idea here. As a matter of fact the body of Jesus was not broken (John 19:36). The bread was broken, but not the body of Jesus.

As useful and pertinent as this information is, what follows that opening phrase of “This is My body,” is far more pertinent to the context.

"This is My body, which is for you"

Here once again is the marvelous paradox that is our God. The one speaking these words was responsible for the very creation of this world and its people. He is all-powerful, all-knowing, and eternal, spanning time and space. Yet this God willingly takes on uncomfortable flesh and willingly dies a horrible death upon a Roman cross—for sinners.

Jesus' words hearken back to what Isaiah wrote about the Messiah.

Read Isaiah 53:12.

Verse 5 is more explicitly detailed.

Read Isaiah 53:5.

Again, scholars have debated precisely what Jesus means by this, but in the context of this letter Paul's point is to draw the contrast between Christ's unselfish sacrifice, and the Corinthians' self-centered treatment of others in the church; the contrast between Christ doing this for ugly sinners who did not yet even know of Him, and the elite in the church despising those they already knew well.

v25

In the same way He took the cup also after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood;"

Here is Jeremiah's prophecy fulfilled (Jeremiah 31:31). From Genesis on the Lord God established that covenants with Him would be made through the shedding of blood, because "the life of the flesh is in the blood."

Read Jeremiah 31:31.

And Jesus was saying that not only was He announcing the inauguration of this new covenant, of which Jeremiah speaks, but that it would be His blood that would make it effective. At the Last Supper Jesus "borrowed" the bread and wine of Passover for the regular remembrance of His sacrifice—someone had to die for a covenant to go into effect. (Of course, from a Christian perspective Jesus did not borrow, but took possession of the elements from Passover.)

do this...in remembrance of Me.

In this narrative of the event, twice Jesus says, "do this...in remembrance of Me."

Garland: What is to be remembered, as far as Paul is concerned, is that "the crucified one" gave His body and sacrificed His blood in an expiatory death that brings the offer of salvation to all persons. By partaking of the bread and the cup, they recall that sacrifice and symbolically share in its benefits.

The word "remembrance" encompasses more than just the mental activity to recall that something happened. The Passover rite was meant to almost reenact the original Passover night and next morning. And when the church joins together for the Lord's Supper it is to be a time when each individual mentally but actively remembers not just Christ, but what He did.

The Lord's Supper "is not simply 'in memory of Him,' but it is eaten as a 'memorial' of the salvation that He has effected through His death and resurrection" (Fee). Holding that bread and wine in our hands we are to close our eyes and see Him being scourged, see the crown of thorns pressed into His head, see His suffering on the cross—but also to see and rejoice in His coming out of the tomb, see Him returning to the Father to sit at His right hand, exalted and glorified.

Do this, participate in the memorial, Jesus is saying, to remember that I shed my blood and gave all of my body over to death—for you.

v26

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

In v20 Paul wrote, “Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper.” He has just recited the account of Christ's Last Supper to show that that is not what the Corinthians have been doing. Instead, they are to be proclaiming the Lord's death. If they are doing this, “they will not overindulge themselves, despise others, shame them, or allow them to go hungry” (Garland).

Garland: The Lord's Supper is founded on the sacrificial death of Jesus for others, and the attitude that led Him obediently to that death should pervade the Supper for Christians ever after. The way the Corinthians conducted their supper, however, gave witness to a culture of selfishness and status-mongering. To conduct their supper in this way and to have the temerity to call it the Lord's Supper can lead only to their condemnation.

Session 114: Preventing Judgment, part one

1 Corinthians 11:27-29

Preface

Read John 17:11, 20-23.

One of the most important things on the mind of Christ Jesus, in the closing hours before His arrest and crucifixion, was that His disciples—the initial remaining eleven as well as “those also who believe in Me through their word” (i.e., us)—that His disciples would have a unity, a oneness that would, in and of itself, both declare the deity of Christ as God’s Son, and the love God has for all believers in His Son.

That is, our unity—our love for and devotion to, our grace and longsuffering with each other—is a witness to the unsaved world that what we are and have from Christ is real, and substantial. Not just the Corinthian church, but far too many churches today have forgotten this prayer of Jesus. They have forgotten that their Savior wants them to be one. To love each other, to support each other, share with each other, and pray for each other—and, in the context of our passage, eat with each other.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:27-34.

The theme of the last two paragraphs of this chapter is “judgment.” Lifting out just the operative words, note,

v27: guilty of

v28: examine himself

v29: judgment to himself, judge the body rightly

v31: if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged

v32: when we are judged, we are disciplined, so that we will not be condemned

v34: come together for judgment

vv27-28

Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of [sinning against^{niv}, ^{csb}] 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.

In many respects we are swimming upstream as we endeavor to digest this passage. The reason for this is that, as we know well, this passage is recited in many congregations every time the ordinance of Communion is observed. So we are familiar with the text, but just about every time we hear or read it, it is lifted out of its context. So most of us approach this passage with a perspective on it that has been drummed into us for years. We must then be diligent to understand the text as intended by Paul.

...in an unworthy manner ... But a man must examine himself

Let me illustrate from my own practice. Every Sunday morning, early, in my prayer closet as I prepare to approach the throne, I review my behavior of the past week. If I can recall any transgression I failed to confess, and for which the Lord’s forgiveness was not pleaded, I address it then. I search for anything in my life that might obstruct or diminish my worship and my teaching later that morning.

On Communion Sundays, with this very verse ringing in my ears, I approach this task with increased diligence and sobriety. I beseech the Lord to throw open every door, every closet, every cabinet in my life and bring to my mind anything I have overlooked that must be confessed before I partake of the bread and the cup. I tremble at the thought that I might participate in this ordinance with some unconfessed or unresolved sin in my life.

Now, even before I read any learned discussion of this paragraph, and v27 in particular, based on study of the previous two paragraphs I was beginning to wonder if perhaps this pre-Communion process so many of us go through is not quite what Paul had in mind. Much of this confusion stems from the original King James translation of the Greek *anaxios* as

“worthily,” which seems to apply to the person doing the eating. You will note that all of our modern translations—even the NKJV—translate this, “in an unworthy manner,” which points to the manner in which it is being eaten.

There is the difference. We all have sin in our lives, and it would be a remarkable person indeed who could remember and confess every fleeting transgression against the righteousness and holiness of our God. I dare say that every one of us approaches Communion with some unremembered and thus unconfessed sin lingering in our life. Don’t misunderstand what I am saying; it is never wrong to conduct a mental, Spirit-guided inventory of our behavior and thoughts, and to confess any wrong that the Spirit brings to our mind. But is that what Paul is saying here? Gordon Fee writes, “This word [“worthily”] became a dire threat for generations of English-speaking Christians.”

This is especially true in the more pietistic sectors of the Protestant tradition. People are “unworthy” if they have any sin in their lives, or have committed sins during the past week. This in turn resulted in reading v28 personally and introspectively, so that the purpose of one’s self-examination was to become worthy of the Table, lest one come under judgment. The tragedy of such an interpretation for countless thousands, both in terms of a foreboding of the Table and guilt for perhaps having partaken unworthily, is incalculable—and seems to have missed Paul’s point almost altogether.

What, then, was the “unworthy manner” by which many in the Corinthian congregation were partaking of the bread and wine?

Read 1 Corinthians 11:18-22.

In this verse Paul does not suggest that some in the church were taking the bread and the cup while there was unconfessed sin in their life, but that they were corrupting the very purpose of the rite by their self-absorbed behavior, and callous disposition toward others in the body. In this they were

guilty of [sinning against^{niv, csb}] the body and the blood of the Lord.

There is a sense in which this behavior was, as the NIVs and CSB insert into the text, “sinning against” the body and blood of the Lord. But here Paul sets up the judicial, legal language that follows. “Liability” is the idea here. To profane the meal as they have been, places them under the same liability as those responsible for Christ’s death. Thus to be “guilty of the body and the blood” means to be liable for His death (Fee). When we so abuse this holy rite, we are as bad as those who tossed dice for the Savior’s clothes at the foot of the cross. We are as bad as those who drove the nails.

So the irony is that instead of approaching the meal with sober gratitude for the salvation we have because of Christ’s sacrifice, we are so profaning the meal that we have made ourselves judicially equal to those who put Him to death.

But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

There is indeed a call for self-examination as preamble to the Communion meal, but it has more to do with one’s attitude toward fellow believers at the meal than how current we are on our confessions for sin. We do not test ourselves to determine our worthiness to attend the table; every one of us can easily answer that without any self-appraisal at all: not one of us is worthy in and of himself to be there. The meal itself proclaims the gospel—v26: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.” Part of living out the good news of salvation in Christ is how we treat our fellow believers. So we “examine” ourselves to determine if we are ready to come under obedience to the gospel the meal proclaims. To fail to do this, as Paul will state, invites God’s judgment upon us.

v29

For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly.

I must confess that for the last roughly sixty-two years (I walked the aisle in our Baptist Temple at the age of seven) I have not understood what Paul meant by his use of “body” (*soma*), in the phrase “judge the body rightly,” in this verse. I guessed I just chalked it up to some vague imagery, part of the overall Communion mystery.

Sometimes the addition of words to the original text by scholars and editors can be invaluable in understanding what is being said. At other times they can be obstacles to that understanding. Either way, in most cases they steer us in a direction of interpretation preferred by those scholars or editors. And if we, as lay believers, are not privy to the underlying Hebrew, Greek, or Aramaic, we can wrongly assume those added words are in the original text.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:27.

In v27 Paul, the original author, explicitly modifies “bread... and cup” and “body and the blood” with “of the Lord.” Based on that text—as well as their interpretation of the immediate context—several of our common translations add “the Lord’s body” (KJVs) or “the body of the Lord/Christ” (NIVs). In this instance Paul did not write any explicit reference the “the Lord,” but just wrote “body.” Those translations that insert “Lord” or “Christ” still lack clarity; do they refer to Jesus’ physical body, or the bread representing that body?

I subscribe to the convincing argument that the overall context insists that we understand “body” in v29 as the church, which is the “body of Christ.” Paul has spent this entire passage, from v17 to the end of the chapter, correcting an abuse of the church during its observance of the Lord’s Supper. When Paul means the “bread... and cup” and “body and the blood” of the Lord, he explicitly states it, as in v27. Here he just says “body” (*soma*). The best evidence for this interpretation, however, is found in Chapter Ten. In the middle of his discussion of idolatry, and the eating of food sacrificed to idols, he injects a brief aside about the Lord’s Supper, where he, again, explicitly states identification of the cup and bread with Christ, but then more obviously (than in 11:29) associates “one body” with the church.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:16-17.

“We who are many are one body.” That being the case, what does Paul mean by “he...eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly”?

judge^{nasb}, **discerning**^{kjvs,niv2011,esv}, **recognizing**^{niv} = *diakrino* = from <G1223> (*dia*) and <G2919>

(*krino*): to separate thoroughly i.e. (literal and reflexive) to withdraw from, or (by implication) oppose; figurative to discriminate (by implication decide), or (reflexive) hesitate :- contend, make (to) differ (-ence), discern, doubt, judge, be partial, stagger, waver.

Fee: The Lord’s Supper is not just any meal; it is *the* meal, in which at a common table with *one* loaf and a *common* cup they proclaimed that through the death of Christ they were *one* body, the body of Christ; and therefore they are not just any group of sociologically diverse people who could keep those differences intact at this table. Here they must “discern/recognize as distinct” the one body of Christ, of which they all are parts and in which they all are gifts to one another. For the “well-to-do” to fail to discern the body in this way, especially by abusing those of lesser sociological status, is to incur God’s judgment.

Every time we approach the table of the Lord we are to recall in a deep and profound way the sacrifice Jesus made for our salvation—and our access to His table. We are also to examine ourselves, to discern and understand that the body—the church—is unique in this fallen world. It is not a social club, but a family in which, even with our personal differences, we are all one. And we are to treat each other as such. No one in the church, save for its Head, is better than anyone else. And at no other time is that so important as when we gather around the table for the Lord’s Supper.

Session 115: Preventing Judgment, part two

1 Corinthians 11:30-34

Preface

I was struck this week by the realization of how so much that we do in the church is really a rehearsal for what we will do in eternity future.

- We gather to worship and praise the Lord—as we will for all eternity future ([Psalms 22:27](#));
- we sing to Him—as we will for all eternity future ([Revelation 14:2-3](#));
- we may not know precisely what we will be doing in eternity future—other than worshiping and praising the Godhead—but we do know that it will be in the company of the saints: fellow believers—just as we come together once a week to fellowship with kindred souls;
- and we gather around the Lord’s table to rehearse “the marriage supper of the Lamb”—which will be celebrated in eternity future.

Read Revelation 19:7-9.

The marriage supper of the Lamb will be the actual performance—opening night, as it were—for all the Communion meals we have rehearsed as earth-bound believers. It will include almost all the elements we have just listed (save for singing, perhaps, which is not mentioned in the Revelation passage), and certainly the two which are the apostle’s focus in our passage: a celebration of what Christ Jesus did to facilitate our attendance at such a holy feast, and the loving fellowship of the saints around the table.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:27-34.

v30

For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep.

For what reason? “For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly” (v29). Paul, having received the news about “many” getting sick, and even dying, concludes that this could very well be the result of their behavior toward one another. First, what is Paul not saying?

- He is not saying that every illness and death is the direct result of sin, or offenses against the body of Christ.
- He is not saying that these individuals have/had lost their salvation. This is corrective judgment, not eternal judgment (David Guzik). [See v32.](#)
- He is not saying that they are only “weak in faith,” “spiritually ill,” and “spiritually asleep.” No, he is saying that there has been in the Corinthian church temporal, physical judgments because of their behavior—including physical sickness and physical death. “Real suffering in the flesh, not a decay of the spirit, is the divine warning bell that should awaken the Corinthians to the dangers of their practices” (David Garland).

v31

But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged.

This is a perfect example of a sentence that, when lifted out of its context, is a head-scratcher, but when read in context makes perfect sense. What did Paul say just before this?

Read 1 Corinthians 11:28-29.

The Lord is permitting—or even inflicting—sickness and death in the Corinth church because “many” are not rightly examining their behavior toward their brothers and sisters in the church. My guess is that this behavior was not limited to the Lord’s Supper, but was evident throughout the doings of the congregation. In any number of circumstances it was evident that the church was sick.

The Lord was at work in the Corinth church with His corrective judgment to make repairs, to get the church back on track, to restore fellowship among its members. The church was sick; it is seen in their lawsuits against each other (6:1-11), their sexual and marital sins (6:12-7:40), their attitude toward idolatry (8:1-11:1). And now, perhaps most offensive to the Lord, it is seen even during their observance of the Lord's Supper. If only they would "examine themselves" and then make the necessary corrective adjustments to their faith-walk and behavior, the Lord would not have to be judging them.

v32

But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world.

Here is the evidence that Paul is not taking about final, eternal, damning judgment for these believers. Here is the definition of the Lord's corrective judgment: discipline.

disciplined, chastened = *paideuo* = from <G3816> (*país*); to train up a child, i.e. educate, or (by implication) discipline (by punishment) :- chasten (-ise), instruct, learn, teach.

Read Hebrews 12:7-11.

...so that we will not be condemned along with the world.

condemned = *katakrino* = from <G2596> (*kata*) and <G2919> (*krino*); to judge against, i.e. sentence :- condemn, damn.

I confess that I had to chew on this quite a bit. It was a struggle—initially. When I read “we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world,” I hear the possibility of the alternative, that if we are not disciplined by the Lord we might be condemned (i.e., damned) along with the world! Yet that does not square with what Jesus said in John's gospel.

Read John 5:22-24.

And then we have the reassuring voice of the Good Shepherd later in the same gospel.

Read John 10:27-30.

I think the way Christians who subscribe to the doctrine of “the perseverance of the saints” are to interpret this verse as found in the Hebrews passage—especially v6, which we did not include before—

For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives.” (Hebrews 12:6)

—and v8.

But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. (Hebrews 12:8)

If we are His children, we will be disciplined; if we are not disciplined by Him, then we are not His children—and thus will be “condemned along with the world.” This is similar to the doctrinal root of the perseverance of the saints: if our faith endures to the end, then we are/have been truly born again; if our faith does not endure (i.e., we “lose our faith”), then we are not/have not been truly born again (John 8:31-32, Hebrews 3:14).

Nonetheless, if it were not for the fact that it is holy writ, I might return v32 to the apostle with a few blue-pencil marks, requesting a rewrite for better clarity.

John Darby: The world is condemned. Sin in the Christian is judged, it escapes neither the eye nor the judgment of God. He never permits it; He cleanses the believer from it by

chastening him, although He does not condemn, because Christ has borne his sins, and been made sin for him.

v33

So then, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another.

Now in this final paragraph we draw Chapter Eleven to a close. Here Paul summarizes the points he made earlier. And we must revisit the two interpretations of v21, where most of our translations employ the “temporal” interpretation, as in

for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk. (emphasis added)

Correspondingly, v33 in the NASB has “wait for one another.” But the real issue at the supper was not a lack of patience for late arrivals, but a lack of fellowship with them. What difference would it make if they did wait for them, if when the late arrivals showed up they still kept to their own kind, eating the food they brought for themselves and not sharing it with their “lessers.”

This is why I favor the new CSB, which translates the beginning of v21, “For at the meal, each one eats his own supper,” and v33, instead of “wait for one another,” it has “welcome one another.” That’s the idea: not when one eats, but what one eats and with whom.

v34a

If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, so that you will not come together for judgment.

Here Paul reiterates what he wrote in v22:

What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink?

The Lord’s Supper is not to be regarded as just any typical meal—a time to fill one’s belly to calm hunger pangs. It is to be a special time of commemoration and fellowship. His statement about coming together for judgment refers to the next sentence in v22:

Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing?

That is what they were being judged for—their treatment of and disdain for their brothers and sister in Christ.

v34b

The remaining matters I will arrange when I come.

I hear Paul saying this—dictating it to his amanuensis—with a weary sigh. You Corinthians are wearing me out, I hear in this closing statement. And so this jam-packed chapter is closed. The next chapter will continue to address deficiencies in their church, but with a brighter, more positive tone as he turns to the issue of spiritual gifts.

The message—from God, through the Spirit, through the apostle—in this chapter is made crystal clear. We are to treat the Lord’s Supper as an occasion of critical importance—not just regarding our personal relationship with Christ and our gratitude and praise for the sacrifice He made to secure our salvation, but regarding our relationship with our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. As Paul will write in Chapter Thirteen, the greatest and most important gift we possess is the gift of love: love for God first, but love also for our kindred in Christ.

Session 116: Setting the Stage, part one

1 Corinthians 12:1

Preface

As we turn the page to Chapter Twelve, we discover two things: First, Paul is still answering the questions submitted to him by the Corinth church. We may not always know precisely what those questions were (as here), but we know that that is what he is doing. Second, we discover that Paul is still on-topic—the topic he opened at the beginning of Chapter Eight. And that topic remains proper, God-honoring, church-edifying worship. Just as with his extended treatise on eating food offered to idols in Chapters Eight to Ten, we have the ultimate purpose of his lengthy counsel near the end. Regarding edifying the church, we have the passage in Chapter Fourteen.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:1-4.

Regarding proper, orderly, God-honoring worship, we have the passage further on in Chapter Fourteen.

Read vv23-26, 40.

- In Chapters Eight through Ten (including 11:1) it was “things sacrificed to idols.”
- In Chapter Eleven, verses two to sixteen, it was the proper dress and appearance for men and women in worship.
- In verses seventeen to thirty-four, it was the proper behavior during the observance of the Lord’s Supper.
- And now in Chapters Twelve through Fourteen it is the proper use of spiritual gifts in worship.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:1-3.

Before we proceed, let me add one point of clarification—regarding the text in v1, but which colors the entire topic. In a sense this takes us all the way back to something we discussed in Chapter Three. That is, how to understand and express the Pauline use of the word translated, more often than not, the adjective “spiritual.” First, regarding how the word is presented in our text, I subscribe to Gordon Fee’s practice of making every effort to translate and express the word *pneumatikos*, no matter the modern convention, as something obviously of the Holy Spirit. That is, the modern convention is to not capitalize the word “spiritual,” which, while perhaps grammatically correct, risks lumping the things of the Holy Spirit in with earthly trivialities as someone or something being generically “spiritual,” mystical, contemplative, healing crystals and oils, ad nauseum.

So, first, in v1 the original Greek has just *pneumatikos*; “gifts” has been added, as in most of our translations. (Later in the topic Paul will indeed switch to *charismaton*, translated “gifts,” or “spiritual gifts.”) Fee translates this in v1, “matters of the Spirit” (neuter), and I would also commend to you the NIV2011, “Now about the gifts of the Spirit,” both of which make clear that Paul is speaking of gifts coming from the Spirit, the Holy Spirit.

Second, there has long been a debate over whether *pneumatikos* in v1 is masculine or neuter. Most of our translations make it to be neuter, and thus refer to “spiritual gifts”—or, better, “things of the Spirit.” That is, Paul refers to the gifts themselves, or the Spirit giftings. If masculine, then Paul refers here to spiritual people, or “those who have the Spirit,” or “spiritual ones” (Garland).

I realize this may be stretching one’s comfort level, perhaps getting a little too far down in the weeds. But consider:

- Be assured that anything I include here is a dramatically abridged version of any scholarly discussion of the situation.

- As always, it seems, learned scholars do not agree on how to interpret this; Fee (with MacArthur) and Garland take different approaches, and D. A. Carson something a little different from those.
- As tedious as this discussion may be, it is important, because our interpretation may color how we approach the next three chapters of this letter.
- As he has before in this letter (e.g., 7:1, 8:1), in v1 Paul is quoting from the Corinthian letter query to him. As before, he begins by using their terminology, but then proceeds to correct their thinking and behavior, employing his more focused terminology. This means that we should not give too much weight to just one word in the first verse of a three-chapter treatise (i.e., Paul's repeating of their terminology does not necessarily signal his acquiescence to it). Yet those who take the position that the v1 *pneumatikos* is masculine, referring to people, cite v14:37, which forms an *inclusio* pointing back to v12:1. There Paul chooses for himself the same word used in v12:1.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:37.

Finally, in this instance my proposition is that we not force a narrow approach to this treatise by selecting just one of the positions cited earlier, but instead consider them all—for one can make reasonable arguments for each. Thus:

- We could gain valuable insight into the various gifts of the Spirit if we approach this treatise only from that perspective.
- But we can gain much more if we include along with that the position that Paul is speaking to the fact that we are to be spiritual people (better, people of the Spirit). It is clear from the text that although Paul will address the importance of the other gifts of the Spirit, the issue in the Corinth church was predominantly about the more ecstatic gifts: tongues and prophesy. This, Paul will claim, was a hold-over from their pagan roots, in which such impressive drama played an important role. Once again the Corinthians were superimposing the beliefs and practices of a secular and pagan world on the church.
- A more nuanced approach, espoused by D. A. Carson, can add yet a third valuable perspective.

Carson: Paul offers a telling rebuttal: Your horizons, he says, are too narrow. For participation in the things of the Holy Spirit is attested by *all* who truly confess Jesus is Lord. Both parties must expand their horizons: the charismatics should not feel they have some exclusive claim on the Spirit, and the non-charismatics should not be writing them off... If First Corinthians 12:3 offers a criterion not to establish true and false ecstatic utterance, but to establish whether or not any particular spiritual manifestation may be used to authenticate the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit, then Paul's answer is in line with the entire New Testament, to be able to confess that the Jesus of the Incarnation, cross, and resurrection is truly the Lord. To put the matter in another way, if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ (Romans 8:9)... Paul provides a profoundly Christological focus—as Schwieterz puts it, perhaps a little too simply, “The Holy Spirit makes us receptive of Jesus.” In short, the purpose of 12:1-3 is not to provide a confessional test to enable Christians to distinguish true from false spirits [as in John 1], but a sufficient test to establish *who has the Holy Spirit at all*.

We can gain by including all of these perspectives—and perhaps others—in our study of this next three-chapter treatise. In the time remaining, let's look more closely at this first verse.

v1

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware.

As mentioned earlier, the church had written a letter to the apostle, submitting—let the evidence show not necessarily politely or respectfully—a number of issues for which they requested his input. In the next three chapters we have Paul's “input” regarding those things in the corporate worship generated or energized by the Holy Spirit. No matter what their actual

question was, Paul takes this opportunity to express his thoughts broadly, including a discussion of some of the specific gifts of the Spirit and their proper use and level of importance in corporate worship. He will also use this occasion to address the larger issue of those who have the Spirit versus those who do not. We see that in v3.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:3.

...brethren

It is to Paul's credit—and to the gracious genius behind God through Christ's "perseverance of the saints"—that the apostle still considers those that comprise the Corinth church "brethren" in Christ, even with all their horrendous problems.

Sidebar: the word translated brethren in most of our translations (*adelphos*) is indeed masculine. Some of our newer translations (e.g., NIV2011 and CSB) make it "brothers and sisters," and our principal commentators have no problem with this. "It is therefore not pedantic, but culturally sound and biblically sensitive, for the NIV[2011] and other contemporary English versions to render this vocative "brothers and sisters" (Fee). Personally I wouldn't take this to court, but I still prefer "brethren," because that is what is in the text. We all know and understand that Paul is not restricting this to the male of the species.

...I do not want you to be unaware.

Using the same phrase he employed at the beginning of Chapter Ten, Paul makes it clear that what follows is important; he wants to make sure the church gets it right.

MacArthur: The Greek *agnoeo* literally means "not to know" or "to be ignorant of." It is the term from which we get agnostic. Paul wanted the Corinthians to have no ignorance and no doubts, no uncertainty or agnosticism, about the identification and use of their spiritual gifts. The church cannot function, and it certainly cannot mature, without properly and faithfully using the gifts God gives His people for ministry. Satan will try to counterfeit the Spirit's gifts, and he will try to induce believers to ignore, neglect, misunderstand, abuse, and pervert them. Consequently, Paul's teaching here is critical.

Session 117: Setting the Stage, part two

1 Corinthians 12:1-3

Preface

The second and third paragraphs in Chapter Twelve offer us valuable insight for understanding not just the first paragraph, but the entire three-chapter treatise.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:4-13.

Now, as Paul opens this extended passage, what is his emphasis? What is the root, the foundation of his argument? Is this all about the various gifts of the Spirit? Yes, but is that the root? Paul's foundational point, from which everything else will spring, is less the gifts themselves than the Spirit that makes them possible! This is stated in v7: "But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good"—that is, the work of God's Holy Spirit in believers for the good of the body of Christ.

In all the proceeding discussion of the various gifts and their use in the next three chapters, we must not lose that focus: It is all about the Spirit. And knowing this helps us understand what Paul is saying in the first paragraph—vv1-3. There is another clue in v13.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:13.

Without stating them explicitly, it is these disparate groups that are being addressed in vv2-3: Greeks ("pagans"), Jews ("Jesus is accursed"), and Christians ("Jesus is Lord").

Read 1 Corinthians 12:1-3.

v2

You know that when you were pagans, you were led astray to the mute idols, however you were led.

There is a wealth of imagery packed into this verse, and although the verse is directed toward Greeks (Gentiles, pagans), both groups—Greeks and Jews—would be familiar with the imagery Paul is drawing from.

Note: Not "led astray by" (CSB) but "led astray to" mute idols.

The cultic procession was something very familiar to both Gentiles and Jews in the ancient world. For pagans, whether carrying the image of the god at the head of the procession or just proceeding to the temple where the god was in residence, the procession was a method of instilling a pronounced level of anticipation, expectation in the worshipers—even a sense of ecstatic euphoria. (In music it is called a crescendo.)

For Jews it was much the same, except that they neither carried or marched to an image of their God, but the temple in which He, in Spirit, dwelt. We even have a set of fifteen psalms sung by individuals or groups as they ascended to the temple mount. Each of these psalms (120 to 134) are called, in their superscription, "A Song of Ascents [or Degrees (KJV)]."

Read Psalm 68:24-26.

But there is an even more pertinent image of a different sort of procession to which Paul refers.

led astray = *apagomenoi* = from <G575> (*apo*) and <G71> (*ago*); to take off (in various senses) :- bring, carry away, lead (away), put to death, take away.

Read Matthew 27:31.

Albert Barnes: Led along; that is, deluded by your passions, deluded by your priests, deluded by your vain and splendid rites of worship. The whole system made an appeal to the senses, and “bore along” its votaries as if by a foreign and irresistible impulse. The word which is used, *apagomenoi*, conveys properly the idea of being carried into bondage, or being led to punishment, and refers here doubtless to the strong means which had been used by crafty politicians and priests in their former state to delude and deceive them.

to the mute idols,

Practically speaking, of course these idols were mute—they were man-made statues. But there is more here than just that. It is the powerful contrast between these mute idols which represented death for their worshipers, and the God who speaks, and represents light and life to His.

Read Psalm 115:4-8.

There is a dramatic contrast between that and the Lord God. We remember that in Genesis 1 the Godhead literally speaks the universe into existence. And in Hebrews 1 the writer addresses how the Lord God spoke to His people after that.

Read Hebrews 1:1-2.

So to the former Gentiles/Greeks/pagans in the church Paul reminds them that earlier, when they were in that “spiritual” condition, they were being regularly—and ultimately—led to their destruction by their faith in lifeless, impotent idols—behind which, Paul earlier noted in this letter, were actual demons (10:20-21).

v3

Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus is accursed”;

In v3 Paul addresses the two other groups that comprise the local church. In v2 the group was former pagans—and in this context that is the proper translation of *ethnos*.

pagans = *ethnos* = probably from <G1486> (*etho*); a race (as of the same habit), i.e. a tribe; specially a foreign (non-Jewish) one (usually by implication pagan) :- Gentile, heathen, nation, people; in practical terms, any non-Jewish peoples.

Much has been made over this blasphemous utterance of anathema Iesous. Just who is saying it? Was it someone in the church? If so, why, and under what conditions? Many fanciful explanations have been offered—none of which track well. What makes the most sense is that Paul is not claiming that any believers were saying this, but refers instead to something a Jew might say prior to becoming a Christian.

In v2 Paul could rightly refer to those who “were pagans”; anyone who used to worship idols, but now worships God through faith in Christ Jesus, would have left behind their heathenism—it would now be something only in their past, and no longer true of them. But he could not say that about those who were formerly members of the synagogue before their conversion to Christ, for they would remain Jews.

Note too that the phrase is not “Christ is accursed,” for a Jew would never say that “Messiah is accursed” (as a pagan could)—but he might very well say this “Jesus [of Nazareth] is accursed.”

Read 1 Corinthians 1:22-23.

Christ Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God was a “stumbling block” to Jews because, first, they did not believe He was what He said and, second, in their eyes anyone crucified was accursed.

Read Deuteronomy 21:22-23.

Finally, “anathema language generally reflects Jewish usage, not Greek” (Behm in Garland). So there is good evidence that Paul is referring to something Jews might say prior to becoming Christians. Anyone who might say this is not “speaking by the Spirit of God.”

...and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit.

David Garland, cites C. H. Talbert’s outline of vv2-3 to show that Paul describes three religious experiences:

1. Pagan experience: being led astray to dumb idols
2. Jewish experience: declaring Jesus is *anathema*
3. Christian experience in the Spirit: confessing Jesus is Lord

Paul closes this introduction to his treatise on the gifts of the Spirit with a reference to the classic utterance of those who are in Christ: “Jesus is Lord.” Sadly, too few Christians today grasp the importance and centrality of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

- Without the initiating act of the Spirit, one would not even be a Christian, one would not know Christ, one would not be saved.
- Without the work of the Spirit, as Paul says here, one could not rightly, honestly make the confession that “Jesus is Lord.”
- Without the Spirit one could not comprehend God’s word, or commune with a God who is also spirit-kind.
- Without the Spirit both the individual and the church would not possess the essential gifts that make it work.
- Without the Spirit’s active influence in the church universal, this world would be even more miserable than it is.

It can be said that the church—the world-wide, spiritually interlinked community of believers in Christ Jesus—exerts, as a collective, a binding force upon the evil that dwells in and on a fallen earth—a world that is in the power of the evil one (1 John 5:19). If the “spirit of the Antichrist” pervades, it is met by the Spirit of Christ, working through His body, the church. Is there any wonder that unimaginable havoc and evil will ensue when every Christian is removed from the earth!

(from my study of 2 Thessalonians 2:5-7)

As with so many aspects of their personal and corporate lives, the Corinthians were misunderstanding—and thus misusing—the things of God. They were associating the work of the Spirit with the various “ecstasies” of tongues and prophecy, to the point that those with such gifts were the only truly “spiritual” ones in the church. Paul is going to be saying to them that all Christians dwell within “the sphere of the Holy Spirit’s power” (Hays)—and only with that power can one utter the confession, “Jesus is Lord.”

Session 118: United Diversity

1 Corinthians 12:4-7

Preface

We established in v1 that Paul was probably quoting back to the Corinthians the terminology with which they queried him: “spiritual gifts” (*pneumatikos*); in this the English “gifts” is implied, and inserted by the editors. This is Paul’s usual pattern every time he opens the discussion of a new topic from their letter to him (e.g., 7:1, 8:1). Now in v4 he switches to what he considers a better term to describe the topic at hand: *charismaton*.

gifts = *charismaton* from 5483; a gift of grace, a free gift:

To put in human terms the difference between the two words *pneumatikos* and *charismaton*, the first was favored by those in the Corinth church who considered themselves more spiritual than others in the church because they could prophesy or speak in tongues. The second, *charismaton*, was favored by Paul because it rightly places the emphasis on God—God’s grace in the giving of the gift.

This is an important distinction: Were these “spiritual” gifts, since they were gifts of the Holy Spirit? Yes. But some of the Corinthians (apparently in keeping with their divisive character) were using this as one more means to create distinct subsets within the church. After all, with what topic did Paul launch this letter? What did he address first?

Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-12.

That word translated “divisions” is the Greek *schismata*, which means to split, tear, rend, divide. We get our word “schism” from it. If one steps back and squints at what we have studied thus far in the first eleven chapters—and now in chapters twelve through fourteen—one can see that every problem in the church addressed by Paul has stemmed from the same insidious root: one group of people desiring to be distinctive from—and better than—the rest in the church. This is the huge, over-arching problem in Corinth: some thought they were better than the others; and if they did not consider themselves already better, they wanted to be.

In the immediate passage before us, as well as in the three-chapter treatise, Paul’s emphasis for the church is “diversity within unity,” and to illustrate his point he uses the Godhead itself for an example. He begins, in v4, with the Spirit, because that is where he has just drawn them at the end of v3—i.e., none of this is possible without the Spirit. But he emphasizes as well, with his use of *charismaton*, that in none of this can they possibly exalt themselves over others, claiming their gifts are superior, because it is all of and from God through His Spirit.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:4-7.

vv4-6

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit.

Since Paul uses the same word in each of the next three verses (vv4-6), we had better look at that word first. The word is the Greek *diairesis* (dee-ay’ee-res-is). All of our versions translate this with either the word “varieties” or a close synonym; all these place the emphasis on the different gifts. David Garland argues that because a word with the same root (a cognate) used in v11 (*diaireo*) means “to distribute”—and is so translated in our versions—that the emphasis should instead be “on the one Spirit who distributes them.” I like the way the NIV2011 covers both bases in its translation of v4: “There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them.” That’s good; as is often the case with the NIV, it borders on paraphrase, but it is helpful.

Once again the Corinthians had a skewed perspective. They were placing the result of grace before the Giver of grace. B. N. Fisk says it well: “Spiritual gifts are not a badge of spirituality, but a mark of grace.”

Read Ephesians 4:4-7.

Just as he does in his letter to the Ephesian church, Paul here to the Corinthians declares that, as in the Creation, not just the Spirit, but the full Godhead is the giver of such things.

- In v4 he declares that all “grace-gifts” (Garland) come from and are distributed by the same Spirit.
- In v5 it is the same Lord (i.e., Christ) who distributes gifts of service, or ministry.
- In v6 it is the same God (i.e., the Father) who distributes “effects,” or workings.

In vv5-6 Paul takes this opportunity to broaden the Corinthians’ understanding of “spiritual gifts,” beyond the more dramatic, ecstatic gifts they so prized. In v5 he speaks of service gifts, using a form of the word from which we get the English “deacon.”

And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord.

ministries, service = *diakonai* = from <G1249> (*diakonos*); attendance (as a servant, etc.); figurative (eleemosynary) aid, (official) service (especially of the Christian teacher, or technical of the diaconate) :- (ad-) minister (-ing, -tration, -try), office, relief, service (-ing).

This was Paul’s favorite word to describe his work for the gospel of Christ.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:5.

In v6, he speaks of gifts of “workings,” or “effects.”

There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons.

effects, activities, workings = *energemata* (en-erg'-ay-mah) = from <G1754> (*energeo*); an effect :- operation, working.

energeo = from <G1756> (*energes*); to be active, efficient :- do, (be) effectual (fervent), be mighty in, shew forth self, work (effectually in).

The idea here is that “something is accomplished by the effort put forth” (Fee).

The apostle is not setting hard and fast lines of demarcation among the three members of the Trinity. He is not saying that only Christ apportions service or ministry gifts, or that only God the Father apportions effective workings. Similarly, as he proceeds in this paragraph to list a number of specific gifts of the Spirit, the apostle is not giving us a definitive, exhaustive list of nine gifts of and for the church, but merely offering an ad hoc (i.e., without general application) representative list of the diverse ways the Spirit gifts the church for the benefit of all.

I believe we can look on these three verses as an illustration for Paul’s emphasis of diversity in unity. He uses the example of the Trinity less to itemize the specific work of each member in the church than to offer a picture of the three working as one. They each can have distinct roles at times, but they are always united as the One God. This Paul reiterates in v12 regarding the many members 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.

He is also pointing out to the Corinthians—and to us—in vv4-6 that the church is filled with many gifts of the Spirit, few of which are considered sensational or dramatic. In fact, he will go on to say that those gifts deemed the most important and prized in the Corinthian church, the more sensational “charismatic” gifts, such as speaking in tongues, are really the least important in the assembly.

but the same God who works all things in all [persons].

God, in His Triunity, is spirit-kind. The second member of the Godhead became flesh—was incarnated on earth—for a while, but He is of the same “species” as the Father and Spirit. As Jesus told the woman at the well,

“But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” (John 4:23-24)

Because we are flesh-kind and, even as believers, remain so at least in part, our default focus remains on the physical. When we hear someone who speaks well, even if we might say, “What a gift he has!” we are probably still thinking, “How eloquent he is!” When we see someone with a talent for understanding and explaining God’s word, we may say, “What a gift he has!” but what we are probably thinking is “He must have had good grades at seminary,” or worse, “He must be really smart.”

What is so easy for us to forget is that all of this—Paul says “all things in all”—every bit of what we see happening in the church is all of God; it is God who works all things in all. So, Corinthians, you who are so impressed with yourselves, it has nothing to do with you. It is all of God. Not only are these abilities grace-gifts, they are grace-gifts from God—which is a great equalizer.

David Guzik: It is easy for us to focus on our own “little area” of gifts, ministries, or activities and believe that those who have other gifts, ministries, or activities are not really walking with God. Yet the One God has a glorious diversity in the way He does things. We should never expect it to be all according to our own emphasis and taste.

v7

But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

In v7 Paul states the basic thesis for Chapter Twelve (Garland).

- “to each one is given”: vv8-10
- “for the common good”: vv12-26

What is each one given...for the common good? “The manifestation of the Spirit.” (manifestation = something rendered apparent, disclosed)

That is, Paul now combines the three categories or “varieties” of vv4-6 under the title “manifestation(s) of the Spirit.” Any and all of these being played out in the church are not manifestations of personal ability or intrinsic skills, but manifestations of an active, gracious God working by means of His Holy Spirit through (“the channel of an act”) every member of the body. One is given the gift for one thing, another is given the gift for something else.

Instead of being impressed by someone’s talent or abilities, we should rather marvel at the generosity of a gracious God who chooses to work through His people. Because it is all of Him.

Session 119: A Few Gifts of the Spirit, part one

1 Corinthians 12:8-11

Preface

I cannot recall another passage in which understanding what the words mean, hence applying the truth to one's life, is contingent less on burrowing down into the original text than on interpreting them from one's faith-standpoint. By that I mean defining the Greek text notwithstanding, a mainstream evangelical, such as a Baptist or Evangelical Free, is going to read this list of nine gifts of the Spirit very different from a Pentecostal charismatic. And to further muddy things up, even within those groups there will be shades of interpretation based on how one interprets other portions of God's word.

Then, as if that weren't enough, we are also faced with a situation not unlike our familiar understanding of the two kinds of sanctification: the immediate, once-only sanctification that takes place at conversion (positional), and the ongoing work of God in a life, the sanctification that represents our gathering maturity in Christ (progressive).

How does this apply to our text? An illustration would be the brief conversation we had during our class last week. I offered, as an example of "the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (v7), the occasions when the pastor is really pumped, on fire more than usual; old-timers would say "he had the unction." And Dennis rightly pointed out that the Spirit is always at work in every one of us—because every believer has the Spirit within. True, very true. However, there can be degrees of manifestation.

- Even if we have identified the gift(s) the Spirit has given us, that does not mean that it will be manifested the same in us as in another person with the same gift.
- Nor does it mean the gift will be manifested in us the same ten years from now as it is today. That is, the implementation of our gift(s) should mature along with our progressive sanctification.
- There also may be times when the Spirit is not as active in us as at other times—that is, the manifestation of the Spirit will be in proportion to the work or service that He means to accomplish at the moment.
- More often than that, however, it will be the vagaries of our weak flesh that will get in the way of the effectiveness of the Spirit's gift(s). He remains, but we have eroded the connection.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:7-11.

v8

If this is the first (extant) letter Paul wrote to a church, and most scholars believe it is, then this would be the first of his several lists to churches, and the first of two in this letter alone. This letter contains two lists: here, and 12:28-30. The other lists are in Romans 12:6-8 and Ephesians 4:11. None of these lists are exhaustive—obviously, since the lists are different from each other—and the gifts listed in this letter have a relevance to the Corinth church specifically. One clue to this is that the very first gift on this list, "the word of wisdom," does not appear again in any further list or discussion in any of Paul's letters" (Fee).

For to one is given...

Let us not miss in all this that familiar verb in the present tense: "given" (didotai). As we discussed in our last session, none of this is based on our inherent abilities, our personal worth, any physical skills we might possess. It is all of God; He is the one who has, by means of His Holy Spirit, granted, bestowed any of these gifts to an individual.

the word of wisdom
logos sophias

the word of knowledge
logos gnoseos

Paul places these two gifts first in the list for two reasons: 1, these are the most important "for the common good" (v7) of the church and 2, they are especially pertinent to this church.

They can be considered separately, but they also can, in a sense, be considered as simply variations on the same gift, for they both have to do with speaking the truth about God.

In the first two chapters of this letter, beginning with v1:18, Paul rails against the “wisdom” that has so impressed, so entranced some in the Corinth church—the glowing, rhetorical eloquence of the Hellenistic philosophers. He then contrasts this with himself.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:1-5.

It has taken him until Chapter Twelve to really dig into this topic, but Paul cued it up in Chapter Two. Do you want to speak a “word of wisdom”? Listen to the Spirit dwelling within.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:10-13.

As to “knowledge,” Paul earlier in his letter commended the Corinthians on their knowledge of God—and he even tied it to their gifts of the Spirit.

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, (1 Corinthians 1:4-7)

Later, however, in Chapter Eight, Paul takes them to task for their being puffed up, and misusing the knowledge they have, instead of loving and caring about their brothers and sisters in Christ.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:1-3.

Depending on one’s particular flavor of Christianity, one can read “the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit” as referring to a “special understanding of the ‘deeper things’ or ‘mysteries’ of God” (Fee), that this gift grants to the recipient something unknowable by other more mundane means. Thus the Pentecostal and charismatic denominations understand this to be a special word of insight, given by the Holy Spirit, to help the church passing through a time of decision or difficulty.

For the rest of us it makes more sense to interpret this with our feet still on the ground as referring to Spirit-inspired and -guided teaching and preaching—that which can only be accomplished by means of the indwelling Holy Spirit. The plain truth of God in His word, illuminated by the indwelling Spirit and available to all with that Spirit, is sufficiently astounding without layering on top of that a supernatural gift unknowable to all.

One piece of evidence points us to this latter interpretation: If the supernatural, “charismatic” interpretation was what Paul intended, he probably would not have used the words for wisdom or knowledge (*sophias, gnoseos*) but instead the word “revelation” (*apokalypseis*)—which in a later verse he differentiates from the former two.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:6.

v9

to another faith by the same Spirit,

Here again, does Paul refer to saving faith, which is indeed supplied by the convicting Holy Spirit, or does he refer to some extraordinary manifestation of faith well beyond that of the average Christian? We get no help from the Greek, which is simply the standard NT word for faith, *pistis*.

We can once again draw upon the example of sanctification to understand the gift of faith. Every follower of Christ has been given the gift of faith, since the faith that saves us in Him is given by the Holy Spirit. The individual’s salvation (justification) comes by faith (Romans 1:17, 3:28), but it is not the faith inherent in him, but the faith given him by God through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

[Jesus said,] “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day.” (John 6:44)

This gift of faith can be likened to our positional sanctification that occurs once at regeneration.

This, however, is not the faith Paul mentions in v9. Most commentators associate this with what Paul says later in Chapter Thirteen.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:2.

Jesus says much the same thing in Matthew 17:20, but since the gospel of Matthew was penned after First Corinthians, Paul did not get it from Him (unless by hearsay). The image of “moving of mountains” in reference to overcoming great obstacles, was a proverbial saying (as today) that surely informed both the apostle and Jesus.

This refers to a deeper level of faith—a supernatural level of faith akin to our progressive sanctification—that calls upon God to work miracles. “It probably refers to a supernatural conviction that God will reveal divine power or mercy in a special way in a specific instance” (Fee). [e.g., Elijah on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:37-39)]

I would suggest, however, that there are individuals given a faith that falls somewhere between. All Christians have the first, only a rare few have the second, but many have this third level, which is simply a deeper level of trust in the Lord on a day-to-day basis. We have all met them; they may not be able to call down fire from heaven, but they seem to possess and experience a level of trust in the Lord that at times puts the rest of us to shame. They seem to have fewer moments of doubt, of questioning—fewer moments of spiritual instability.

And as with the other two kinds of faith, this deeper trust in the Lord is not of flesh, but from God through the ministry of the Spirit.

In our next session we will resume v9, and finish our examination of this passage.

Session 120: A Few Gifts of the Spirit, part two

1 Corinthians 12:8-11

Preface

With the second half of v9 it becomes obvious that Paul is combining in this list Spirit-gifts of what we might call a more “normal” or “ordinary” type (word of wisdom, word of knowledge, faith) and those of a more “spectacular” or obviously “supernatural” type (healing, effecting of miracles, prophecy, distinguishing of spirits(?), tongues, interpretation of tongues). It is probably not necessary for me to point out that not everyone agrees on which gifts fall into which category—and no matter which camp one is in, some of these gifts could fall into a gray-zone in between, or be included in both. Note that Paul does not make such distinctions himself. As Garland points out, “Gifts do not need to be spectacular to be manifestations of the Spirit.”

Of one thing we are certain: The apostle makes the assumption that the more “supernatural,” or what we might term, “charismatic” gifts, such as tongues, miracles, and healing were, as Carson puts it, “everyday occurrences within this Spirit-endowed community.” As we know, whether or not these are manifested in the church today is a matter of opinion.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:7-11.

v9b

...and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit.

This is the first and only item in the list explicitly identified as a charisma: *charismata iamatōn* (literally, gifts of healings [as in NKJV]). It is noted by Fee that by using the plural form (gifts, healings), Paul suggests that this was not a permanent gift, but that each occurrence of healing is a “gift” in its own right. That is, by this he means that someone would not become a “healer,” empowered by the Spirit to heal anyone and everyone. Nevertheless, healing was a signifying sign of Christ Jesus’ deity, and of the true apostles.

Read Romans 15:18-19.

Except in the case of Jesus, this does not mean that those who healed could always heal. Paul did not heal his fellow Epaphroditus, who was deathly ill (Philippians 2:25-27), and he left Trophimus sick at Miletus (2 Timothy 4:20).

v10a

and to another the effecting of miracles,

The gifts of healing and miracles go together like the gifts of wisdom and knowledge; that is, the line of distinction between them is blurred. The “effecting [or working] of miracles” (*energema dynameon*) seems to apply to any “actualization of God’s power in mighty deeds” (Garland) beyond healing. As to the question of whether or not these two gifts are still in effect, we must remember that since these are all of God, He can do anything today that he did in the first century. Does the Lord God still perform miracles? Of course. Does He still perform them by means of a gift in a human? He certainly can, but such occurrences seem to be rare.

Whether one believes these two miraculous gifts are still active today is tied to whether one believes there are still apostles today, for the primary reason they were so active in the first century is that they were attesting signs of legitimate apostleship.

Read 2 Corinthians 12:11-12.

The Greek *apostolos* means “someone sent,” and derives from the verb “to send out” (*apostellein*). Validated apostles were necessary in the first century because they and they alone carried the word of God to the rest of the world. Whether in spoken or written form, once Christ ascended they alone were left to substantiate His life, the reason for His death, and the truth of His resurrection. The compiled word of God (the Bible) was not yet in existence, other

than portions of what we call the Old Testament, so it fell to the apostles to speak for God and for Christ Jesus. They were validated, at least in part, by the “signs” they performed; these signs—healing miracles, prophecy, etc.—attested to the fact that God was working through them and so should be believed—this was true even for Jesus. If one needed to hear the truth about Christ in the first century after His resurrection, one required an apostle.

Today, in the twenty-first century, we have God’s inerrant written word, and so no longer need apostles to speak *ex cathedra* for Him. If we do not need apostles, we no longer need their attesting signs of validation. Can God still work these miraculous gifts through individuals? Nothing is impossible with God. Does He need it to validate a spokesperson? No.

and to another prophecy,

If there is controversy about the continuation of the healing and miraculous gifts, there really is controversy about the gift of prophecy. Much of this stems from how the term “prophecy” (*propheteia*) is defined. Does it refer to telling the future? Does it refer to speaking of things otherwise unknown? Or does it refer simply to preaching and teaching the word of God?

It is clear that prophecy was an integral part of the early church; for the apostle Paul it was a desired and preferred gift of the Spirit, for it was instrumental—perhaps even essential—in the “edification and exhortation and consolation” of the church.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:1-5.

Paul’s parting counsel in his first letter to the Thessalonians included a command to honor “prophetic utterances.”

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22.

So we need not question or debate the use and importance of prophecy in the early church. That leaves us only to consider whether or not it remains so in the church today or whether it belonged only to the “apostolic” era—and if it remains, how is it to be identified and implemented. That is, is the Spirit-gift of prophecy still given today?

Paul’s understanding of the prophetic gift was informed by his Jewish background. To him the prophet was someone who spoke to God’s people under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (Fee). As implemented in the early church, it was far less about foretelling the future (although we have at least one instance of that by Agabus in Acts 11:28), than that of bringing an edifying, encouraging word from God by means of the Spirit. And since all believers now had the Spirit within, everyone was equipped with the means to do this, if God so willed.

Our primary commentators for this study (David Garland, Gordon Fee, and John MacArthur) all agree that the Spirit-gift of prophecy remains in effect today. But we need to clearly define it, and define the differences between it and the gifts of the word of wisdom and the word of knowledge (teaching and preaching). When I prepare these lessons, I prepare to teach by reading, studying, and praying; as I am doing this I write down in my notes what I will be teaching. In other words, when a teacher teaches and a pastor preaches there is preparation beforehand, and, more often than not, some form of written notes to guide his or her thoughts. With prophetic utterances there is none of that. The individual just speaks, for the benefit of others, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

...and to another the distinguishing of spirits,

What “interpretation of tongues” is to “various kinds of tongues,” “distinguishing of spirits” is to “prophecy.” It is almost as if this teaching and the Constitution of the United States stem from the same source, for both implement a form of “checks and balances.”

Later in this verse—and especially in Chapter Fourteen—Paul will place a check on tongues by adding “interpretation of tongues,” and here he places a check on prophecy by adding “distinguishing of spirits” (*diakriseis pneumatōn*).

Read 1 Corinthians 14:29.

In v14:29 Paul uses the verb form of the same word translated in v12:10 (*diakrino*) to command that whenever an individual in the church prophesies, those who are present, who hear the prophecy, are to “pass judgment” on the veracity of what has been said.

Every believer is to discern, distinguish right prophecy from wrong prophecy—and, in practical terms, this would also extend to every form of preaching, teaching, or commentary. We are to always gauge what we hear against the truth of God’s word, which presupposes that the believer is sufficiently familiar with Scripture to make that test!

There are in the kingdom, however, certain individuals that have the Spirit-gift of “distinguishing of spirits.” These individuals are able to quickly and accurately test what has been spoken to determine from which spirit it has come: the Holy Spirit, or an evil spirit. This is one of the most important gifts in the church, for the Christian is literally surrounded by evil counsel from false prophets, which must be sifted through the clarifying screen of God’s word. Today there are church pulpits, television screens, radios, and countless web sites from which is spouted wrong doctrine, preaching “a different gospel” (Galatians 1:6) and “another Jesus” (1 Corinthians 14:12).

Garland: Prophecy, in Paul’s estimation, is the most valuable for building up the church, but it requires testing and evaluation, just as tongues, the least valuable gift for building up the church, requires interpretation.

John MacArthur: Those to whom God has given the gift of discernment have a special ability to recognize lying spirits, and this gift is the Spirit’s watchdog. Some ideas that are given as scriptural and that on the surface *seem* scriptural actually are clever counterfeits that would deceive most believers. Those with the gift of discernment are the Holy Spirit’s inspectors, His counterfeit experts to whom He gives special insight and understanding. The gift was especially valuable in the early church because the New Testament had not been completed. Because of the difficulty and expense of copying, for many years after its completion the Bible was not widely available. The Holy Spirit’s discerners were the church’s protectors.

Session 121: A Few Gifts of the Spirit, part three

1 Corinthians 12:8-11

Preface

We now come to the bottom of this list of Spirit-gifts and to what Gordon Fee has referred to as “the problem child” of the various gifts. Yet again I must point out that not everyone agrees on this particular gift: they do not agree on what the apostle Paul is saying, and they do not agree on whether or not there are, or should be, “tongues” today. Keep in mind that Paul is still on-topic; his overarching point is proper, respectable, God-honoring, well-ordered corporate worship. In first-century Corinth the speaking in tongues was part of that worship, and in Chapter Fourteen Paul will issue details for their proper use.

Though Paul will discourse at length on tongues in Chapter Fourteen, I am not comfortable tabling any discussion of this gift until then (as John MacArthur). So far I have offered thumbnail sketches of the various gifts in this passage, and I want to do the same with this gift. Of course to do so we will draw from the information in Chapter Fourteen, but I see no harm in a little repetition if we touch on it again in that chapter. This is a controversial topic today in Christendom, so we should be well-equipped by God’s truth on the matter.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:7-11.

10b

...to another various kinds of tongues.

Let’s look first at the operative words. The word “various,” or “different” (KJV: “divers”) has been added to the Greek text by the editors to modify *gene* (gen’aye), translated “kinds” in all of our versions. We get the word “genus” from this word; *gene* can be translated family, race, or nation (a people); class, sort, or kind.

The word translated “tongues” is the Greek *glosson* (glow’-sahn), from a root meaning a projecting point. Originally the word *glossa* meant the physical tongue, but came to stand for the faculty of speech, utterance, language, dialect—that is, that which is produced by the tongue.

Individuals speaking in tongues occurred first at Pentecost when the apostles were given the Holy Spirit. Here the supernatural speaking in tongues—other languages—was used by God to validate the presence of the Spirit now in the apostles.

Read Acts 2:1-4.

It is clear from the text that the result of this phenomenon in Acts 2 was not an ecstatic gibberish that no one understood, or that required a translator for those hearing it. To the contrary, the phenomenon was that those who spoke different languages, heard in their own language what the apostles were speaking! That is, either the apostles spoke in these languages (heretofore unknown to them), or (better) they all spoke in a language that was then translated by the Holy Spirit into the foreign tongue of each person present. That is, the phenomenon was not necessarily the speaking, but the hearing.

Read Acts 2:5-11.

In this event at Pentecost, no interpreters were necessary; the Holy Spirit was the translator. Many commentators say that since “speaking in tongues” at Pentecost referred to earthly foreign languages, then the same template must be applied to the church in Corinth. That is, speaking in tongues always means speaking in an earthly foreign language (heretofore unknown to the speaker). But why must that be the case?

For our look at the gift of tongues in v10, I would like to offer a concise list of bullet points, each backed up by passages in Chapter Fourteen. When we eventually get to that chapter, these points will be examined in greater depth. The gift of tongues is...

Spirit-inspired

“Kinds of tongues” is included in a list of various manifestations of the Spirit (v7), and v11 reiterates this truth with, “But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills.”

a Language

The modern incarnation of this gift is essentially an ecstatic, uncontrolled, incoherent babbling. This is not the picture from God’s word. It is clear from Chapter Fourteen that while the speaker’s rational mind may not be engaged (v14:14), this person is not in a trance, or otherwise out of control.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:27-28.

Those are not instructions for someone experiencing an ecstatic seizure, stringing together meaningless syllables. “Tongues consist of words (*logoi*), which, though indecipherable, are not meaningless” (Garland).

Addressed to God

The gift of tongues produces communication addressed to God, not man.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:2.

...and to another the interpretation of tongues.

It is the Holy Spirit energizing our own spirit to form unearthly prayer and praise for the ears of God alone. And even if it is interpreted, the message is not for the congregation, but to just describe for them the gist of the message delivered from the speaker to God.

A High-status Gift

As in some churches today, in Corinth the gift of tongues was considered a high-status indicator—indicative of a higher level of spirituality. This was contributing to the atmosphere of conflict in the church.

Not a Known Earthly Language

While we do not have a one-verse proof text for this, we can infer from all of Chapter Fourteen that the language being spoken in Corinth was not the same as in Acts 2. There the “tongues” required no interpreter because the purpose of the words being spoken was to witness the gospel to those present who were from foreign lands. Either each apostle was speaking the recipient’s (earthly) language, or the Spirit translated what was being spoken for each person of a different language.

In Corinth the Spirit-gift of tongues was manifested in a different way: the words being spoken were an unearthly language directed to God alone; if employed in corporate worship, an interpreter was necessary to inform the congregation of the nature of the communication. In private prayer, no interpreter was required, since God (the sole recipient) already knew the language. This brings us to the inevitable question:

What was/is the language?

None of our commentators broach the answer to this—at least not in their discussion of this verse. Neither do they (save for Gordon Fee, who reveals his “Pentecostal heritage”) voice an opinion on whether or not this particular gift remains active in the church today. Permit me to close this session with my own thoughts on the matter. First, the evidence.

Read Romans 8:22-23, 26-27.

Here is the picture of the Holy Spirit within each believer translating our “groans” into “groans” of his own. I have always read this to mean that we groan and the Spirit turns our groans into words, but the text actually says something different. As the late, great Donald

Barnhouse puts it in his classic study of the Romans letter, “And here we read that ‘likewise’ the Holy Spirit is helping us, interceding with groanings which cannot be uttered. This adverb likewise, in the same manner must refer to the operation of the Holy Spirit groaning within us as we groan in the midst of a groaning creation.”

Now, before I draw a conclusion from this, let’s return to Corinthians and look at two more brief passages.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:1.

Here Paul draws a distinction between “the tongues of men,” and “the [tongues] of angels.” One more passage.

Read 2 Corinthians 12:3-4.

In the past I have often used the phrase “the language of heaven” in reference to such passages—sometimes poetically, sometimes literally. I would suggest—I cannot be dogmatic about this—that the biblically sound (i.e., according to Paul’s commands in 1 Corinthians 14) demonstrations of the gift of tongues, in either corporate worship or the private prayer closet, are instances of the indwelling Holy Spirit taking the inner, inexpressible thoughts and passions, worship and praise of the believer and expressing them—Spirit to Father—in the literal language of heaven.

On 2 Corinthians 12:4:

Peter Lange: The substance of the communication was so exalted that it would have been a profanation to give it in human language. W. F. Besser: “It is likely that the substance of the heavenly words was taken up by the Apostle as he heard them, but he felt that no man after receiving such a communication in successive details, could find language adequately and worthily to express what he had heard in that sacred presence. And even if God had given him power to express on earth what he had heard in heaven, there were no earthly ears which could intelligently receive the communication.”

Albert Barnes: Paul meant to say that he could not attempt by words to do justice to what he saw and heard. The use of the word “words” here would seem to imply that he heard the language of exalted praise; or that there were truths imparted to his mind which he could not hope to convey in any language spoken by people... It might be also true that it would not have been possible for language to convey clearly the ideas connected with the things which Paul was then permitted to see; but the main thought is, that there was some reason why it would not be proper for him to have attempted to communicate those ideas to people at large.

We often hear someone say that a word or phrase does not translate well from, say, French to English, or Hebrew to English. There are things we wish to say to God that cannot be put into human words; to even attempt to do so would somehow cheapen them. The Holy Spirit overcomes this weakness in humans by taking those thoughts, those emotions, those inexpressible words of praise and translates them for us into the native language of the Godhead—words and sounds it is impossible for the human ear to translate. More often than not this communion is accomplished silently (to human ears); at other times the Spirit chooses to employ human vocal cords—i.e., speaking in tongues.

Is this gift still active today? If the guidelines of Chapter Fourteen are observed, I see no reason why not. After all, why would Paul, under the inspiration of this same Spirit, have taken such time and care to specify such guidelines if the Spirit-gift would have soon come to an end?

v11

But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills.

No matter what, this is all of God, through His Spirit, and not of us, by us, or about us. Charles Haddon Spurgeon summarizes this nicely.

C. H. Spurgeon: Whatever our gifts as a church, or as individuals, may be, they all come from the selfsame Spirit. This should tend to promote unity amongst us. Let us all trace whatever gift we have to the hand that gave it, and to the Spirit that wrought it; let us feel that we are so many pipes connected with one fountain; and, therefore, as all the good that we convey comes from the one source, let us give all the honour and glory of it to the Spirit of God from Whom it comes.

Session 122: The Many into One—by the Spirit

1 Corinthians 12:12-14

Preface

Verse 7 in this chapter is a foundational statement in two parts, with each part setting up the proceeding two sections, the first of which we have just completed:

But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit vv8-11
for the common good (or mutual benefit). vv12-31

For the last three sessions we have focused on the various “manifestations of the Spirit”—not a comprehensive list, but a subset. Now from v12 through the rest of this chapter we will focus on what Paul writes in the second portion of v7: “for the common good.”

A Bizarre Illustration

Permit me to pose a rather bizarre thought experiment. What if every person in the church were a Rupert Gandwiller? What would this church—including the physical church—look like? One thing about which we could be reasonably certain is that the financial health of the church would be good. The numbers would be well organized, clearly stated, and trustworthy. We could also be reasonably certain that the fellowship and care for each other within the membership would be healthy, and that the body would be in good humor on most occasions.

One thing about which we could also be reasonably certain is that the physical church—that is, the church building—would be in a sorry, even dilapidated state. For a church body comprised of Rupert Gandwillers would not be very good with necessary repairs—and even if, because of the financial health of the church, we could afford to pay an outside source to make the repairs, the Deacon of Building and Grounds (Rupert Gandwiller) would not be very good at diagnosing what needed to be done.

This body of believers benefits from having both a Rupert Gandwiller and a Harry Farkwar. Both make an invaluable contribution, but in entirely different ways.
(Names have been changed to protect the guilty.)

The rest of Chapter Twelve can be easily subdivided into three parts:

1. In vv12-14 Paul sets forth his metaphor of the “body” (*soma*), which, by the way, would have been familiar and comfortable imagery in the first century; the apostle was not inventing something new here.
2. In vv15-20 Paul emphasizes the *diversity* within that body, that it is a good and healthy thing, necessary for the well-being, and effectiveness of the body of Christ.
3. In vv21-26 Paul turns around and emphasizes the *unity* of the body—not in spite of its diversity, but because of it.

This last is an important point. Let’s compare two of our popular translations to see the difference. First the 1984 NIV:

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ.

The troublesome word in that version is “though,” an extremely poor translation of the Greek *kai* (Fee). The NASB is better, but only marginally so with “and yet.” The NIV implies that the diversity in the body is something that must be overcome; that is, the body of Christ is one in spite of its diversity. But Paul will go on, primarily in vv15-20, to make the point that the diversity within the church is integral to its strength. Hence the better (and more literal) translation of the 1900 KJV:

For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ.

As with our earlier illustration, the apostle nails the point in vv19-20, but more succinctly.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:19-20.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-14.

v12

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.

This circuitous verse emerges out of and begins the elaboration of the previous.

But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills. (12:11)

In the rest of this chapter Paul will establish the value—indeed, the genius—of the Holy Spirit “distributing to each one individually”—not the same gift, but different gifts—and he begins with v12, which seems to circle back on itself. He establishes the familiar metaphor of the human body in the first two-thirds of the verse. Every person’s physical body (soma) is one “unit” (NIV), yet it is comprised of arms and legs and head and hands and feet and eyes and ears, etc. Then he circles back and states the same thing from the other direction. All these components of the physical body are, still, but one body.

The Pauline twist at the end is, “so also is Christ.” This is shorthand for “the body of Christ.” That is, the church mirrors the constitution of the physical human body. Paul hinted at this all the way back in Chapter One.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:11-13.

He was not asking if the person of Christ had been divided, but the body of Christ—the church.

v13

For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free,

One of the things I believe I have gained from this detailed study of the first Corinthian letter—one I hope some of you have as well—is a new and deeper appreciation for the work of the Holy Spirit in a believer’s life—and beyond that, the life of the church.

It seems to me that Christians more often than not speak of the common faith that binds us together, that our solidarity with other Christians is based on that name: that the common denominator, as “Christ-ians,” is our mutual trust in Christ for our salvation. That is not false, but even if we subscribe to the doctrine of election (that those who “believe” were chosen by God to be saved [Romans 8:29-30, Ephesians 1:5]), even if only subliminally we may have the perception that it is our faith that has saved us, and insured our place with God for all eternity. Hence it is that common faith that holds together the integrity of the church.

What Paul is emphasizing in this chapter—and pointedly in this passage—is that the church, the body of Christ, is formed of those who have been baptized into it by the Spirit. That is, it is not the belief system that joins the individual to the body, but the indwelling Spirit; without Him there would be no fellowship of believers. As John the Baptizer understood, the water is just the sign; the real baptism is accomplished by the Holy Spirit. John’s baptism was for repentance; the Spirit’s baptism is to place us—and confirm our place—in Christ.

Read Luke 3:16.

So in the first portion of this chapter (vv1-11) Paul speaks of how the Holy Spirit is responsible for equipping the saints for the church; here he speaks of how the Holy Spirit is responsible for equipping the saints to be in the church in the first place.

...and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

The jury is out on precisely what Paul means by this statement. Some say he refers to the Christian ordinance of water baptism, others say he refers to the ordinance of Communion.

Note: the “into” included in the KJVs is not in the oldest and most reliable manuscripts.

The operative verb here is *epotisthemen*, translated “were...made to drink,” or “have been...made to drink.” It is from the root *potizo*, meaning to give to drink.

I believe the attempt to somehow associate what Paul says here with believer baptism or the Communion cup misses the point. Paul is searching for and has settled on pertinent words with which to describe how the “one Spirit”—the Holy Spirit saturates, drenches the church and every believer in it. I like the way the venerable Matthew Henry pulls all this together.

Matthew Henry: Christians become members of this body by baptism: they are baptized into one body. The outward rite is of divine institution, significant of the new birth, called therefore the washing of regeneration, (Titus 3:5). But it is by the Spirit, by the renewing of the Holy Ghost, that we are made members of Christ's body. It is the Spirit's operation, signified by the outward administration, that makes us members. And by communion at the other ordinance we are sustained; but then it is not merely by drinking the wine, but by drinking [of] one Spirit. The outward administration is a means appointed of God for our participation in this great benefit; but it is baptism by the Spirit, it is internal renovation and drinking [of] one Spirit, partaking of his sanctifying influence from time to time, that makes us true members of Christ's body, and maintains our union with him. Being animated by one Spirit makes Christians one body.

The body of Christ—the church—is a distinct, unique entity. Nothing in this world is like it, and nothing in this world has the same rule for membership. One does not become a member by paying one's annual dues; one does not become a member by passing through an initiation or by wearing a silly hat or learning a secret handshake. One does not become a member by osmosis—because one's parents were members. One becomes a member by only one means—a means which has nothing to do with any action by the individual. God, by His choice and will, places the Holy Spirit in the individual (“were made to drink of one Spirit”); that and that alone gains one the privilege of joining with the other “parts” of the body of Christ.

And Christ Jesus Himself associated the Spirit with the believer first drinking, and then being inundated by, immersed in the “water” that is the Spirit.

Read John 7:37-39.

v14

For the body is not one member, but many.

In v14 Paul restates some of v12—although in the negative—but also cues up his discussion of diversity within the body in vv15–20. For those in the Corinth church it also is a rebuke to their behavior.

The influential elites in the church thought themselves—and their Spirit-gifts—superior to the Plebeians in their midst, and their attendant gifts. Implicit in the attitude of the elites was that the church was better off with them and their gifts, and perhaps the church would benefit if everyone were like them! But the apostle is about to spend considerable time and ink explaining that, no, the church benefits from its diversity: a rich tapestry of varying gifts, some flashier than others, some, at least on the surface, more menial than others, but all necessary.

Verse 14 wraps back to the illustration with which I began this session. Select any one person in the body of Christ, and if he is replicated throughout, with everyone being him, or even just everyone having his Spirit-gift, the church suffers. Indeed, the church cannot operate properly as the church in that circumstance. It requires a variety of both members and gifts.

By my count Paul uses the word translated member or members (*melos*) about sixteen times in this chapter. And it is an interesting, multifaceted word. I do not often quote from *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (“Brown,” for short), but one paragraph offered a good summary of this word.

The body [*soma*] was also used in antiquity in a figurative and corporate sense in mythology and for groups of people. In this connection *melos* (member, limb) denotes a part of the group or whole. It is used in theological contexts to show the functions of members in relation to the whole. At the same time their action reveals something of the corporate personality.

So we may instinctively associate the word “member” with someone just on the roll, someone on the list of official members. But perhaps a better association is with the idea of a “limb,” as the branch of a tree—or vine (John 15)—is something attached to the root, or whole, as well as an arm or leg is a limb attached to the trunk of a human body. Brown, however, offers yet a third idea for this word: each individual member or limb reflects back on the personality of the body of Christ. Think for a moment about all we have learned about the elites in the Corinth church, and their divisive behavior. What was their behavior and mindset saying about the church to the public at large? This, I believe, is why Paul is so exercised about this situation in Corinth, and why he spends so much time and effort in an attempt to correct it. These people were behaving in a way that was destroying the name of Christ in the secular world of the city.

Here, contained in this small five-letter Greek word, is a veritable wealth of imagery describing the individual believer’s relationship with the church, the importance of his or her Spirit-gifts to the body of Christ, and the importance of his or her behavior in relation to the surrounding, unbelieving community.

Session 123: Complementary Members

1 Corinthians 12:14-20

Preface

In our examination of vv12-14 last week, we saw Paul emphasizing the important unity of the body of Christ. In v12 he states that “the body is one,” with “many members.” He then presses the point in v13: It was the “one Spirit” who “baptized” us “into one body,” and those in the body are “all made to drink of one Spirit.” Here is the unity portion of the two-fold argument: the church is one, made one and sustained as one by the one Holy Spirit.

Now, in the next and longer passage Paul offers the diversity portion of the argument, and he does so using rather fantastical imagery to make his point. As we delve into this passage we should keep in mind that Paul’s application to the Corinthian’s situation is not about persons within the church, but hearkens back to what he wrote in vv7-11 about the Holy Spirit distributing manifestations of Himself, according to His will, in the church. That is, this is less about people in the church than it is about the Spirit-gifts manifested in them.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:14-17.

vv15-16

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.

The apostle begins by posing an absurdity: talking body parts, at least two of which claim they should not be part of the body because they are not other body parts.

I want to point out just one aspect of this analogy: Note that there is no hint of superior/inferior positioning here. We have two limbs and two sensory organs, one each of which may be envious of the other, but does not necessarily feel inferior to it. So, for example, I may be envious of someone who is an artist, because I would like to be able to draw and paint a picture, but that does not mean I consider the gift of writing inferior to that.

v17

*If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be?
If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?*

Paul answers the absurdity of the previous analogy with another absurdity—which, though Paul doesn’t know it, ties back to my absurd illustration from last week: If the whole church body was Rupert Gandwillers, how well would repairs to the church house be carried out?

The point being that all the parts—all the members of the body—are necessary for the proper functioning of the body.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:18-20.

v18

But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired.

After his fantastical analogies in vv15-17, Paul now snaps us back to reality by echoing the thought in v11:

But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills.

Note the unity of the Godhead here standing as an example for the unity of the church body. In v11 it is the Holy Spirit “distributing to each one individually just as He wills.” Here in v18 it is God (*theos*) who “has placed the members...just as He desired.” I imagine this is much like the work of the Godhead in creation itself: In Genesis 1:1 “God” (*elohim* (plural));

that is, the Godhead) created the heavens and the earth. But in Colossians it is Christ (“His beloved Son”) who created all things.

Read Colossians 1:13-17.

We can draw from Scripture that from at least a human perspective the individual members of the Godhead have distinct responsibilities, different areas of work—we might even say, different “gifts.” Yet all three work together in sublime unity, working as a whole for the good of all. In fact, considering all that each member of the Godhead does, one would be hard pressed to determine which of its members is the more important.

This being true, there is a glaring, gross presumption in any individual, faction within the local church, an entire local body or even an entire sect or denomination thinking that their gift of choice should be prominent—or worse, everyone in the church should have this gift—even to aspire to obtaining this gift. This attitude effectively replaces Christ as the head of the church, and the Godhead as creator of the kingdom, with narcissistic human beings honoring themselves instead of their Lord. And in v19 Paul points out how ridiculous the result would be.

v19

If they were all one member, where would the body be?

Consider, if you will, the institution of marriage. I suppose exceptions are possible, but I have never met a married couple in which each spouse contributed identical gifts to the union.

We all can probably agree that a union of man and woman, male and female becoming one flesh (Genesis 2:24), requires just that—male and female: physical opposites. I would dare to posit that it also requires that they cannot be of same abilities, personality, temperament, sensibilities, and gifts to form that perfect union of “one.”

The successful, workable marriage requires differences that complement each other in the true sense of that word: something added to complete a whole. Imagine a marriage in which both spouses were alike in every way: alike in nature, personality, sensibilities, and even skills and gifts. They would constantly be butting heads, fighting each other, because they would also share the same failings and frailties. But when two people in a marriage complement each other the one fills in many of the voids in the other. Where one is deficient, the other may be prolific; where one is weak, the other may be strong; where one, in one area, may be hard and unyielding, the other may bring a yielding softness that balances out the two.

In my own marriage there are certain abilities (gifts) in which I am weak, but my wife is strong. There are others in which that is reversed. There are other situations in which both of us bring only a set of moderate abilities; neither is strong or weak, but when we pool what we have—two halves—we are effective. I have some gifts, my wife has others, and combining the two sets into a whole makes us a pretty good team—a “one flesh.”

Just so in the church. If every member of the church had identical gifts, nothing would ever get done. It simply wouldn't work. But by individual believers, each imbued with the Spirit, complementing each other, filling in the voids that exist in every person's toolkit, the church becomes an effective ministering, teaching, supportive, edifying whole.

v20

But now there are many members, but one body.

Here I really like the NIV and ESV: “As it is, there are many parts, but one body.” In other words, all this is really academic, since it is impossible to have 150, 200 members of a church all with identical Spirit-gifts. The Holy Spirit has designed it otherwise. Verse 20 marks the end point of the inclusio, restating what began in v14: “For the body is not one member, but many.”

Paul has been arguing, and will continue to argue against the position of some in the Corinth church—to wit, “To be truly ‘spiritual,’ we all should have the gift of speaking in tongues.” The Holy Spirit is in charge of apportioning these gifts, and that is not what He has in mind.

Session 124: The Sun and the Tree

1 Corinthians 12:20-24

Preface

There is a book in our library, written by a former uniformed officer of the presidential Secret Service during the Clinton administration. In this book, titled *Crisis of Character*, Gary Byrne, who was typically posted right outside the Oval Office, recounts the noxious behavior of the President and First Lady during those years.

The Clintons were surrounded by individuals whose sworn duty it was to protect the First Family at any cost, to immediately put themselves, at risk of their own lives, between the Clintons and any harm that might arise. In return, the Clintons treated these individuals with utter contempt. Mrs. Clinton was particularly venomous in her profane vitriol, screaming at and cursing those sworn to protect her. She demanded to be treated as if a sovereign queen:

When her detail passed Mrs. Clinton expected everyone else to disappear. She didn't want to see anyone in the White House halls, as if the whole place were her *personal* Executive Mansion. It was insulting. People scurried as if in a giant game of hide-and-seek. An agent traveling ahead of her would direct people to disappear, usually into a nearby closet or alcove.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:20-26.

In the body of Christ there are many different parts, many different members—many different Spirit-gifts. And it is part of our human nature to think that some are more important, more worthy of honor, while others are less important, less worthy of honor. Certainly the one whom the Spirit has equipped for the pulpit is more important than the one He has equipped to clean the toilets, or even teach Sunday School. Yet that is an earthly perspective, not a heavenly one.

v20

Let me add just one more thought about v20: Paul is indeed emphasizing the diversity of the many parts, or members (gifts), but here is a reminder that the “diversity is not an end in itself,” but is meant to “function within” the essential unity of the body (Fee). The Spirit’s many gifts are designed to work together, as a body, with each other.

v21

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.”

Paul’s fantastical analogy of talking body parts continues for a moment with a “top-down” assumption that the components of the head (eye, head) consider themselves more important than the more mechanical extremities (hand, feet).

v22

On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary;

Consider (albeit mixing the metaphors):

- It may be your eyes that take in the beautiful, awe-inspiring mountain grandeur; without the eyes you could only imagine the scene. It was your *feet*, however, that got you to the spot from which you could see the landscape before you.
- It may be true that the head is the seat of control of the body, but if some object or another’s person’s fists come hurtling toward it, what instinctively happens? What is the body’s reflexive action? The *hands* come up to protect the head from the blow.

As I have just mixed the objects in Paul’s metaphor, he too is switching the application of his metaphors. I have been saying that Paul’s reference in Chapter Twelve is not to people but to their Spirit-gifts. So far that has been true. But now, in vv21-27, he is indeed speaking of

people instead of gifts. Now he presents the various parts of the human body as analogous to certain individuals in the body of Christ—the church. Of course, there is no sharp line of delineation between the person and his or her Spirit-gifts; in the mature believer who is part of a mature church, the two almost become one.

The thrust of this passage cannot help but take us back to Chapter Eleven, and the bad behavior of the elite in the church at the Lord's Supper and the church's so-called "love feasts."

Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-22.

Here in Chapter Twelve Paul is analogizing the same two groups of people, contrasting the wealthy elite, the prominent in the church, the leaders, with those they considered their social lessers, the *hoi polloi*, the commoners in their midst. As to the metaphor, "the members of the body which seem to be weaker," most seem to agree that Paul refers to the internal organs of the human body. They are "weaker," more fragile, prone to ailments and sickness, belly aches, indigestion, etc. Yet the body could not survive without them. Even the least considered of the internal organs serve essential service for the sustaining of life.

v23-24a

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.

One reason this verse seems to be rather awkwardly written, and why our various translations substitute a plethora of synonyms, is that Paul refers obliquely to body parts that throughout history—and especially in the first century—were and have been deemed unmentionable. The cross-references from the *Treasury of Scripture Knowledge* give the game away with its cross-reference to Genesis 3:7.

Read Genesis 3:7.

The NKJV, NIVs, and ESV help us out.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:22-23. (not NASB)

The idea here with this metaphor, is that there are portions of the human body that seem less honorable, because in most cultures they are kept hidden away, covered up, not displayed. We may think this renders them less honorable, but in point of fact, Paul is saying, the careful modesty with which we treat them renders them more honorable.

We can tie this back to our discussions in Chapter Seven regarding marriage. These body parts we typically make a point of keeping covered ("less presentable") are special because they are reserved for our spouse—indeed, we no longer have authority over them; that authority has been handed over to our spouse (v7:4). They are special, private, reserved for the honor we render to our husband or wife. And, of course, we can add to this the utter necessity of these "less presentable members" for human reproduction. Quite contrary to the original assumption, we "bestow more abundant honor" on these members, which is why they are kept private. Just as with our "weaker" internal organs, without these less presentable members we could not live; they are critical to our survival.

Thus it is in the body of Christ. There are certain members of the church who are never on the platform, never teach a class, never raise their hand for a question or comment. Some of us may not even know their names, or that they exist at all. Yet they may do something for the body, utilizing their Spirit-gifts, behind the scenes and out of the public eye. Or it may not even be a specific act of service, but just who they are as a person, as a believer, contributes something valuable, essential to the body. Perhaps just being who they are performs an invaluable service to the church.

v24b

But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked,

Don't miss how this sentence begins; don't skip lightly over its first two words: "But God..." This has been a recurring marker in this chapter.

- In vv4-6 Paul speaks of the varieties of gifts, of ministries, of effects—but declares that the Spirit, the Lord Jesus, and Father God are at work in them all.
- After listing the gifts in vv8-10 he declares in v11, "But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills."
- In v18 Paul states that God, just as His Spirit, is in charge of the distribution of gifts in the church: "But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired."
- Here in this verse he explains that God Himself has "composed" the church—*synkerannymi*, commingled, mixed together, blend (KJV: "tempered together")—the body according to His wisdom and will, distributing the honor due the members of the church.
- And finally in the last paragraph Paul lists another subset of gifts, but prefaces it with the fact that it is *God* who has appointed these gifts in the church.

It is to this that we cling. It really isn't very clear what Paul means by pointing out that God has designed the mix of people and gifts in the body of Christ so that "more abundant honor" is given to those who are either weak, or in need of such honor. From the proceeding verse we can learn the reason for this, but it is not clear just what he means: Precisely how is this honor apportioned? What does that look like in the local church?

That, however, is a minor consideration next to the reminder throughout this chapter that God, working through all three members of the Godhead, is the one doing it. It is He who is responsible for the gifts, their distribution, and the distribution of individuals throughout the kingdom. This casts fresh light on a verse familiar to us all.

Read Romans 8:28.

It is the Lord God who brings balance and stability to the church. It loses that balance when man intervenes with his arrogance and pride, his earth-bound reasoning, thinking one gift—hence one person—is better, and due more honor, than another.

I would like to close with a meditation on this topic by Martin Luther.

Luther: The sun does not say that it is black. The tree does not say, "I bear no apples, pears, or grapes." That is not humility, but if you have gifts you should say, "These gifts are from God; I did not confer them upon myself. One should not be puffed up on their account. If someone else does not have the gifts I have, then he has others. If I exalt my gifts and despise another's, that is pride." The sun does not vaunt himself, though more fair than the earth and the trees, but says, "Although tree, you do not shine, I will not despise you, for you are green and I will help you to be green."

Session 125: A Deeper Fellowship

1 Corinthians 12:25-26

Preface

Almost sixteen years ago individuals from all corners gathered at the old Miller Junior High in Marshalltown, Iowa. We came from all walks of life, of ages spanning twenty years. The reason for this gathering was focused on just one old man.

He was almost completely bald. Extra folds of skin billowed below his chin. His belt was lost somewhere beneath a belly that had seen higher days. Age spots clustered on his hands and arms like a mottled suntan. He had become, to the unfamiliar eye, someone way past his prime, perhaps even unremarkable. But when he stepped through the doorway, the roomful of people expressed their love and respect with an outpouring of grateful applause for the elderly man.

In 1965, during my final year of junior high, our band director, Mr. Francis, had an idea. He would form a stage band with the better players from his larger concert/marching band. This was something new—certainly unheard of in Marshalltown, Iowa. Seventh, eighth and ninth-graders playing jazz? Getting up early, twice a week, to rehearse before school even started for the day? Come on. But it worked. And so for the next twenty school years, until he retired in 1986, Mr. Francis led a succession of stage bands, rehearsing in the band room at Miller Junior High.

On that day in 2005, alumni from those twenty years of junior high stage bands gathered once again in that basement band room to pay tribute to this man who had played such an unintrusive yet important role in our lives—from the 33-year-old “youngsters” who had been in his last stage band, all the way back to us old folks who had played in his first.

Part of that surprise tribute would be that some from our group would take their chairs on the stage of that dilapidated auditorium to play once again one of those old charts—under the direction of our surprised band leader. One of my former mates from the trombone section actually rented an instrument to get his chops back in shape so he could participate. And so they somehow located a stack of parchment that had been one of our regular charts back in 1965, and performed under the hand of our beloved director.

The rest of us, meanwhile, cheered them on from the sunken, spring-less auditorium seats—probably the originals from the days the school had been my mom’s high school. Though we were not up there on the stage, our hearts swelled with joy and pride, as if we were indeed up there with them. No one was jealous of those in the limelight, but rather rejoiced for and celebrated those who were.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:24b-26.

v24b-25

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.

We back up to the end of v24 because it is there that the sentence begins. Clinically speaking, Paul’s use of metaphor, using the human body to illustrate his points about the church body, goes a bit awry here. And the commentators spend a little ink expressing their confusion, trying to twist the text into the original template, but there is no need.

Paul, though a consummate teacher and eloquent writer, is still human. And it is a perfectly human trait to begin a discourse with a splendidly illustrative, detailed metaphor that one eventually abandons before one is done. Using the human body as a metaphor for the church body made sense early on, but one cannot say with a straight face that one’s eyes “care for” or have “concern for” one’s feet, or that one’s hands have any deep emotional consideration for the ears. Thus in vv25-26 Paul abandons the metaphor and goes right for the church itself.

In v25 he sets up a contrast: division (*schisma*) contrasted with “care for one another” (*merimnao*, take thought, be anxious about). We learned back in Chapter One of this letter that Paul is painfully aware of the schisms that exist in the Corinth church. He doesn’t have to imagine or project; they are already there.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-11.

In that setting the apostle was referring more to doctrine, the basic principles of the faith, and whose teaching the various groups were following. But now he is applying the same rule to their fellowship in the body, being brothers and sisters with each other in the family of the church. “The opposite of division is showing care for one another” (Garland).

The best illustration of this behavior is found in Chapter Eleven, and the bad behavior of the elite in the church at the Lord’s Supper and the church’s so-called “love feasts.” (11:17-22). We won’t read it again, since we did in our last session. We recall the mental image of the “betters” feasting on the fine cuisine they brought for themselves—even drinking a little too much of the wine—and not sharing any with their “lessers” in the cheap seats.

Such divisions, such mindsets with their associate behavior, demonstrate the presence of a cancer in the local body of Christ. It is a very real and deadly disease in many contemporary churches—just as it was in Corinth.

The polar opposite of that diseased condition is “that the members...have the same care for one another.” That all members of the church body manifest a heart-felt, authentic concern for each other—implied, a concern for their betterment, their edification, their spiritual and physical health. And if we consider the two groups referred to in Corinth—and, of course, there would always be more than just two—the care and concern does not just flow down from the top, but also from the bottom up. The “hands” and “feet” in the church are not the only ones due the care and concern of others, but they are to be just as concerned for the “eyes” and “head.”

v26

And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it;

This is a common theme for Paul (and other NT writers) to the churches. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul wrote, “Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.”

Read Hebrews 13:3.

And notice how what Paul writes to the Romans ties in so well with the Corinthian situation.

Read Romans 12:15-16.

To understand Paul’s mindset and purpose, we must associate it with the word *koinonia*, which is translated, “fellowship,” and more often than not, at least in our minds, we think of as “socializing.” But the biblical idea of fellowship is far deeper than just being sociable over a cup of coffee. It can certainly include that—chatting about the weather and one’s recent golf score—but the body of Christ is to embrace a far deeper and richer level of association. True *koinonia* is suffering with those who suffer. Just as having a toothache can make us feel miserable from head to toe, or having minor surgery on one small part of an extremity can put us to bed for a day or two, when there is pain and suffering in one member or portion of the church, there is to be suffering experienced and shared in its other members.

This is not something we set out to do; this is something that occurs naturally when we think rightly of our brothers and sisters in Christ—something which was so lacking in some members of the Corinth church.

...if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.

Spurgeon: I am afraid that this second half of the verse refers to a duty which is more neglected than is the other. It is an easier thing to suffer with those that suffer than it is to rejoice with those that rejoice; and I will tell you why it is so; because, in giving compassion to those that suffer, you have some sense of dignity. Condescension is often a sort of pride; but when a brother is better off than you are,—when he has more talent than you have,—when he is more successful than you are,—for you to go and rejoice with him, and be as glad as if it were all your own gladness,—ay, to enter into his joy, and say, “God be thanked, my brother, for thy prosperity! I would increase it if I could, for I feel that I am a partner with you;”—ah! this needs great grace. So, may God

give us more grace continually, and deliver us from everything like envy, which is of Satan, and yet is all too common even among professing Christians.

Thinking back again to that special moment in 2005, sitting slumped in those ancient swayback auditorium seats, I can only speak for myself. Based, however, on expressions on the faces of those around me, combined with the feelings I was experiencing, there was nothing but joy being felt and expressed for the on-stage performers. Though most of us hadn't seen each other for decades, at least in that moment, we were still mates.

The word translated “honored” in most of our translations (*doxazo*) means “to render glorious, to glorify, magnify.” When someone in the church family is rendered glorious—I like the word used in The Message paraphrase: “flourishes”—we then glory in their glorification; we share in their joy and honor, we experience the same joy they are experiencing over their blessings. And I believe Spurgeon to be right: this is the harder of the two, for it is in our nature to be jealous, envious of those receiving any glory of which we are deprived. The apostle Peter sums this up for us.

Read 1 Peter 3:8-9.

I want to close by illustrating this precept within the context of our “prayer and praise” time. We usually fail to plumb the true depths of this God-ordained practice. There is nothing wrong about praying for a good result to an upcoming surgery, or praying that someone who is ill will have their health restored, or praying for the emotional and spiritual well-being of someone in deep sorrow. But that alone does not fulfill the injunction of v26.

What we so often fail to do is to “enter into” either their sorrow or joy. Just how this will be accomplished will surely be different for each person, but nonetheless we are called to do this. (And this is for family members; our prayers for anyone outside the fellowship, those without Christ, must be for their salvation.) Paul calls us to not just pray for them in their suffering, but to enter into their suffering; he calls us to not just acknowledge their blessings and praise, but to enter into those joys, to enter into their praise: to become one with them in their pain or glory.

I commend this to your own, private prayer time. Lord, teach me how to do this; show me how to be in true *koinonia* with my brothers and sisters.

Session 126: The Mystical Body

1 Corinthians 12:27

Preface

There are aspects of life in Christ that beggar description, that render our small earth-bound minds to quivering Jell-o in the face of such other-worldly truths. Among these we might include

- the work of the indwelling Holy Spirit, and how He is so essential to our life in Christ;
- that each individual believer is *in* Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17), and that Christ is *in* him or her (Colossians 3:3).

To these and others we can add the extraordinary concept of the church being the “body of Christ”—not just that it exists, but that each individual believer, with his or her associate Spirit-gifts, is an active, at times critical part of that body. No matter how different we are from each other, no matter our personality, lineage, like and dislikes—with all that, we are “one” in the body of Christ. What the apostle has been emphasizing is that it is not in spite of our differences, but because of them we are one.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:18-20.

I read v27 as the declarative climax to the groundwork he has been laying since the chapter began. He subtly broached the subject in v7:

But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

Then watch how he builds his case, piece by piece, defining the body:

vv12-13: 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.
v14: For the body is not one member, but many.
v18: But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired.
v20: But now there are many members, but one body.

Then, if he were standing before them, he pauses for dramatic effect, looks them straight in the eye and points his finger at them like a first-century Uncle Sam, and declares: “Now you are Christ’s body, and individually members of it.”

v27a

Now you are Christ’s body.

First, let’s look at a few details hidden in the English. In the Greek text the “you” is first and emphatic: you! In other words, after all this data describing the church, the body of Christ, he now nails them with the line he has been aiming at all along: “You are Christ’s body!”

Second, although almost every one of our translations has it, there is no definite article in the Greek (“the”), which makes the NASB, the sole exception, the most faithful with “Now you are Christ’s body.” Gordon Fee explains the significance of this.

Fee: Paul is not trying to say something about their relationship to other churches, but about their relationship to Christ and to one another. Thus he does not mean *the* body, as if they were the whole, nor does he mean *a* body, as if they were one among many (true as that might otherwise be). Rather, he means something like “your relationship to Christ (vv12-13) is that of being His body.”

In Paul’s letter to the Romans he restates this in a slightly different way.

Read Romans 12:4-5.

There he re-words the thoughts from our previous passage, where he emphasized how the members of the body are to care for one another: if one member suffers, all the members suffer; if one member is honored, or flourishes, then all the members rejoice. To the Romans Paul adds that the individuals are not just members of the body, but members one of another. The picture, the diagram of the church body then changes from a tree with single branches coming off the trunk and root, to a tree in which every individual branch is connected as well to every other individual branch. This explains how we are able to—indeed compelled to—live out v26:

And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.

Of course! We share in the suffering and honor of our brothers and sisters because, through the mystical power of the binding Holy Spirit, it is as if we are physically attached to everyone else in the body.

The church is indeed connected to the “church universal”; the church is indeed to minister to those outside the church local and church universal. But what Paul refers to here pertains specifically to the local body internally—especially internal unity. Even the listing of gifts and appointments that follow in vv28-30 all pertain to the edification of the church—“not to ministry without” (Fee).

v27b

...and individually members of it.

If the first part of this verse addresses the body of Christ as a whole—“you are” (plural “ya’ll”)—the second emphasizes the body’s respective parts. And this caps what Paul has been saying for most of this chapter: Every individual believer has been purposely placed into the church by God and the Holy Spirit, each with a kit of Spirit-gifts meant to be employed in the edification of the rest.

Read 1 Peter 4:8-10.

Paul mirrored that in v7: “But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

Conclusion

I return to where I began this session: the wondrous, mysterious, mystical concept of a church being “Christ’s body.” And a passage in Ephesians has taken on fresh meaning for me, for the way it illumines our passage in the Corinthians letter. The Corinthian passage was written first; the apostle later expanded on it to the Romans (12:4-5, which we read), the Ephesians, and finally the Colossians. Let’s look at the Ephesians passage.

Read Ephesians 1:18-23.

v18

Even though this passage is a hymn of praise to Christ, it is also all about what God is doing in and for us through Christ. Paul prays for our spiritual eyes to be “enlightened,” so that we will “know”—perceive, appreciate, understand—the “hope” to which He has called us, and—here’s the breathtaking part—“the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints.” That’s a lot of words that mean God has invested Himself into our eternity, and our relationship to Him through His Son.

F. F. Bruce: That God should set such high value on a community of sinners, rescued from perdition and still bearing too many traces of their former state, might well seem incredible were it not made clear that He sees them in Christ, as from the beginning He chose them in Christ. [\[incredible indeed\]](#)

v19

In an observation that I have used before, Bruce writes, “If the death of Christ is the supreme demonstration of the love of God...the resurrection of Christ is the supreme demonstration of His power.” And in v19 Paul exhausts his pocket thesaurus in an attempt to express this same love and power that God expends—and will expend—on the saints. Just as Christ was raised from the dead (as Paul details in vv20-21), so too will He raise the saints who are Christ’s body on earth.

vv20-21

So that the Ephesians, and us, will grasp and appreciate what awaits us—perhaps even believe it in the first place—Paul then paints a glorious picture of what God did for His Son in His resurrection and glorification.

Read 19b-21.

v22-23

In the next two verses Paul continues this narrative about Christ, but now injects how it pertains to the church—Christ’s body—including the fact that God the Father installed Christ Jesus as the “head” of the church. But just who is this “head”? Beyond being “the Lamb who was slain” for our sins, vv21-22 explain that Christ has been given authority over (“far above”) “all rule and authority and power and dominion” from now until forever; everything is “in subjection under His feet” (quoting Psalm 8:6). This is the One who is “head” of and over the church.

Let that sink in for a moment. The church is a communion of saints, a fellowship of believers, followers of Christ. As such, someone needs to be in charge. Do we have the richest man in the world? Do we have the smartest, the most knowledgeable man on earth? Do we have the wisest man on earth in charge of the church? No, we have the One who is very God, under whose feet, under whose sovereign rule is every last institution, every last molecule and atom that has ever been and ever will be created in the entirety of the universe. But wait; it gets even better than that.

...which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

To be fair, because of the Greek text, there are several different interpretations of v23—i.e., whose “fullness” are we talking about, and who is doing the filling. But all of our common translations interpret this in a way that connects it to our passage in 1 Corinthians. That is, the church is Christ’s body and the church is the fullness of Christ (“Him who fills all in all”). Back to 1 Corinthians.

When we combine these two passages, we learn that the church—both as a collective, and each individual member of the collective—is not just led by the sovereign brilliance and wisdom of Christ Jesus. It is filled—it is energized, supplied, informed—by the fullness of who and what Christ is. We are filled with His power, His greatness, the riches of His glory, His strength.

And on top of that, He fills us with the hope, the glorious expectation and confidence that what Father God did for His Son, He will one day do in and for us, joining Them in eternal glory, in heaven and, ultimately, on a New Earth.

Session 127: A Rich Tapestry of Gifts

1 Corinthians 12:28-30

Preface

Although, in a sense, vv28-30 continue from what Paul wrote in v27—i.e., You all, collectively, are Christ's body, and individually members of it, and here are examples of how some of the individuals in the body serve it.

More specifically, however, this passage before us today returns to his argument for a unified church by means of a diversity of Spirit-gifts.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:4-7.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:14, 18-20.

Let's include our verse from last week as we read the text for this study.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:27-30.

v28a

And God has appointed in the church,

Paul reiterates that it is God Himself (*theos*) who determines how the various Spirit-gifts are apportioned in the church local. And once again the apostle highlights those gifts that pertain to the internal workings of the body; there are other gifts that come out of the church but are—or can be—effective in the outside world, such as “various ministries” (12:5), giving, showing mercy (Romans 12:8), evangelism (Ephesians 4:11). Here, however, as in the list earlier in this chapter, the focus is on edifying those in the body.

Most of our versions use the word “appointed” to describe what God has done. The earlier NIV has “placed,” and the earlier KJV has “set,” both of which are more literal translations. The word (*etheto*) means to set something down, to install, or lay down. Vincent points out that the use of the middle voice in this verb implies that God is doing this “for His own use.”

Here is the clash of opposing worldviews. To those outside the body, those whose feet are stuck in the mud and mire of this earth and its culture, this is utter foolishness. According to their worldview,

- when Linda and I moved back to Iowa and spent considerable time finding a Realtor and then touring a number of properties, *we* were the ones who decided to purchase our present home, and it was *our* hard-earned money that paid the price;
- when we subsequently erected a barn on our property, building it from scratch, it was *our* labor and sweat, *our* money that did it all;
- and much later, when we were looking for a new church, and our doctor recommended a country church in Martensdale, *we* were the ones who made the decision to make it our spiritual home.

The Christian worldview, however, sees it differently: God was in charge of every step along the way. Thus we can thank Him for the land and house that is now our home—in fact it is not ours at all, but His; we are just its stewards. Thus we can look at our barn and give God the praise for it. Thus we can know with confidence that we were not the ones who chose to become a part of MCC, but in fact it was God who chose us for that. And, with variation of course, this process is repeated in the lives of every one of us. Why? Because we all serve Him; He is our Lord. And everything we are and have has come from and for Him. Ultimately, before everything else in our lives—yes, even family—we are each of us here for His use, and for His glory.

v28b

first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues.

To that end he has apportioned various Spirit-gifts that are to be employed in that service. It is not readily apparent in some of our versions, but Paul's emphasis here—especially after the first three—is not on the individuals, but on the gifts and deeds.

Gordon Fee: [Paul] lists gifts and deeds, not persons. That probably suggests that the first three items are not to be thought of as “offices” held by certain “persons” in the local church, but rather as “ministries” that find expression in various persons; likewise the following “gifts” are not expressed in the church apart from persons, but are first of all gracious endowments of the Spirit, given to various persons in the church for its mutual up-building.

first apostles, second prophets, third teachers,

At least the first three gifts that have been “appointed” or “placed” in the church seem to be ranked: first, second, and third. There are various opinions on this, but what seems to track best is that it is not so much to rank them by level of importance, or necessarily by order of authority, but this represents a ranking of “precedence in the founding and building up of the local assembly” (Fee).

The apostles (witnesses to the resurrected Christ, specially called out by God) are the ones who founded each local body of believers; prophets (which could also have been the founding apostle) would then, especially in the early days of the church, speak to God's people under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit; teachers would instruct and inform the church by more normal means—i.e., not supernaturally by means of the Spirit.

prophets

Let me add just a few words about prophets (*prophetas*). I would suggest that it is disappointing that we do not have more “prophets” today. To refresh our memories about what Paul means by “prophetic utterances” (1 Thessalonians 5:20), let me quote from our study of v10 of this chapter.

As implemented in the early church, [prophecy] was far less about foretelling the future...than that of bringing an edifying, encouraging word from God by means of the Spirit. And since all believers now had the Spirit within, everyone was equipped with the means to do this, if God so willed.

Read Romans 8:5-6.

Read Galatians 5:22-25.

Prophesying is one mark of the spiritual person—the person walking by the Spirit rather than the flesh. The one whose mind is more often than not set on things above will be more accustomed to hearing the Holy Spirit's counsel. And the one in the habit of *hearing* that counsel, will be more available to speak it.

There should be more prophets today, because more of us should be walking by the Spirit rather than the flesh.

teachers

This is the apostle's first mention of this ministry in his extant letters; he will subsequently include it in Romans 12:7 and Ephesians 4:11. The primary difference between prophets and teachers, is that prophets speak extemporaneously, moved by the Spirit, while teachers (*didaskalous*) typically prepare before speaking. Each can, at times, be both, but if you have studied beforehand, written down or memorized the words, that is teaching, not prophesying.

In one hundred twenty six sessions of this study I do not think I have referenced the commentary by W. Harold Mare (in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*), but on this verse he offers an interesting thought.

Mare: The office of apostle was all-encompassing, including the gifts of prophecy, teaching, miracles, and the rest. But the prophetic gift did not include apostolicity, though it did include teaching. The teacher class did not compare, per se, with that of apostles or prophets.

...then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues.

It is possible that Paul meant to prioritize, or rank, the rest of the Spirit-gifts in v28, and just wearied of using the numbers. The consensus seems to be that he ranks the first three, but adds the rest in an unordered fashion.

miracles and healings

These two gifts were included in the previous list in vv8-10—but they were in reversed order, which would seem to substantiate the position that after the first three in this list, there is no significance to the order. And note again: Paul's emphasis is not on the individuals who have these gifts, but simply on the presence of the gifts in the body (Fee).

It is noted by Fee that by using the plural form (gifts, healings), Paul suggests that this was not a permanent gift, but that each occurrence of healing is a “gift” in its own right. That is, by this he means that someone would not become a “healer,” empowered by the Spirit to heal anyone and everyone. Nevertheless, healing was a signifying sign of Christ Jesus' deity, and of the true apostles.

The gifts of healing and miracles go together like the gifts of wisdom and knowledge; that is, the line of distinction between them is blurred. The “effecting [or working] of miracles” (*energema dynameon*) seems to apply to any “actualization of God's power in mighty deeds” (Garland) beyond healing.

helps

This is the only place in the NT where the gift of “helps” is mentioned by that name, but we can consider it a close relative to those mentioned in Romans of service, giving, and showing mercy.

Read Romans 12:6-8.

This, in my opinion, is one of the most important and most precious gifts in the body of Christ. It is also one of the hallmarks of a healthy church. David Guzik passes along how Charles Haddon Spurgeon described the qualities of someone who has been given the Spirit-gift of helps:

1. A tender heart to really care.
2. A quick eye to see the need.
3. A quick foot to get to the needy.
4. A loving face to cheer them and bless them.
5. A firm foot so you will not fall yourself.
6. A strong hand to grip the needy with.
7. A bent back to reach the man.

“Helps (*antilempseis*) is an especially beautiful word meaning to take the burden off someone else and place it on oneself” (MacArthur).

administrations

This gift, also, is new to the lists, and, according to Fee, some of the translations of this word are unfortunate and misleading—including in the NASB. It is translated administrations^{nasb, niv, nkjv}, governments^{kjv}. He claims that a better translation is represented by the NIV2011: “guidance”, because (according to Fee) Paul intends something like “acts of guidance, giving wise counsel to the community as a whole, not simply to other individuals.”

The cognate of the word (*kyberneseis*) means to steer or pilot a ship, and since I am ill-equipped to judge either way, I will simply point out that most translations and commentators interpret this to refer to the gift of administrating or guiding the body, making decisions for the direction it should go—e.g., as does a board of elders.

various kinds of tongues

Some opine that Paul lists “various kinds of tongues” last to make the point that he considers it the least important of the gifts. Perhaps. Others (e.g., Fee) claim it is the last gift mentioned because it was the big problem in Corinth.

vv29-30

All are not apostles, are they? All are not...

Paul closes by reiterating his primary point that the church is not—indeed cannot be—populated by individuals all having the same gift. In Corinth, as today in some churches, one is considered not a fully developed Christian—perhaps not even a true Christian with the indwelling Spirit—if one does not speak in tongues. Each of these rhetorical question is to be answered with, “Of course not.”

In our next session we will transition from Paul’s detailed instruction on the unity of the body through the diversity of Spirit-gifts, to what Paul describes as the greatest, most essential component of all—the one essential that makes all the other gifts effective.

Love.

Session 128: A Better Way

1 Corinthians 12:31

Preface

The apostle Paul has spent considerable time and ink telling us that what Spirit-gifts we have as individual believers, and as a local community of believers in the body of Christ, all come from above and are not self-generated. First he tells us they have come from the Holy Spirit:

Read 1 Corinthians 12:11.

Then he says much the same thing about God Himself:

Read 1 Corinthians 12:18.

And he reinforced that more recently with v28: “And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets...”

The point is clear: Whatever Spirit-gift(s) we have, have been given us from above. We do not select what we personally have from a list of options, nor do we have any say in the distribution of gifts within the church. Yet Paul closes this dissertation with the enigmatic v31: “But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And I show you a still more excellent way.” Even so, I believe we can make sense of this—and even draw some rather valuable insight.

v31

But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And I show you a still more excellent way.

While it is certainly true that the second sentence of this verse points us toward Chapter Thirteen’s treatise on love, I hope to make the case that it is also essential to understanding the first sentence in this last verse of Chapter Twelve.

Here, once again, Christian scholarship presents us a long list of different interpretations for this verse. I will not waste time itemizing them, but I will point out just one with which I do not agree, but is sufficiently common and certainly possible. For example, it is the interpretation to which John MacArthur subscribes.

The operative verb, (*zeloute*), translated “earnestly desire” in the NASB, can be either in the indicative mood or the imperative mood. That is, with the same spelling in the Greek it can indicate something that is, or it can express a command (e.g., “Do this”). If one interprets this verb in the indicative, it could be expressed, as does MacArthur, “But you earnestly desire the greater gifts.” That is, in the indicative Paul is accusing the Corinthians of desiring the more prominent, the flashier Spirit-gifts such as tongues. He then follows this up with (paraphrasing), “But I have a better idea for you.”

It is true that interpreting the verb this way (indicative) clears up some of the problems we have with this first sentence. Why would Paul be telling them to do something that seems to run counter to what he has been teaching? But we can easily hear him once again pointing out what the Corinthians are doing wrong. Most commentators, however, believe this verb should be interpreted in the imperative, meaning that Paul is indeed telling them to “earnestly desire the greater gifts.”

The Greater Gifts

What is the effective difference between the gift of tongues and the gift of prophecy or the gift of helps?

The first, tongues, is self-oriented; Paul writes in 14:2, 4, “One who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God... one who speaks in a tongue edifies himself.” Thus it is not without merit, not without profit for the individual, but it is just for him (or, of course, her), and no one else. It is to his own profit.

The gifts such as prophecy, teaching, or helps, however, are other-oriented; Paul writes in 14:3-4, “One who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation... one who prophesies edifies the church.” Thus it is a gift God intends more specifically to build up the body of Christ, not the one who has been given the gift.

The church in Corinth was not bereft of Spirit-gifts. To the contrary, Paul opened this letter with his estimation of their spiritual endowments.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:4-8.

Nonetheless, just two sentences later he is pointing out their deficiencies—particularly in the area of divisions, or schisms within the body. And as we proceed through the letter we learn that, in sum, their priorities are all wrong. Though it is true they are well-gifted by the Spirit, they are placing too much importance on the flashier gifts such as speaking in tongues. But Paul says that the “greater” gifts, the higher gifts are not those that draw attention to the one with the gift, but instead edify those who benefit from the use of that gift.

But what does Paul mean by “earnestly desire” the greater gifts? I rarely do this, but the late commentator Albert Barnes (published in 1847-85) puts the explanation for this so well, that I prefer to read, rather than reword what he has written.

Barnes: This word, however, may be either in the indicative mood (ye do covet earnestly), or in the imperative, as in our translation. Doddridge contends that it should be rendered in the indicative mood, for he says it seems to be a contradiction that after the apostle had been showing that these gifts were not at their own option, and that they ought not to emulate the gifts of another, or aspire to superiority, to undo all again, and give them such contrary advice. The same view is given by Locke, and so Macknight. The Syriac renders it, “Because you are zealous of the best gifts, I will show to you a more excellent way.” But there is no valid objection to the common translation in the imperative, and indeed the connection seems to demand it. Grotius renders it, “Pray to God that you may receive from him the best, that is, the most useful endowments.”

The sense seems to be this, [Paul says,] “I have proved that all endowments in the church are produced by the Holy Spirit; and that he confers them as he pleases. I have been showing that no one should be proud or elated on account of extraordinary endowments; and that, on the other hand, no one should be depressed, or sad, or discontented, because he has a more humble rank. I have been endeavoring to repress and subdue the spirit of discontent, jealousy, and ambition; and to produce a willingness in all to occupy the station where God has placed you. But, I do not intend to deny that it is proper to desire the most useful endowments; that a man should wish to be brought under the influence of the Spirit, and qualified for eminent usefulness. I do not mean to say that it is wrong for a man to regard the higher gifts of the Spirit as valuable and desirable, if they may be obtained; nor that the spirit which seeks to excel in spiritual endowments and in usefulness, is improper.

[“]Yet all cannot be apostles; all cannot be prophets. I would not have you, therefore, seek such offices, and manifest a spirit of ambition. I would seek to regulate the desire which I would not repress as improper; and in order to that, I would show you that, instead of aspiring to offices and extraordinary endowments which are beyond your grasp, there is a way, more truly valuable, that is open to you all, and where all may excel.” Paul thus endeavors to give a practicable and feasible turn to the whole subject, and further to repress the longings of ambition and the contentions of strife, by exciting emulation to obtain that which was accessible to them all, and “which, just in the proportion in which it was obtained,” would repress discontent, and strife, and ambition, and produce order, and peace, and contentedness with their endowments and their lot, the main thing which he was desirous of producing in this chapter.

[Barnes continues] This, therefore, is one of the “happy turns” in which the writings of Paul abounds. He did not denounce their zeal as wicked. He did not attempt at once to repress it. He did not say that it was wrong to desire high endowments. But he showed them an endowment which was more valuable than all the others; which was accessible to all; and which, if possessed, would make them contented, and produce the harmonious operation of all the parts of the church. That endowment was love.

David Garland follows up with,

The greater gifts are those that edify, encourage, and comfort others. No gift is worth anything, however, if its use is not motivated by love. Love is *not* a greater gift or a substitute for gifts. It is a fruit of the Spirit, and love must accompany the gifts, not replace them. Love is the framework in which all gifts, greater and lesser, must be used.

The Way

And I show you a still more excellent way.

Christianity is far more than just a belief system; Christianity is “life in Christ”—that is, a way of life. The goal, the purpose in this way of life is not simply eternal life, as in life beyond the grave, but living in the here and now “eternal life in Christ.”

Read Romans 6:22-23.

Conzelmann: Paul does not promise a way to the “spiritual gifts,” but one that leads beyond them; nor is it the way that leads to love, but love *is* the way, at the same time also the goal of the “pursuing” and the “striving for.”

When Paul writes, “But earnestly desire the greater gifts,” then follows that immediately with, “And I show you a still more excellent way,” he is making two interconnected, essential points:

1. Our love for each other in the body of Christ is to permeate everything we do, everything we say, and every purpose we pursue. It is to be the “way” we live. It is to be the motive behind our use of every Spirit-gift we have.
2. To that end, love is to be the guide and measure, the engine by which we “earnestly desire the greater gifts.” *Lord, please grant to me gifts that will build up my brother, my sister. Grant to me gifts that will glorify You and Your Son. Give me gifts that point others to You, instead of me.*

Session 129: The Necessity of Love

1 Corinthians 13:1-3

Preface

What stands before us is a passage of Scripture so beautiful, so eloquent, that it has been misused and misunderstood down through the centuries.

- Its eloquence does not make it poetry; it is not a “hymn to love.”
- It does not represent a peaceful interlude for Paul as he leans back in his chair and takes a break from his persistent exhortation and counsel.
- It was not written as a sentimental paean to romantic love.

David Garland: [Chapter Thirteen] is not a digression—a charming, self-contained hymn on love that Paul drew from his files to serve as a pleasant diversion or to give people something to read at weddings. It comprises an essential link in the flow of argumentation from Chapter Twelve to Chapter Fourteen.

I would like to begin by reading Chapter Thirteen. As I do, please note the rather obvious organization of the text.

- Verses 1-3: The Necessity of Love
- Verses 4-8(a): The Character of Love
- Verses 8-13: The Persistence of Love

Read 1 Corinthians 13.

Let us begin by defining the word that is the focus of these thirteen verses: love. Not surprisingly to anyone familiar with God’s word and the Christian faith, that word is translated from the Greek *agape*—more specifically in this instance, *agapēn*. The apostle will indeed present his own definition in vv4-7, but let’s look first at the Greek word itself, and the manner in which Paul uses it.

The reason we commonly think of *agape* as the highest form of love is that it is the word of choice to describe God’s relationship with man. Thus, just as God’s grace, compassion, forgiveness represent the highest form of those concepts—so high they cannot remotely be compared to man’s expression of them—*agape* represents the highest form of love, because it comes from, and is exemplified by, God. And we have the supreme expression of that love being demonstrated at the cross.

Most of us are familiar with another Greek word for love: *phileo*, which is “the most general word for love, or regard with affection. *Phileo* mainly denotes the attraction of people to one another who are close together both inside and outside the family” (W. Gunther in DNTT). This is why the city of Philadelphia is known as “the city of brotherly love.”

More often than not in the NT *agape* is used to express God’s love for man, and man’s love for God. It is that kind of love Paul employs nine times in this chapter—but the twist is that the chapter is not about man’s love for God, but man’s love for others in the body of Christ. That is, this love has the qualities of *agape* (vertical), but the direction and deployment of *phileo* (horizontal).

Gunther: A believer is a sinner who is loved by God. When he realizes this, he enters the sphere of God’s love. He himself becomes loving. Hence, also in Paul, love for God and love for one’s neighbour derive from God’s own love... [In Chapter Thirteen] *agape* is always both God’s love and man’s love.

Before we move into the text, let me reiterate how we are to understand love in the context of this discussion about Spirit-gifts. Love is not a gift from the Spirit, as in, for example, prophecy, helps, or tongues, but love is a fruit of the Spirit. That is, love is not the “best” gift; it is the best way to employ the gifts. Note, for example the context where Paul places love in v13.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:13.

“Faith, hope, love”—those are all fruits of the Spirit, not Spirit-gifts. Here is how Gordon Fee expresses it:

Love is primary for [Paul] because it has already been given concrete expression in the coming of the Lord Jesus to die for the sins of the world. Love is not an idea for Paul, not even a “motivating factor” for behavior. It *is* behavior. To love is to act; anything short of action is not love at all. Love is not set over against the gifts, precisely because it belongs in a different category altogether. For Paul it is not “gifts to be sure, but better yet love”; rather, love is to be the primary motivation lying behind everything they are and do—including Spirit manifestations (gifts) in the gathered assembly... It is not a matter of these things *or* love, or even these things motivated *by* love, but these things by a person whose whole life is also given to love, which begins, as someone well noted, when another person’s need is more important than one’s own. Otherwise, the speaker’s ethical life adds up to zero.

Finally, note Paul’s use of “having” love throughout. He doesn’t say “show” love or “be loving,” but “have love.” This points up that he is talking about authentic, true love.

Garland: One can put on a show of love without having love, but one who truly has love cannot help but show it. Consequently, Paul emphasizes *having* love.

v1

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.

In the first paragraph (vv1-3), Paul sets forth five conditional statements regarding the necessity of love. He begins with tongues because that is the issue in Corinth. I’m going to move through these three verses rather quickly, because I think Paul’s point is obvious. I just want to reveal some details lying beneath the surface of our translations.

Verse 1 is one of the texts that help substantiate the position that authentic speaking in “tongues” may be speaking in a celestial language—what I have termed “the language of heaven.” Paul draws a distinction between the tongues of men, and the tongues of angels (see also, 2 Corinthians 12:1-4).

I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

NKJV: sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.

The first noun is never used for a musical instrument; a metaphor for an empty, hollow sound; The second is indeed an instrument commonly employed (still) in pagan worship. So one can interpret Paul as saying, speaking in a language of earth, or even the language of heaven without love is nothing better than the sound of one banging on an empty pot or making the music of the pagan temple.

v2

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.

Paul continues to emphasize some of the gifts so prized by some in the Corinth church. After tongues in v1, he moves on in v2 to prophecy, mysteries, knowledge, and faith—the last three modified by “all.” This is a mixed bag. The first, prophecy, we know from Chapter Fourteen that Paul considers to be the most valued of the charismata in the church. So he certainly is not denigrating it here—in fact he is not denigrating any of these Spirit-gifts but simply making the case that any or all of them are worthless without the surrounding Spirit-fruit of love. “Knowledge” was a Corinthian favorite.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:1-3.

“Faith” that can “remove mountains” was a proverbial expression meaning the gift of a special faith for mighty works, or doing the impossible in a miraculous way—used even by Jesus.

Read Mark 11:22-23.

The combination of “all mysteries and all knowledge,” both controlled by the verb *eido*, to know, to understand or fathom, hearkens back to the deep mysteries of Judaism regarding “the unfolding of God’s final eschatological drama” (Fee). So if we package all this up, we could summarize and paraphrase this verse, If I were so gifted as to know everything about everything, to not just know, but understand even what God is doing now and will be doing until the end of time itself; if I had so much faith that I could will the geography of the planet to change before my very eyes—even with all that, if I have not love, I am nothing.

v3

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.

Finally, Paul moves beyond *charismata* to give examples of great personal sacrifice. The first part means, literally, “If I parcel out all my property for food to feed,” with “the poor” being implied. The word translated “give” or “bestow” is *psomiso*, which means to “give away bit by bit, feed with sops or tidbits.”

Sidebar: At first, considering this literally, I was disappointed that Paul would use a term that seems to imply that the generous one is doling out food in a niggardly fashion, just a small bit at a time. But then I thought about my typical response to the stories on the news of individuals and restaurants laying out free spreads for the poor on Thanksgiving or Christmas. My thought when I see this is invariably, But these people are hungry year-round. Wouldn’t it be better to feed them a small amount on a regular basis, than a feast on just one day? And, of course, some individuals and institutions do just that.

The second part of this verse represents a problematic “textual variant.” By changing the operative Greek word by just one letter, the meaning is changed considerably. If the manuscript has *kauthesomai*, it means to burn; if the manuscript has *kauchesomai*, it means to boast. Commentators are divided, with the majority going with “to burn.” The NIV2011 typically covers itself both ways, but offers perhaps a reasonable compromise with “and give over my body to hardship that I may boast.”

Frankly, I consider the arguments for either side to be strained, so have no strong opinion either way. But just two points: First, no matter how our common versions translate this, most include a footnote offering the variant; and second, we shouldn’t miss the overall point that Paul climaxes this paragraph with an example that, whichever text is correct, is an example of giving oneself bodily for the good of others.

Paul is always thinking about Christ. For him, He is the supreme example of giving oneself for others out of love. It was Jesus who said, “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).

In v2 the result of having gifts without love was, “I am nothing.” In v3 this changes to performing acts of kindness and sacrifice without love. The result? “It profits me nothing.”

There will indeed come a day for each one of us when we stand before our Lord and give an account for what we have done in His name. And though it may not be clear what it will be, there will be some manner of reward for those things done for the right reason: love—love for Christ, and love for our brothers and sisters in the body.

Let us close with Paul’s account in Philippians where Christ Jesus received His reward for a job well-done—a reward for His personal sacrifice, if not by being burned, to death on a cross, and all out of His love for sinners.

Read this familiar account in the context of our passage, especially v3.

Read Philippians 2:1-11.

Session 130: The Character of Love, part one

1 Corinthians 13:4-8a

Preface

Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a.

For most human beings, “love” is a feeling, or emotion. We say we “love” someone because of the way we feel about them. Agape, in particular, is an action word, something that is demonstrated. It is not sufficient to feel agape; one must do something about it. Beyond that, here in this paragraph (vv4-7, with 8a), Paul personifies love. All the descriptive words that follow are not adjectives, but verbs: *agape* is someone doing something. (Realizing this, the old KJV word “charity” isn’t so bad after all—even in the twenty-first century. “Love” to us is a feeling, while “charity” is doing something for someone else. That is the idea here.)

Last week I pointed out that Chapter Thirteen is not a hymn to love. It stands as a integral, effective continuation of Paul’s exhortation to the Corinthians, and a close examination of the words in vv4-7 reveals that the apostle is using irony (supposedly praising love) to actually blame the Corinthians for their behavior. All we need do is remove the “nots” to get a pretty accurate picture of the Corinthian church: they are jealous, envious, arrogant, they seek their own, they do take into account a wrong suffered, etc. “Rather than a hymn glorifying how wonderful love is, this text becomes a subtle commentary on what is rotten in Corinth” (Garland). Our take-away from this is to keep the lessons being taught here squarely in the body of Christ. We can make extended application to other relationships, but Paul addresses here specifically how love is to be enacted in the church—or put another way, what love is to look like in the church.

Finally, we could dedicate an entire session to demonstrating from God’s word—as well as our own experience—that all of these actions performed by the personified *agape* correspond perfectly to the actions of our gracious God. All we need do is look to Him and His Son for examples of this righteous behavior, His benevolent actions toward us.

v4

Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant,

Love is Patient

I am in the habit of making the point that it’s not that we prefer the more modern versions of the Bible over the old KJV because the KJV is bad translation, but that so many of its word choices are dated, and don’t translate well for this century. But here, in the word translated “patient” in most of our common versions, we have precisely the reverse situation.

The word “patient” does not at all capture the depth of this word *makrothymei*. Patience (or impatience) in our vernacular is the husband waiting by the door with his coat already on as he waits for his wife to finish primping for the party. The KJV has it right: “Charity suffereth long.” The word means to be long-tempered, to persevere, long-suffering; it means putting up with (i.e., loving in spite of) the most egregious of difficulties (Fee). The first character trait of love pointed out by Paul is that love “endures hardships and difficulties of all kinds over the long haul.”

Love is Kind

If “patient” represents the passive response toward others, “kind” (*chresteuetai*) represents the active response, and the two together reveal the two sides of God’s attitude toward man: In His forbearance He holds back divine wrath toward man’s rebellion and sin; at the same time, His kindness is revealed in the manifold expressions of His divine mercy and grace.

Read Romans 2:4.

Thus the long-suffering and kindness as part of our “love of the brethren” (1 Thessalonians 4:9) is a measure of godliness in the body. “Kindness recognizes that everyone carries a heavy load” (Garland).

[Love is] not Jealous

After the two positive verbs—patient and kind—Paul points his finger directly at the Corinth church with a list of seven negative verbs, which is a thinly veiled condemnation of how they are behaving.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:2-3.

This word (*zeloi*) can be either base or noble: When noble, it earnestly desires something nobler for oneself; when base, it jealously longs for the betterment of oneself to the detriment of another. Love does not behave in this base manner.

Love Does Not Brag (boast)

The next two verbs—brag and arrogant—are associates, much like the earlier patient and kind. This first means to “behave as a braggart,” or “to be a pompous windbag.” With this rare word (*perpereuomai*), first used here, Paul may be pointing his accusatory finger less toward the church members and more toward his rivals for their hearts and minds. Remember his earlier references to those of whom the church was becoming enamored, with their impressive presence and superior “wisdom” and “knowledge.”

Read 1 Corinthians 3:18-21.

[Love] is Not Arrogant

The next verb goes hand-in-glove with the previous. The word is *physioutai*, and means to be “puffed up.” Paul may be still referring to the speakers the church was listening to, but we have lots of evidence that of this he accuses the Corinthian body.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:6-8.

Garland writes, “Love is constructive. It builds up the building. The puffed-up spirit blows up the building.” MacArthur: Arrogance is big-headed; love is big-hearted.

v5a

does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own,

[Love] does not Act Unbecomingly

Here once again we have the old KJV coming out with one of the better translations: “[Love] doth not behave itself unseemly.” The NASB comes in a close second with “unbecomingly,” but the versions that have translated this “rude” (ESV, NIV84, NKJV, CSB) miss the mark. The verb (*aschemonei*) means to behave shamefully, disgracefully, indecently. It can and often does include “rudeness,” but that doesn’t capture the word’s true depth and scope, which can include sexual or nudity overtones. Paul’s use of this word here points back to

- the gross impropriety of the man living with his father’s wife (5:1-2);
- the behavior of the women (and men) bringing shame on their “heads” by dressing and grooming themselves inappropriately for worship (11:2-16);
- the behavior of the “haves” at the Lord’s Table, humiliating “those who have nothing” (11:20-22).

In the grace of Christ—not to mention as citizens of the United States—we enjoy many liberties. But love dictates that we are never to abuse those liberties to the point that they bring dishonor, disgrace, shame or pain on others in the body.

Read Galatians 5:13-14.

[Love] does not Seek its Own

From Paul's three-chapter treatise on "liberty" (8-10, "concerning things sacrificed to idols"), we have a pretty good idea that some in the Corinth church were more concerned with what benefited themselves than what benefited others. Since it was no stumbling block to their own faith to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols, they had little concern for how their self-indulgence might be a stumbling block for the faith of others.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:23-24, 32-33.

To that Paul adds, in 8:11-13,

For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died. And so, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble.

I agree with Gordon Fee who suggests this item—and I would include with it the previous ("does not act unbecomingly")—may be the fullest expression of what Christian love is all about.

Fee: It does not seek its own; it does not believe that "finding oneself" is the highest good; it is not enamored with self-gain, self-justification, self-worth. To the contrary, it seeks the good of one's neighbor—or [even] enemy.

That is how we closed our last session. It's appropriate to do it again:

**Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.
(Philippians 2:3-4)**

Session 131: The Character of Love, part two

1 Corinthians 13:4-8a

Preface

Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a.

We now continue through the apostle Paul's characterization of *agape*: how it behaves; what it looks like; what actions it takes. And it is appropriate for us to be reminded of a couple of points.

- *Agape*, in particular, is not just a feeling, but is an *action* word, something that is demonstrated. It is not sufficient to *feel agape*; one must do something about it. Beyond that, here in this paragraph (vv4-7, with 8a), Paul personifies love. All the descriptive words that follow are not adjectives, but verbs: *agape* is someone *doing* something.
- Chapter Thirteen is not a “hymn to love,” but a continuation of Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians, and a close examination of the words in vv4-7 reveals that the apostle is using irony (on the surface, praising love) to actually blame the Corinthians for their behavior. All we need do is remove the “nots” to get a pretty accurate picture of the Corinthian church: they *are* jealous, envious, arrogant, they seek their own, they do take into account a wrong suffered, etc. “Rather than a hymn glorifying how wonderful love is, this text becomes a subtle commentary on what is rotten in Corinth” (Garland).

In our previous session we looked at how *agape*

- is **long-suffering**; it perseveres through trials, and “endures hardships and difficulties of all kinds over the long haul.” *Agape* does not reject the company of brothers and sisters in Christ simply because they are inconvenient.
- is **kind**; the long-suffering and kindness as part of our “love of the brethren” is a measure of godliness in the body.
- is not **jealous**; *agape* does not jealously long for the betterment of oneself to the detriment of another.
- does not **brag** and is not **arrogant**; *agape* does not behave like a pompous, know-it-all windbag, and it is not puffed up with itself.
- does not **act unbecomingly**; *agape* does not behave shamefully, disgracefully, indecently.
- does not **seek its own**; true love does not insist on its own personal rights and liberties at the expense of others. If something it is at liberty to do will inflict harm to the faith of a brother or sister, *agape* will forego that right (1 Corinthians 8:13).

Now we are ready to continue in this passage.

v5b

...is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered,

[Love] is not Provoked

With this word, *paroxynetai*, Paul begins to speak less of the evil in oneself and more to how one responds to the evil in others (Bittlinger). At the same time, however, this word is a close cousin to the first in this passage: long-suffering. When this verb is in the active voice, it means “to arouse someone to anger”; here, in the passive voice, it means that *agape* “is not easily provoked to anger by others,” or to be easily irritated (ESV). Garland translates this, “Love is not cantankerous.”

My guess is that every one of us can find one or more of these character traits of *agape* in which we miss the mark, fail to meet this standard. Frankly, I've already found two for myself—this being one of them.

It is important to point out that this does not speak of what we might term “righteous anger.” Certainly Jesus exhibited such anger at times, as did Paul—but note that their anger, their provocation, was not sparked by a personal affront—or, as is often the case today in this

detached, online society, by what is considered a personal affront—but by an affront against God, or His righteousness. They rose up in anger at things that anger God (MacArthur).

[Love] does not Take into Account a Wrong Suffered

In our previous study I lauded the original KJV for its translation of a couple of words in this list. I now need to balance the record—again, not that the KJV (and in this instance NKJV) is necessarily wrong, but just that it does not capture the fullness of the Greek with its “thinketh no evil.”

The image of *logizetai* to *kakon* is of “keeping records of wrongs with a view to paying back injury” (Garland). In his second (extant) letter to the Corinthians, Paul states (using the same word, *logizetai*) that God in Christ does the same for us.

Read 2 Corinthians 5:19.

So the idea here is not that we don’t think about or acknowledge a wrong done to us, but that we don’t, as it were, compose a list of wrongs with the idea of getting back at those who have wronged us. We would be super-human if we didn’t notice evil done to us, but we are to follow the pattern of our heavenly Father who forgives and forgets the transgressions—as Paul exemplified earlier in the same letter.

Read 2 Corinthians 2:5-11.

v6

[Love] does not Rejoice in Unrighteousness...

Agape does not celebrate sin. The Greek word *adikia*, translated unrighteousness in the NASB, can mean iniquity or injustice—which might be a better companion to the second clause regarding “truth.” Any act of injustice will invariably include a measure of duplicity, shading the truth, or outright lying. If injustice, it may be that Paul refers back to Christians defrauding Christians in the secular (pagan) courts (6:1-11). If unrighteousness, he may be referring to the episode regarding the man living with his father’s wife (5:1-13). In either case, we are not to celebrate bad behavior, but rid it from our midst.

...but Rejoices with the Truth

“Rejoice” in the first clause translates the Greek *chairei*, while “rejoices” in the second translates *synchairei*, which means “to rejoice together.”

Read 1 Corinthians 12:26. (same word)

It is easier to illustrate the opposite of rejoicing in truth, because there are so many instances today of churches, even entire denominations officially rejoicing in preaching and teaching a false gospel—not just shaving off the sharp corners of God’s truth, but manufacturing their own brand of “truth” that actually runs counter to God’s word and Christ’s gospel. “Rejoicing with the truth” means—from the individual, to the small Bible study, to the local congregation, to the denomination—standing with, living, and celebrating the rock-solid truth of God’s word.

v7

...bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Paul wraps up this paragraph with a staccato-like coda. It is rhythmic; it is forceful. The repeated word accompanying the verbs, translated “all things” in all but the NIVs, is the Greek *panta*. It can mean all or every, but can also mean, as it is translated in the NIVs, always (lasting, continually, continuously). “All things” is good translation, but leaves it open for the erroneous interpretation that Paul is saying that love is gullible (“love believes all things”).

Here is Thiselton’s interpretation: “Love never tires of support, never loses faith, never exhausts hope, never gives up.”

Here’s how *The Message* paraphrase renders v7:

Puts up with anything, Trusts God always, Always looks for the best, Never looks back, But keeps going to the end.

[Love] Bears all Things

The word translated “bears” (*stegei*) in all but the NIVs can mean to cover or protect (as it does in the NIVs) but here it means to bear up under any circumstances; NEB: “There is nothing love cannot face.”

[Love] Believes all Things

This is not saying that love is gullible, believing everything it hears. The Greek here is *pisteuei*, which is from the common word in the NT for faith or trust, *pistis*. It means that agape trusts deeply, solidly, thoroughly; it does not lose its faith in God.

[Love] Hopes all Things

In the Christian life a close relative of trust and faith is hope (*elpizei*). This could refer to the hope each believer has in his or her eternal future—a “hope” better termed “confidence”—or agape’s hope in others.

[Love] Endures all Things

Nearly synonymous with the first verb, endures (*hypomenei*) refers to agape’s “ability to hold out during trouble and affliction (Garland).” Hypo means “under,” so the picture here is of love enduring as the heavy weight of troubles and hard times bears down upon it.

Gordon Fee: The first and fourth [verbs deal] with present circumstances, the second and third [look] to the future. Thus it is the character of love to “put up with everything.”... So too the final verb, “love always perseveres.” Love has a tenacity in the present, buoyed by its absolute confidence in the future, that enables one to live in every kind of circumstance and continually to pour oneself out in behalf of others. Paul’s own ministry was a perfect example of such love.

The enclosed verbs [second and third] reflect the other two members... In saying “love always trusts” and “hopes,” Paul does not mean that love always believes the best about everything and everyone, but that love never ceases to trust God and thus leave justice in God’s hands.

In his conclusion to this passage, Fee suggests the manner by which every believer might make the best use of its exhortation.

Fee: It is often pointed out that in this paragraph Paul seems best to capture the life and ministry of Jesus. So much so that one could substitute his name for the noun “love” and thereby describe love in a more personal way: “Jesus is kind, is not easily angered, etc.”

After doing so, however, one does not want to miss Paul’s point, which ultimately is description for the purpose of exhortation. Perhaps that point could best be captured by putting one’s own name in place of the noun “love” (Gordon is patient and kind—really?) and not neglecting thereafter to find a proper place for repentance and forgiveness.

Indeed, rereading this section for a final edit came home once more as a bombshell from heaven, regarding the ease with which one falls into unloving behavior.

v8a

Love never fails;

Although it does technically belong to the next paragraph (vv8-13), I cannot help but include the statement “Love never fails” with vv4-7. In our next session we will dig deeper into this clause in its context, but I believe it makes a resounding final statement for the previous paragraph.

Taken as the end of vv4-7, the common translation, “Love never fails” could mean that love is never defeated, or persists even when rebuffed. If, however, it goes with vv8-13, and is translated from the alternate manuscript sources, it reads “Love never falls”—as in love never comes to an end (ESV, CSB), or becomes invalid, or always endures.

Either way it expresses agape’s permanency, its dependability. Agape will always be there, and it will never stop performing its purpose in the life of trust and faith in Christ Jesus.

Session 132: The Persistence of Love, part one

1 Corinthians 13:8-13

Preface

Thus far in Chapter Thirteen we have looked at the necessity of love (vv1-3), and the character of love (vv4-7). Now we consider the persistence of love in the remaining verses (vv8-13). In this final paragraph Paul contrasts the permanence of love with the impermanence of the Spirit-gifts.

As we read this paragraph, note that it begins and ends affirming the permanence of agape: In v8 it begins with “Love never fails,” and in v13 it ends with the statement that love (along with faith and hope) “abides.” When all spiritual gifts—even the ones so dear to the hearts of the Corinthians—have come to an end, agape will remain.

This last portion of Chapter Thirteen is eschatological: it is all about the nature of the Spirit-gifts we have now in relation to the end times, when Christ returns in power and the church, both dead and living, are united with Him forever. The apostle will be showing that these Spirit-gifts will come to an end along with most everything else. In contrast, agape, like God’s word, lives forever.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:8-13.

v8

Love never fails;

Our previous session concluded with the beginning of v8—“Love never fails”—simply because of its rhetorical placement. But the clause does belong contextually to this paragraph, one clue being the next word in the Greek, *de*, (“but,” which the ESV strips out).

Last week I pointed out the two translations of the word *ekpipto*, rendered in most versions “fails,” but also rendered “fall” by some interpreters. This is a small point, for just about all agree on what Paul intends. There is small effective difference between “love is never defeated” and “love is never deprived of its force, or comes to an end.” All agree that the point Paul is making is that both in this present age and in the future Eschaton, agape remains.

The Corinthians were of the opinion that they, being “spiritual” people, had already attained; some thought they were already as good—i.e., spiritually gifted and mature—as they would get. This points back to the passage in Chapter Four, in which Paul sarcastically rebukes the Corinthians for thinking more of themselves than they should (1 Corinthians 4:6-8). That mindset is what makes it necessary for Paul to say what he does here. Let me share some of what I said back in September 2018 regarding that passage.

Another “now—not yet”

Read 1 Corinthians 4:8.

The Christian in the here and now, because of the indwelling Spirit, is “filled” in ways the world will never know or even understand, and the Christian has a measure of “wealth” the world can never obtain. But the Christian also understands that there will come a day when what he has now in Christ will then seem like slim pickings when compared to the outpouring he will receive in glory.

The Corinthians, however, were living as if they consider that what they have by means of the Spirit in the here and now has already filled them to overflowing; they already have all there is or will be. Paul is not saying the Corinthians literally believe they are already living in the end times—in the kingdom on the other side of Judgment Day, as did some of the Thessalonians. As Fee puts it, for the Corinthians, “already but not yet”

is one of “already” with little room for “not yet.” Having received the Spirit, they have already arrived; for them spirituality means to have been transported into a whole new sphere of existence where they are “above” the earthly, and especially “fleshly,” existence of others.

It’s not that the Corinthians believe Christ’s judgment has already occurred; their problem is that they aren’t thinking about it at all (Garland). To convince them into realizing

that they are not yet filled with what they can consume of God, that they are not yet overflowing with His riches, Paul seeks to shame them from their pride, into humility and gratitude for what they do have.

D. W. Kuck: [The Corinthians] already see themselves as morally and spiritually perfected, without having to experience the bodily struggles which Paul sees as the sign of life in Christ.

Now here, nine chapters later, Paul, in the context of comparing these Spirit-gifts to the superior agape, employs a different tack to get their minds right. These gifts the Spirit has given them to use are meant only for the here and now—a mere down payment on what will be theirs in the future.

Read 2 Corinthians 1:21-22.

When we like a house and want to purchase it, we make a down payment—a pledge, an “earnest” in the KJV—to say in tangible terms that we are earnest in our intention to pay the full amount for the property. This is what the Holy Spirit has done in every follower of Christ. He doesn’t give us the full amount, just an earnest payment to guarantee the rest, which awaits us in glory.

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.

In v8 Paul names three gifts he will use in this paragraph as examples to drive home his point. The first, prophecy (literally, prophecies), he considers the most useful in the church; the second and third, tongues and knowledge, the Corinthians consider the most important to possess. So Paul is not just making a generalized statement regarding Spirit-gifts; he is making the point by referencing the very gifts of which the Corinthians were enamored, as well as the one he considers the most important for the church.

His point? That even those gifts the Corinthians deem special have a “built-in obsolescence” (Garland). They are not now perfect, nor will they be perfected in eternity; they will not exist in eternity.

- What good is prophecy when everyone is standing before the Lord God Himself?
- What good are tongues when everyone is speaking in (and understanding) the language of heaven?
- What good is supernatural knowledge when everyone will have it to the full?

These and all Spirit-gifts have been given for the edification of the church during the “between times”—the period from the death and resurrection of Jesus to the final consummation inaugurated when Christ Jesus returns in power to judge the world. That is, they have been given for the church age.

v9

For we know in part and we prophesy in part;

In vv9-10 Paul explains further what he said in v8. (And in your Bible you should draw a big red circle around this verse (just kidding). I was amazed to see that this verse is translated identically in all our common versions—even the KJV! I do not recall ever seeing that before.)

More than just agreeing on how to translate this verse, I doubt there is any disagreement on the truth of the statement. Whether one has the gift of supernatural, Spirit-informed knowledge, or one has the gift of supernatural, Spirit-informed prophecy, all can agree that not one of us has this to the full. No one still in flesh can possibly know or prophesy everything that there is to know or prophesy. The Greek word translated “part” (*meros*) can include the idea of extremity. That is, even as energized by the Holy Spirit, what little knowledge or prophecy we can speak forth is just out on the fringe of their totality.

There is no significance to Paul leaving out a reference to tongues in v9, except that speaking in tongues would not fit well into how this verse is phrased.

v10

but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away.

I personally favor the old KJV for this verse: “But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.”

Note first what Paul is not saying; in any other context we might expect to read, but when the perfect comes, the partial will become perfect as well. After all—and you can’t really fault the Corinthians for thinking this—if in the end all is perfection, then it would follow that everything—including our Spirit-gifts—would be perfected as well. But the apostle says that they will be “done away” (*katargethesetai* = stop, cease, be discontinued, be abolished, bring to an end, to render inoperative). This is the same word used in v8 to describe what will happen to prophecy and knowledge.

Sidebar: The verb translated “cease” in the NASB of v8, regarding tongues, is different (*pausontai*), but essentially synonymous with the other. Some commentators attempt to draw some important inference from this (e.g., MacArthur), but Fee and Garland agree that the different verbs are no more than a rhetorical device.

It is clear, both here in vv8-10 and through the end of Chapter Thirteen, that Paul is thinking and speaking in eschatological terms. Later, in Chapter Fifteen, he uses the same word to describe the abolishing of “all rule and all authority and power,” and death itself at the coming of Christ.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:20-26.

It is not just the Corinthians who are guilty of this mindset; it is built into the human DNA to think that the way things are now is how we want them to stay. We are loathe to lose the relationships, the way of life we enjoy in the here and now. Too often we think of eternity in terms of what we will lose, rather than what we will gain. And why not: For the most part, and through no fault of our own, we remain ignorant of what our eternity with Christ will be like. Like the Corinthians, we aren’t sure we want to lose the gifts given us by the Spirit in exchange with the unknown.

Gordon Fee closes his thoughts on v10 with a quotation from the late theologian Karl Barth (pronounced “bart”; d.1968). Regarding the cessation of the Spirit-gifts when Christ returns, he writes in his book, *The Resurrection of the Dead* (1933), “Because the sun rises all lights are extinguished.”

Perfect.

Session 133: The Persistence of Love, part two

1 Corinthians 13:8-13

Preface

Children are remarkable beings. Solomon tells us that they “are a gift of the LORD,” and that “the fruit of the womb is a reward.” (Psalm 127:3) Jesus rebuked His disciples when they tried to prevent children from coming to Him for a blessing, telling His men, “Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to Me; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” (Matthew 19:14) In the other gospel accounts Jesus went on to say, “Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all.” (Luke 18:17) So clearly, in God’s eyes, there is something to be said for the simple, direct, untainted, “uncynical” faith of a child.

It is easier for children to believe because they have not yet built up their layers of crust: doubt, cynicism, and prejudice. At the same time, however, children lack the experience, the foresight, the knowledge and wisdom of the adult. They may be better at believing, but they fall short in reasoning, comprehension, perspective. They are, for the most part, lacking in the scars of life that give wisdom.

The point of this passage is not to denigrate the childish behavior of children. One cannot expect a five-year-old to act and speak like a Rhodes scholar. Nor is Paul claiming that the Spirit-gifts of the Corinthians are in any way childish. The point of the passage is to make clear to the Corinthians and all believers that, as Solomon also wrote, “There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven.” (Ecclesiastes 3:1) In fact, much of the book of Ecclesiastes makes a pretty good companion for our passage, for the overarching point of that portion of Scripture is captured in “the preacher’s” repeated refrain: “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.”

Not just our Spirit-gifts, but much of everything we now deem terribly important, even vital, will pass away. It’s time will be over. All this will be replaced by “the perfect,” as Paul puts it in v10. This time of perfection will be brought about by the Parousia—the presence of Christ once again on earth.

Paul is not saying that the Corinthians’ Spirit-gifts are childish and should be discarded, but that these gifts should be employed with love, for love is one of the few things that will survive into perfection. Lacking that love, their gifts are spiritually barren (Garland).

Read 1 Corinthians 13:8-13.

Let’s stay with this point of transition described in v10 for just a moment more, for this is the context for how the apostle closes out this treatise on love. Here is how David Garland puts it.

Garland: The disappearance of the partial replaced by the complete [perfect], and the reference to knowing as God knows us, all point to the end time. He contrasts the present age with the age to come. The “perfect” is shorthand for the consummation of all things, *the intended goal of creation*; and its arrival will naturally displace the partial that we experience in the present age. Human gifts shine gloriously in this world but will fade to nothing in the presence of what is perfect. But they also will have served their purpose of helping to build up the church during the wait, and to take it to the threshold of the end. When the anticipated end arrives, they will no longer be necessary. (emphasis added)

With that statement, “The ‘perfect’ is shorthand for the consummation of all things, the intended goal of creation,” Garland raises an important point that we will revisit thoroughly in our next class on the “Last Things”—in fact, it will be the foundational premise for the entire study. Just as God’s word, from Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:21, points to Christ, so the purpose and narrative flow of God’s economy (as told in Scripture) runs inexorably from the initial “perfection” of creation to the perfection of the Parousia (i.e., the ultimate rule and authority of Christ in eternity). Put another, if more base, way, it is as if in eternity past the Godhead put their collective heads together and agreed, Here is where we are going, and this is how we are going to get there. The completeness, the perfection of the “Last Things” (Eschaton) is the ultimate destination that was set in place before time began.

v11

When I was a child,

The word Paul uses here is *nepios*, which can refer to anything from an infant, to an older child or adult who is immature. (My guess is that Paul might even include his time before Christ nailed him on the road to Damascus.) In any case, Paul is simply using this example of being a child—and being childish—to illustrate how some things are meant to come to an end, or transition to something better.

I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child;

This in no way denigrates children or their behavior. It is simply a statement of fact: children speak, think, and reason like children!

when I became a man, I did away with childish things.

But there is a time for that to end. The child is meant to grow up into adulthood. Most of us have experienced the sad absurdity of adults who still think and behave like children.

Sidebar: There are some who posit that with the use of the word “speak,” or “talk” (*elaloun*), Paul refers to speaking in tongues, and thus labels that gift as childish or immature. Not at all. Why would someone who will go on to say, “I thank God, I speak in tongues more than you all” (1 Corinthians 14:18), refer to that gift as childish?

Again, Paul is simply drawing an analogy between “childish things” coming to an end, and Spirit-gifts coming to an end.

v12

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face;

There is a scene from the Pentateuch that illumines the analogy Paul uses here.

Read Numbers 12:1-9.

Yahweh draws a distinction between how He communicates with prophets (v6)—as it were, secondhand, by means of visions or dreams—and how He communicates with Moses—“mouth to mouth.”

When we awaken from a dream, even a strong, clear dream, we are left a bit unsettled: Who was that person, why did they look that way, where did it take place, what does it all mean? Even seemingly harmless dreams (as opposed to nightmares) leave us feeling off-balance; there is a measure of strangeness, of ambiguity, even dread.

In Numbers the Lord uses the Hebrew *chidah* (khee-dah’), translated “dark saying” in the NASB (v8), which means a riddle, an enigmatic, perplexing saying, a conundrum or question. This is how He describes His prophetic communication through visions and dreams—not unlike how Jesus would communicate to some in His hearing through parables to be purposely obtuse (Matthew 13:10-17). Even the disciples would answer Him with, “What are you talking about? What does that mean?”

Yahweh contrasts this with speaking “mouth to mouth” to Moses. This, as well as “eye to eye” and (as in our Corinthian passage) “face to face” are OT idioms that imply something comes directly, not through an intermediary or medium, such as a vision or dream (Garland). Along with seeing oneself in the mirror, it is like the difference between seeing someone in a photograph or video, and seeing them in-person—a big difference. Jesus made a similar comparison to His disciples, speaking of how it would be in the Eschaton.

Read John 16:25.

We may think that we see things with sharp clarity and comprehension, but so long as we dwell this side of Christ’s return, we are, in actuality, seeing things only secondhand, as if looking at them reflected in a darkened mirror. When Christ returns, when the fullness of His

presence (Parousia) overwhelms every citizen of His kingdom, the blinding clarity of His light will reveal what we have never seen before.

now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known.

Just as there will be a change in how we “see,” there will be a change in how we “know.” Even as we have spoken many times in this class about the precious gift of the Holy Spirit, how He graciously implements and enhances our communication with, and understanding of, God, the truth is that what we know through the Spirit now is but a tiny subset of what we will know after Christ returns.

How much, and to what level of clarity and insight will we then know? “Just as [we] also have been fully known” (implied, by God). God has always—even before we were born—known us “face to face”: completely, inside and out, directly. But only in the Eschaton will we have the privilege of knowing Him and the Son to that same level.

The apostle Paul is saying that in the life of every human being there is a time for one thing to be replaced by another: childish things are to be replaced by adulthood. Likewise, there comes a time in the life of the individual believer and the church when the imperfect things of this earth—including gifts from the Spirit—will be replaced by the perfect, when life as we know it now, and the church as we know it now, will have been replaced by eternity in the presence of the Lord Himself.

v13

But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love.

There is argument over whether Paul suggests here that along with love, which he has already stated (v8) will continue when all Spirit-gifts have ceased, faith and hope will continue into eternity as well. But one must stand on his head to make the case that faith and hope continue on in the Eschaton. Common sense tells us otherwise, but Scripture does as well.

Read 2 Corinthians 5:6-8.

To that we could add,

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1)

When we have that sight, when we are seeing with our own resurrected eyes the eyes of our Lord, faith will no longer be necessary. It is a temporal gift, for the here and now.

Read Romans 8:24-25.

Once again, what we “hope” for in the here and now is our resurrected life with our resurrected Lord. Once that hope has been realized, there is no longer any need for that hope.

But love never fails or falls. It endures. It will not just remain when the perfect comes, it—along with faith and hope—remains essential to the Christian life in the here and now.

Spirit-gifts are dispensable. The presence of particular gifts listed by the apostle in Chapter Twelve are not essential in order to be a Christian and spiritual. One is no less spiritual if one does not have the gift of tongues—and no more spiritual if one does. Beyond that, these gifts are temporal only; when Christ returns, they will cease.

Agape, however, is never dispensable. It endures now. It will endure forever. Because God is love (1 John 4:16), our love for Him and each other will endure, alongside God’s word, for all eternity.

Session 134: The Superiority of Prophecy

1 Corinthians 14:1-4

Preface

From the beginning of this letter, the apostle Paul has made it his primary purpose to restore in the Corinthians the practice of proper, God-honoring worship. He has labored in this letter to get the Corinthians to get their focus off themselves and on, first, Christ Jesus and, second, on their brothers and sisters in Christ. Throughout the various topics addressed, this has been his purpose. For example,

- At the outset, in Chapter One, he addresses the injurious divisions in the church; instead of edifying the assembly, they were tearing it apart.
- In Chapters One and Two Paul speaks against the earthly and fleshly wisdom seeping like a poison into the church—the worldly, individual-exalting wisdom that stood in opposition to the wisdom of the Spirit of God.
- In Chapter Five he raises a painful topic that has been reported to him: that “someone has his father’s wife.” They were apparently praising themselves for their “grace” in allowing this in their midst (v5:2). Thus they were actually sanctioning behavior that was undermining the integrity of the body of Christ. Paul’s judgment and command? “Remove the wicked man from among yourselves” (v5:13).
- Paul addresses another way they were undermining the integrity of the church in Chapter Six: certain individuals in the church were suing their brothers in Christ in the civil courts—before unbelievers.
- Later in that chapter he speaks to the sexual and marital corruption that was taking place—not just doing harm to the unity of the church, but harm to the unity of those who were married, and he continues this into Chapter Seven.
- In Chapters Eight through Ten the apostle supplies a detailed treatise on food sacrificed to idols—that is, there were some who saw no harm in this, but by their public actions were doing great harm to the faith of others in the body.

All of these bad practices cause harm to the assembly as a whole, as well as individuals in the assembly. These sinful practices, by extension, harm and dilute their worship because of the resulting corruption to the body. They destroy the necessary unity of the church. These practices exalt the worshiper rather than the God who is being (supposedly) worshiped.

So far, for the most part, Paul’s counsel and commands have been related to proper worship by extension; in Chapter Eleven he begins to address it head-on.

- In the first part of Chapter Eleven Paul speaks to the concept of “headship,” the hierarchy of authority in the kingdom—God the Father is the head of Christ, Christ the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman—and how the manner in which we physically present ourselves impacts the integrity of worship in the assembly.
- In the second part of Chapter Eleven he moves to a critique of their observance of the Lord’s Supper, and how cultural, societal, and economic strata were dividing the church during this most solemn occasion.
- In Chapter Twelve Paul gets specific regarding the apportionment of Spirit-gifts in the church, but this is presented, still, from the angle of church unity. His goal is to reorient the Corinthians from seeing their Spirit-gifts as something which exalts *themselves*, to seeing them for what they truly are: gifts distributed by God for the edification of the church—the body of Christ. He bookends this emphasis, first, in v27: “But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” Then, near the end of Chapter Twelve, he adds the second bookend.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:24b-27.

- Finally, in Chapter Thirteen, Paul emphasizes the importance—and permanence—of love over all the Spirit-gifts—not romantic love or brotherly

love, but agape, the active, eternal, sacrificial love that God through Christ has for the church. This is the binding love that sets the body of Christ apart from every other institution on earth. It is in the sphere of this love that the local assembly comes together as a unified whole before the throne of God.

Now, in Chapter Fourteen, Paul presents an in-depth comparison of the *least* important gift for the edification of the church (tongues), to the *most* important gift for the edification of the church (prophecy). And, once again, before the end of the chapter he will tie this into its role in corporate instruction and worship.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:23-25.

Now let's read our first passage in Chapter Fourteen.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:1-4.

v1

Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy.

The first thing we should note is that there is a difference between the verbs “pursuing” and “desire”—even “desire earnestly.” Regarding the first, once again the NIVs disappoint, along with the KJV, with the anemic “follow.” Because agape is an active form of love, our pursuit of it is likewise to be active, imperative. *Diokete*—a word that is typically used in the negative (such as chasing after someone to do them harm), but one that Paul likes to use in a positive way—means to strive for, seek after, hunt, drive on. The verb tense means that we are to commit to a long term pursuit of agape, we are to keep on doing this as a general habit or lifestyle.

Though still active and imperative, *zeloute* (“desire earnestly”) is slightly less active than *diokete*. Paul here is emphasizing the pursuit of love. The word that ties them together, *de*, can be adversative (but, or the NASB “yet”) but all the rest of our common translations make it “and,” which I think is the best. The idea here is that we are to take all of what Paul has been saying about agape and live that form of love as we actively desire Spirit-gifts—especially the Spirit-gift of prophecy. Desire Spirit-gifts with agape. Use your Spirit-gifts with agape. Then in vv2-4 Paul fleshes out the statement in v1.

Perhaps this would be a good time to refresh our understanding of what Paul means by the Spirit-gift of prophecy. He is going to be spending most of this chapter telling the Corinthians—and us—that it is the superior gift in the church, so we had better understand what it is.

We know that prophecy was an integral part of the early church; for the apostle Paul it was a desired and preferred gift of the Spirit, for it was instrumental—perhaps even essential—in the “edification and exhortation and consolation” of the church.

The primary commentators I have been using for this study (David Garland, Gordon Fee, and John MacArthur) all agree that the Spirit-gift of prophecy remains in effect today. But we need to clearly define it, and define the differences between it and the gifts of the word of wisdom and the word of knowledge (teaching and preaching). When I prepare these lessons, I prepare to teach by reading, studying, and praying; as I am doing this I write down in my notes what I will be teaching. In other words, when a teacher teaches and a pastor preaches there is preparation beforehand, and, more often than not, some form of written notes to guide his or her thoughts. With prophetic utterances there is none of that. The individual just speaks, for the benefit of others, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. (from Session 120)

The main difference between tongues and prophecy is that tongues are in an unintelligible language, while prophecy is in the language of the speaker.

v2

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.

Speaking in tongues stands in stark contrast to prophecy, for on a human—and especially human senses—level, it is utterly meaningless. Speaking in tongues is simply the audible manifestation of the believer's spirit speaking to God by means of spirit language—I contend, the language of heaven, as it were. It is unintelligible and meaningless to anyone who hears it. It can gloriously profit the believer in his or her prayer closet, but has marginal use in the assembly of the church.

For one example, there are moments in private prayer when the Spirit overwhelms, often in a time of spiritual crisis. We desperately need communion with our God—solace, encouragement, perhaps even rebuke. The world and its ways have become too much for us; we have seemingly lost touch with our Lord. In His mercy and grace He reaches down and reattaches the severed cord; we are lifted up and out of the clutches of this fallen world, and we once again exult in His presence. On occasion this mystical revival might even become supernaturally verbal; the believer may not even be aware that he is speaking the language of heaven.

But none of this edifies the church, only the individual.

v3

But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation.

Question: In v2, regarding tongues, who is the recipient? (Answer: God.)

Question: In v3, regarding prophecy, who is the recipient? (Answer: people.)

And the reasons are different, as well. No actual purpose is stated in v2 for speaking to God in tongues—implied, that is part of the “mysteries” (*mysteria*)—although the speaker undoubtedly receives some benefit, as in the example above. But in v3 Paul states at least three reasons for prophecy: edification, exhortation, and consolation.

Paul reiterates his position in v4.

v4

One who speaks in a tongue edifies himself; but one who prophesies edifies the church.

Some like to use this verse to prove that Paul denigrates the gift of speaking in tongues—you're just edifying yourself, you self-centered lout!—in contrast to church edifying prophecy. If that be the case, then Paul should have had a better proofreader, for he is then talking out of both sides of his mouth.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:28.

If in Chapter Twelve Paul told us that “tongues” is one of the gifts appointed by God, then why would he then deem it bad in 14:4? Look at the end of this chapter.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:39.

Here he concludes the comparison of the two gifts by stating flat-out: “Do not forbid to speak in tongues.”

The apostle is teaching not the elimination of tongues, but for placing this Spirit-gift in the proper context. There is nothing wrong with edifying—building up—our own faith and sanctification in Christ, so long as we also participate, through the use of our Spirit-gifts, in the edification of others.

Session 135: The Greater Benefit

1 Corinthians 14:5

Preface

We continue now in the apostle Paul's treatise on the superiority of prophecy over the Spirit-gift of speaking in tongues.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:5-9.

v5

Now I wish that you all spoke in tongues,

Why would Paul wish that every Corinthian spoke in tongues?

For one reason, to answer the behavior of those who considered themselves more "spiritual" than others because they spoke in tongues. The inescapable conclusion from a passage like 1 Corinthians 12:12-30 is that there were some in the church—especially those with the gift of tongues—who considered themselves superior—more gifted, more elite, more "spiritual"—than those without that particular gift. One condition that would democratize the situation would be if the Spirit chose to endow every believer with that gift—a purely hypothetical situation. Then no one could consider themselves superior in that regard.

More to the point, however, Paul acknowledges there is value, there is edification, at least for the individual who speaks in tongues. In this he would be expressing a thought similar to that of Moses regarding prophesy, in response to Joshua.

Read Numbers 11:27-29.

That is, Paul is saying, I wish that all of you could experience for himself the benefits I have by speaking in tongues. What sort of benefits? David Garland cites (without quoting directly) Gerd Thiessen:

[Speaking in tongues] affords access to the unconscious dimensions of the soul and allows repressed impulses to the consciousness. It enters into an inner space dissociated from the everyday realities surrounding them and it may result in a feeling of peace and even euphoria (Esler).

I think some of us perceive any and all Spirit-gifts in much the same way, as an official endowment from God, labeling and categorizing each of us by that gift—henceforth to be known as someone with that gift. And in some individuals that may be the case. Most of us are familiar with individuals who exude the qualities of their Spirit-gift in every aspect of their life, as with the gifts of helps, or wisdom, or knowledge.

Some gifts, however, such as healing, may come and go. Using the example of healing, and cautioning against the institutionalizing of gifts, this is how D. A. Carson explains it:

Carson: If a Christian has been granted the *charisma* to heal one particular individual of one particular disease at one time, that Christian should not presume to think that *the* gift of healing has been bestowed on him or her, prompting the founding of "a healing ministry."

What I believe Thiessen, a respected German theologian, is saying, and what Paul may be insinuating, is that the gift of tongues can be one of those supernatural methods God employs to disengage His children from the spirit-deadening world in which we dwell. To be sure, He uses other, less sensational methods more often: prayer, fellowship with other believers, His printed word, devotional contemplation. But there may be times when He feels it necessary to use, as it were, the Big Guns, the momentary charisma of tongues to break us loose from our over-indulgence of this temporal world, to reconnect us in a dramatic way with Him.

The Lord God is not a passive, inert spectator to the lives of His children. When He sees them becoming too enamored of the world, or too enmeshed in their own sin, He often does something about it. He does something to draw us back to Him, to revive us, to cause His Spirit to quicken in us. One way He might do this is through the charisma of tongues.

Before we move on, however, we must allow for a brighter reason for the speaking of tongues—especially in the privacy of the prayer closet. That is, instead of the charisma being unleashed because of a separation from God, it can become an energetic component of unbridled praise and exultation in His presence.

To the best of my knowledge I have never spoken in tongues—there have been times when my spoken or written words have required interpretation, but that is a topic for another day. Even though I may not have been speaking the language of heaven with my lips, however, I have experienced private worship of such powerful intensity that it seemed my very skin would burst from the pressure, that my head would split apart from the inexpressible joy I was experiencing, bowed before the throne of God. Given that, it requires no effort at all to imagine that in some individuals in such a moment, beckoned by the Holy Spirit, would come forth from their lips words spoken in the language of heaven—words unintelligible to mere humans.

but even more that you would prophesy;

Paul, too, is concerned about the lives of the individual, but right now, in this context, he is more concerned with the integrity of the church, the integrity of its relationship with God, and its members with each other.

Why? He has already stated the basis for this.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:2-4.

Paul, in this letter, is all about the integrity and building up of the church. That is uppermost in his mind. How it must have broken his heart to hear what was going on in Corinth—as well as to hear the wrong-headed attitudes voiced in the letter sent to him from the church.

God's word teaches many beliefs and practices that are important in the life of the individual believer and the life of the church. For the individual the first priority is salvation: repentance, confession, and embracing Christ Jesus as Lord. After that, however, for both the individual and the congregation, comes the long and treacherous road of sanctification: becoming steadily more like Christ. It is through the edification of the church that this takes place, and it is a grievous thing if it is not taking place. The body of Christ “builds up” itself and its members through preaching, teaching, prophecy, and fellowship.

and greater is one who prophesies than one who speaks in tongues,

At the end of Chapter Twelve Paul begins his segue into his treatise on love with, “But earnestly desire the greater gifts.” Then he uses the same word translated “greater” (*meizon*; from *meqas*) here to refer not to the gift, but to the individual with the gift. But neither application—to the gift or to the person—is really his point.

The Spirit-gift is not “greater” in and of itself, neither is the person with that gift “greater” in and of himself. We should all desire to contribute to the edification of the church, and, in Paul's eyes, one of the best ways to do this is through the Spirit-gift of prophecy. What Paul considers “greater” is the work done by the gift in the church.

Albert Barnes: The idea here is, that talents are not to be estimated by their “brilliancy,” but by their “usefulness.” The power of speaking in an unknown tongue was certainly a more striking endowment than that of speaking so as simply to be “useful,” and yet the apostle tells us that the latter is the more valuable. So it is always. A man who is useful, however humble and unknown he may be, really occupies a more elevated and venerable rank than the man of most splendid talents and dazzling eloquence, who accomplishes nothing in saving the souls of people.

We have discussed that Paul draws a distinction between tongues in the prayer closet and tongues in corporate worship. David Guzik makes an interesting point regarding this.

Guzik: Since Paul is focusing on when the Corinthian Christians come together as a church, it is clear why he regards the gift of prophecy as greater. However, if one were to ask Paul, “Which is greater for one's devotional life: the gift of tongues or the gift of prophecy?” He would no doubt say “the gift of tongues,” because who do you prophesy to when you are alone with the Lord in your prayer closet?

That which is considered the “greater” Spirit-gift will change when the venue changes. For example, if one has a gift for evangelism, it will not be the more useful gift if one never leaves the body of Christ; it must be used out on the streets, on the mission field. But a gift of teaching or prophecy will be more useful within the body of Christ, rather than in those external venues.

unless he interprets, so that the church may receive edifying.

Let’s think about this for a moment.

Question: Assuming a public setting, what is, for the congregation, faithfully interpreted public speaking in tongues? That is, what is the effective result for the congregation of interpreted tongues?

Answer: prophecy.

Of course this depends on the content of the language spoken to God with tongues. Nonetheless, Paul remains on-topic: Public speaking in tongues only when it may benefit, build up, the body of Christ by being interpreted. And, depending on your translation, in two places Paul suggests that the one with the Spirit-gift of tongues may also be the one with the gift of interpretation.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:12-13.

Here Paul seems to state explicitly (in all our versions) that it should be the prayer of the one speaking in tongues that he will also be able to interpret his own words. Here in v5, most of our common translations say the same thing—i.e., “greater is one who prophesies than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets.” The ESV and NIV2011 make it, “unless someone interprets”—which does not eliminate the speaker, but includes others.

In either case, and as pointed out, tongues are transformed into prophecy when they are interpreted. And only then is the body edified.

Session 136: Clarity, part one

1 Corinthians 14:6-9

Preface

Please turn to the fourth chapter of Nehemiah.

Governor Nehemiah was surrounded by enemies. Many did not want him to complete the work assigned to him by God: to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Chief among his opponents were Sanballat, effectively governor of Samaria, and Tobiah. The strengthening of Jerusalem would erode some of their political power in the region. So they actively conspired to stop the work on its walls by any means—even by violence.

So instead of stopping the dangerous work, Nehemiah armed those doing the work, and he established a method to rally the men to any place on the wall being threatened.

Read Nehemiah 4:16-20.

Sidebar: Just as an aside, I want to make sure we pay due notice to what Nehemiah said in that last statement. It is indicative of the faith of the man that he did not say, ...rally to us there and together we will fight the enemy. No, Nehemiah said, ...rally to us there and our God will fight for us.

More to the point of our current lesson, Nehemiah kept a trumpeter at his side to sound the alarm whenever the wall was threatened. Now just imagine how that would have worked out if the musician, when told to sound the alarm, decided to render some lyrical, pianissimo lullaby. First off, most working on the wall would not even have heard it—and if they did, would stand there scratching their heads as to its purpose. Is it the alarm—or is the musician just serenading the governor as he eats his lunch?

The apostle Paul, using three such musical illustrations, makes the point in our passage that edification comes by way of a clear, strong, understandable voice—not by way of incoherent babbling.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:6-13.

v6

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?

Paul opens this paragraph with what all our common versions translate “Now,” or “But now,” but which commentators suggest means something like “But as it is” (Fee), “Let us look at the facts” (Garland). That is, beginning in v6 he shows evidence to substantiate, to illustrate what he has been saying thus far in vv1-5.

Note: This series of illustrations works regardless your position on tongues. Whether you believe the NT reference to “speaking in tongues” always means speaking in a known but alien foreign language (as in Acts 2), or elsewhere refers to Spirit-talk in the language of heaven (as Paul describes in this chapter), the principle set forth in these verses holds true. Even if your position is that the gift of tongues ceased after the first century (one held by many), the principle still applies: Know your audience; speak in a manner they will understand. That is precisely what took place in Acts 2.

Here Paul sets up a hypothetical situation in which he visits their church and speaks to them (implied) only in tongues. If he did there would be no profit, no benefit to them, because they would not understand what he was saying. Commentators struggle to find deep meaning in Paul’s choice of the gifts “of revelation or of knowledge or of prophecy or of teaching.” But it would seem that he is simply using them as examples of speaking that is intelligible, standing against the unintelligible tongues. What is the point of it all if no one understands what you are saying?

v7

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?

Our common versions offer variations on the first word of v7—*homos*--translated in the NASB “yet.” The NIV is helpful with its typically verbose “Even in the case of...” Paul proceeds to illustrate his point with three musical examples. His use of “lifeless”—inanimate—to describe the instruments reflects common usage of the time (see Euripides, Plutarch, the LXX).

if they do not produce a distinction in the tones,

The word “distinction” can also be translated “separation”—that is, if one is just randomly running one’s hands over all the strings of the harp, the result is not a pleasing melody (separate notes), but just painful cacophony: mush.

I am reminded of Rush Limbaugh, who just this last Wednesday passed away at the age of 70 from lung cancer. He had been totally deaf for a number of years. With the aid of a cochlear implant some of his hearing had been restored. When it came to music, however, his memory had to come into play. He reported that if the song to which he was listening was familiar to him, he was able to hear the tune, but if the song was unfamiliar, he could not make out the distinctive tune, but heard only harsh, irritating noise—which is what unintelligible tongues are in comparison to the clear speaking of prophecy, teaching, etc.

v8

For if the bugle produces an indistinct sound, who will prepare himself for battle?

Now the apostle offers an illustration of more critical importance than just musical entertainment. From time immemorial military commanders have used various means to signal their troops—to send orders of movement, or just call them to arms. A piercing sound by the trumpet or bugle was and has been a common means to both signal action and rouse the fighting spirit of the men. This was how Nehemiah signaled to the men rebuilding the Jerusalem wall that they were to rally to the spot where those opposed to that work were causing trouble.

The word translated “indistinct” in the NASB (*adelon*) is, I think, best in the KJVs: “uncertain.” That’s the idea: hidden, unseen, concealed, not manifest. In the only other instance of this word in the NT, Jesus used it to describe the Pharisees.

Read Luke 11:43-44.

The reason for a bugle in battle is for it to deliver a recognizable call to the combatants. Trained soldiers know what to expect, so when they hear something they cannot recognize, there results only confusion, inaction, and, perhaps, death.

Gordon Fee points out a good contemporary analogy. It’s been many years since I’ve attended a live performance of a symphony orchestra, but I believe my memory serves that there are two things that occur before the entrance of the conductor. One person plays an A (440), to which everyone tunes their own instrument. Either before or after this (it’s been many years), the sound from the stage dissolves into a sea of cacophony as individual musicians woodshed troublesome passages, or just warm up their chops and their instruments. The result is a symphony of disordered bedlam—mush. But then the conductor mounts his podium, taps his stand for attention, and with a dramatic downbeat suddenly, almost miraculously, all that disorder is turned into order as all those individuals coalesce into a unified whole, following the music and their leader.

And at once cacophony becomes music.

v9

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.

If the orchestra is not unified under the score set before it, how will anyone hear the message of the music? And, of course more to the point, if one does not speak in a distinct, understandable language—clearly, assumed to be a public gathering such as corporate worship or instruction—then no one will know what you are saying. What is the point if there is no edification?

Here Paul uses the organ of speech—the literal tongue—as just another of the musical instruments he has mentioned above. “Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying?” (Fee)

For you will be speaking into the air.

One is reminded of what Paul wrote in Chapter Nine.

Read 1 Corinthians 9:25-26.

The idea of a roomful of people babbling incoherently just to prove their own “spirituality” is antithetical to kingdom life. There is an American idiom that might also apply to the Corinthian congregation: “speaking just to hear oneself talk”—that is, just amusing yourself and no one else. That may be appropriate in the private prayer closet, but not in corporate worship.

But we would be remiss if we didn’t extend this principle. One does not have to be “speaking in tongues” to be unintelligible.

The principle applies any time one believer is speaking to another—even when a believer is speaking to a nonbeliever—perhaps more so. There have been times in this room when I am met with with one or more faces expressing, predominantly “What in the world are you talking about?” At such times I know either I have not expressed myself well, or I have introduced a concept that requires more explanation. In either case, I have probably not spoken with “clarity”—“speech that is clear” (v9).

There is a reason we do not conduct the Sunday worship service in the language of “Lower Slobovia” (imaginative creation of cartoonist Al Capp). No one here speaks that language. What would be the point? And there is a reason we do not include a time for everyone to speak, at will, in “tongues.” No one here speaks that language. What would be the point?

Session 137: Clarity, part two

1 Corinthians 14:10-14

Preface

It is clear from this letter that the apostle Paul recognized the potential of those in the Corinth church.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:4-7.

The Corinth church was well-endowed by God in *charismati*—i.e., Spirit-gifts. In our passage today he reveals that not only had God, in His *charis*, been generous to them, they remained “zealous” for more.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:12.

Even so—even with the abundance of Spirit-gifts that they had from God, they remained immature.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:1-3.

Paul recognized their great potential; they had been thoroughly equipped by God for not just the edification of each other, but perhaps beyond their precincts—yet time and again they had veered off-course, taken a left turn in their faith-lives. In just the first thirteen chapters of this letter we have seen plenty of evidence for this—especially in their coarse and un-brotherly behavior toward each other.

What was in tatters was not just their fellowship with each other, but their fellowship with God—the one who, in His grace, had generously equipped them for good (12:7). Their corporate worship had degenerated into a madhouse of competing tongues without interpretation, and disorganized teaching, prophesying, and psalms.

In our passage today Paul continues leading the church in Corinth toward the goal of more clarity—clarity in both their speaking to each other, and in their worship of God. Acknowledging their wealth of Spirit-gifts, as well as their zeal for them (or was it really just fascination?), the apostle nonetheless continues to refocus their use of these charisma for the benefit of the church.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:10-14.

v10

There are, perhaps, a great many kinds of languages in the world, and no kind is without meaning.

Some have used this verse to claim, *See, Paul is saying that “speaking in tongues” refers to different foreign, but known languages.* Actually this analogy proves just the opposite.

Throughout his discussion of this charisma Paul has been using the Greek *glossa*, translated “tongue.” Here, however, he switches to *phōnē*, translated “languages” or “voices,” because this is just an analogy; he is saying that—like public speaking in tongues—all these foreign tongues in the world have meaning for the one who knows the language, but no meaning at all for the one who does not know the language.

v11

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.

I have pointed out before that the word transliterated “barbarian,” the Greek *barbaros*, was originally onomatopoeic—that is, a word that imitates the sound associated with an object or person. For example, we refer to a certain bird as a “bob white,” because its call sounds like that; same with the whippoorwill. Likewise, to the Greeks, some foreign tongues sounded like

gibberish: bar-bar-bar-bar. Hence, *barbaros*. It was common to use this term in a derogatory way, but Paul is not using it so. A barbarian was simply someone who spoke a language one did not understand.

v12

So also you, since you are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek to abound for the edification of the church.

You can't say it much clearer than that: You are a people eager for things of the Spirit. Great. Wonderful. Now, let's just utilize those gifts to build up the church, rather than building up your individual reputations as "spiritual" people.

Paul uses the Greek *pneumatōn*; this is translated in our versions "spiritual gifts," "manifestations of the Spirit" (ESV), and "gifts of the Spirit." It is commonly understood that this refers to a zeal the Corinthians had for all things spiritual—charisma in general. Gordon Fee proposes a more focused interpretation.

Fee: More likely this refers especially to their desire for one particular manifestation of the Spirit, the gift of speaking in tongues, which was for them the sure evidence of their being *pneumatikos* (a person of the Spirit, hence "spiritual").

Let's broaden this out for a moment, to look at the condition of the forest rather than the disease in just one tree. Let's consider for a moment the possibility that the apostle's use of the word "barbarian," or "foreigner" was meant to have a sharper impact on the Corinthians than we might first imagine.

Paul opened this letter with a criticism of the factionalism that was taking place in the Corinth church, how the body was being subdivided because of different belief systems as the result of one group following one teacher while other groups followed others (1:11-13). Thus instead of unity, lines were being drawn to alienate one group in the church from another. Paul draws the topic to a close at the end of Chapter Three, calling for unity under Christ.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:21-23.

Now fast-forward to Chapter Fourteen. How ironic that in their abundance of Spirit-gifts, the one they most prized, and had the greatest zeal to obtain, was the Spirit-gift of speaking in tongues. This gift more than any other would separate the haves from the have-nots—in fact, would separate even the haves from other haves! Their most prized gift, used in the corporate assembly without interpretation glorified only the speaker, and edified no one else. But worse than that, it was fashioning an increasingly bizarre congregation of foreigners. This casts into shade the situation addressed by Paul in the earlier chapters.

In corporate worship they were speaking in languages no one else understood—effectively reversing the situation in Acts 2. Instead of bringing together disparate groups under the gospel by the supernatural use of foreign tongues, the Corinthians were employing, as Paul puts it, "barbarian" tongues that served only to subdivide the church even further. How pertinent then the command of v13.

v13

Therefore let one who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret.

A Lampel Paraphrase: *Therefore—for this reason: the importance of building up the church in spite of the use of unintelligible tongues—pray that even you yourself would translate into intelligible language what you have spoken.*

Interpretation of tongues is a Spirit-gift as well (12:10), and need not be carried out by a different person. How might this play out in a worship service? The Holy Spirit might move mightily in an individual in the congregation to bring forth prophecy, but in the language of heaven (tongues). The individual, sensing this, would quickly pray, "Lord God, if You choose to speak through me in Your own language, please grant me as well the gift of interpretation, so that in this act You and Your Son are glorified, and the church is edified."

v14

For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful.

There is considerable disagreement on precisely what Paul is saying here. We will broach the subject here, but further enlightenment must wait till we examine what Paul writes in the subsequent verses. He himself will help explain what he writes here.

There are principally two problem areas in this sentence. First, what does Paul mean by “my spirit,” and second, is he saying that when one prays in the spirit the mind checks out altogether (*arkapos*: unfruitful, barren, unproductive, fallow ground)? David Garland cites R. Collins, who writes something that gets us headed in the right direction.

The spirit is the faculty by which one is in communion with the deity. The mind is an organ of thought that allows for ordinary communication among human beings.

I like to think of this in terms of the contradiction with which all believers must struggle: being, in Christ, converted to a spiritual being, yet still residing in fallen flesh. I don't believe Paul is saying that when his spirit prays (e.g., tongues), his mind is 100% dead in the water, nor would he say that the reverse is true. He touches on this in the next verse.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:15.

Nevertheless there are times when one is predominate. If you are sitting in a classroom, making every effort to understand and learn advanced calculus, your mind is predominate and your spirit is not. But the study of calculus cannot sever the connection between your spirit and God's Spirit. In our next session we will continue into this. But I want to conclude with something Gordon Fee writes about the personal and the corporate.

In times when Charismatic utterances experience something of a revival in the church, this paragraph [vv6-13] is especially important to those in such a renewal. The point of everything in corporate worship is not personal experience in the Spirit, but building up the church itself. Much that comes under the banner of charismatic or Pentecostal worship seems very often to fail right at this point. However, it is not so much that what goes on is not understood by the others, but that it fails to have Paul's concluding sentence (v12) as its basic urgency. The building up of the community is the basic reason for corporate settings of worship; they should probably not be turned into a corporate gathering for a thousand individual experiences of worship, although the end result will include that as well.

Session 138: Proper Balance, part one

1 Corinthians 14:14-19

Preface

Read 1 Corinthians 14:14-19.

Let's now take a deeper look at v14.

v14

For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful.

Though there are different opinions on what Paul means by “my spirit”—even between the standard commentators I am using for this study—it seems clear that Paul’s use of “my spirit” refers to that part of every believer in direct contact with God’s Holy Spirit, that part of us that best understands and holds the deeper mysteries of our relationship with God through Christ. Here is a mechanical analogy: Like God, the local power station is the source of all electric power; the source sends its power out to each individual household (like the Holy Spirit) where it connects directly with the junction box for the house, where it then branches out power to every corner of the house. The junction box in the house is the “spirit” directly connected to the “Holy Spirit” coming from “God,” but at the same time sending out its tendrils to every part of the house that is “our being.”

One might then conclude that our own spirit is that part of us most attuned to the things of the Holy Spirit. Our spirit understands Him, just as He understands the Father.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:10-11.

The personal spirit can indeed feed the personal mind; this is what occurs when, while reading familiar Scripture, the Holy Spirit says to our spirit, “Wait a minute, there is special meaning in this passage just for you; you need to consider this in a new way.” Our spirit takes that message and sends it to our mind, and suddenly the light bulb goes off in our brain: “Hey, I’ve never seen that before!” The result? We know and understand God’s word to a greater degree—i.e., edification.

There are other times, however, when the Holy Spirit and our personal spirit seem to be carrying on a conversation all their own. We can still be edified, since we are still physically and spiritually connected to the process, but for the most part it is occurring without engaging the rational, logical mind. It is a “spirit-thing.”

For example, as we pray and worship in our prayer closet we rise higher and higher into the sphere of the throne of God. At times this can become a very strong, moving experience and, on rare occasions might even include audible communication between God’s Spirit and our own, in the language of God’s throne room. Our rational mind is not part of this process, so what is the point? How are we thus edified? I have pondered that question this week, and I believe vv14-15 open a window for our understanding.

R. Collins: The spirit is the faculty by which one is in communion with the deity. The mind is an organ of thought that allows for ordinary communication among human beings.

Let me preface by posing three pertinent questions:

- Am I, or can I be, edified by conversation with a brother or sister in Christ?
- Can my life benefit by being in their presence?
- If that be so, how much more will I benefit and be edified from being in the presence of and communing with very God?

We can demystify true and authentic speaking in tongues, as Paul describes, by just thinking of it as a particularly intense form of worship or prayer—an intensified form of communion with God. That communion is so rarefied that it takes place in an other-worldly language—I contend, the language of heaven. That is, God’s language, not ours. This is a Spirit-gift He has granted to some individuals—a minority in the first century, and an even smaller minority today.

Now, though the mind during that process may be “unfruitful,” that does not mean that you—the one whose spirit is connected to the Holy Spirit, who is connected to very God—will not come away from such an exchange edified. Your mind may not be able to put it into words, but you will know that you have been edified—you have been changed for the better—because you have just been with God.

The late Samuel Wakefield, D.D., writer of *A Complete System of Christian Theology* (1862), wrote,

But to present our prayers acceptably to the Father, through the Son, we must offer them under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Though we are not authorized to look for those immediate and sensible inspirations which the prophets, and apostles, and many of the primitive Christians possessed, yet we may expect, from the unction of “the Holy One,” that earnestness, and fervor, and penitence, and trust which are necessary to acceptable devotion. The Holy Spirit is the great agent in the world of grace, and without his influence there can be no spiritual worship.

v15

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.

This verse begins with the apostle using a familiar idiom that he will use several times in his letter to the Romans, which means, “What then is the upshot of what has just been said?” (Fee), “Similar to ‘What, then, shall we say?’” (Garland)

None of what has been said renders the “mind” or “understanding” unimportant. What is called for in the mature believer is a proper balance of praying—and now he adds “singing”—both “with the spirit” and “with the mind.”

I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also;

Individuals are different; congregations are different; denominations are different. Each of these has certain personalities, characteristics, talents and Spirit-gifts, belief systems, and priorities. Paul is not saying that every individual, every congregation, every denomination is to “pray with the spirit” (implied, with tongues) fifty percent of the time and “pray with the mind” fifty percent of the time. He is saying there is a time to pray with one’s spirit, and a time to pray with one’s mind; there is a time to edify oneself, and there is a time to edify the body of Christ.

Imagine a time of corporate prayer—say, during a Wednesday evening Bible study and prayer meeting, something very familiar to me when I was growing up in a Baptist church. And imagine that as each person so moved stands and offers a public prayer, one person stands and prays speaking in tongues, then sits back down. The members of the congregation look at each other, wondering, “What was that all about?” What has just occurred? The one who just spoke in tongues has, in an inappropriate way, edified himself, while not one other individual was edified at all. The design and intent of the Wednesday night prayer meeting and Bible study is to build up the church—and to do so with clarity and understanding. Even if that person who spoke in tongues was, in his spirit, praying for his neighbor’s ailing child, what good did it do anyone to do it in what seemed to be a Barbarian tongue?

Yet that same person, kneeling before God in his private prayer closet, could rightly and appropriately have uttered the very same words in the same language and it would have been utterly appropriate. In that setting, the language would not have been Barbarian, or foreign.

I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also.

The word translated “I will sing” (*psallo*) means to make music, in the form of praise to God, either with instruments or voice or both. That is, to praise and worship in song by most any means.

It is important to note something K. H. Bartels writes in the *Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Colin Brown):

The contrast here is not between *to pneumatē*, with or in the spirit (either the speaker’s or...the Holy Spirit) and *to noi*, with or in the mind, but between being in the Spirit unintelligibly and therefore unedifyingly (in tongues) and being in the Spirit intelligibly.

The Bible as a whole clearly portrays our God as a God of order—yet, He is spirit-kind. Both of these—praying and singing—should also be interpreted in light of something Jesus said to the Samaritan woman at the well in the gospel of John.

Read John 4:21-24.

The S/spirit, in all His/its manifestations, colors, and works, is essential, vital to the correct and effective worship of our God, whether in the assembly of saints or in the private prayer closet. As Jesus pointed out, however, the spirit is companion to “truth”—which, when traced back to its root in the Greek, means something of which we are not ignorant, something not hidden. That is knowledge, understanding.

It is the proper balance of the two, both privately and “in the church” (v19), that feeds and builds up the church in love. This is what was in such short supply in Corinth.

Here, too, is the lesson for us today. Most churches today suffer from the same imbalance: either there is an unbridled, undisciplined effusion of spiritualism, or a rigid, unfeeling intellectualism that throws a cold shoulder to anything remotely of the Spirit. This combined with the tragedy of traditionalism—i.e., continuing to repeat the past for no better reason than “that’s the way we’ve always done it”—results in a local body of believers lacking in growth, in maturity, and quite often in love.

It requires diligence, hard work, strong leadership, and, not least, a deep knowledge of God’s word to strike the proper balance between the two. Woven throughout this chapter (and others) is the motive that helps sustain the balance: love, and the desire that all in the body be edified.

Session 139: Proper Balance, part two

1 Corinthians 14:14-19

Preface

Let me begin this session by posing a couple of questions:

1. Why are we here, in this building, on a Sunday morning?
2. Why is it *necessary* for us to be here?

Answering for myself, to Question #1 I would say, in order of priority, to worship our God and Lord, to learn from His word, to fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Christ. To Question #2 I would say, because of the corrosive effects of the fallen world in which the church dwells. More on this later.

I recently read a couple of articles, written by a political writer who is also a Christian, in which he responds to those who are critical of Christians for their position on marriage being only between one man and one woman.

In Christianity, marriage isn't just the central building block of society—producing and rearing the next generation—but the essential symbol of the Church's relationship with Jesus Christ.

In the Old Testament, God the Father often portrays Himself as the faithful husband of an unfaithful bride, His chosen people Israel. Although God chose Israel and remained faithful to her, she abandoned him, seeking pagan idols or putting her trust in other nations to save her from her enemies.

This metaphor becomes even more explicit in the New Testament. Jesus often compared the kingdom of heaven to a wedding feast (Matthew 22:1-14) and Revelation looks forward to “the wedding feast of the lamb” where the bride is the Christian Church and the groom is Jesus (Revelation 19-21).

When exhorting husbands to “love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,” Paul explicitly ties Genesis 2:24—the passage about man and woman becoming “one flesh” in marriage that Jesus cited—to the relationship between Jesus and the Church.

Marriage is about more than just social convention for Christians—it is a symbol of God's faithfulness to His people and Christ's selfless love for the Church. In marriage, men and women take part in a small echo of God's perfect love. (Tyler O'Neil, *Here's Why Those Stubborn Christians Won't Just Redefine Marriage*, at PJ Media.com)

You may be asking what all this has to do with the discussion of tongues in vv14-19 of Chapter Fourteen.

Stay with me.

Let's look at one of the passages O'Neil mentions without citing the reference.

Read Ephesians 5:25-27.

This is a beautiful picture of what the church means to Christ Jesus.

- He loves it so much that He gave His life for her (His bride).
- Echoing the gritty scene in Ezekiel 16 painting a picture of God's tender care for Israel, once she was “born,” Christ set out to sanctify her—*hagiazō*, to make her holy, purify her, consecrate her; He does this by “the washing of water with the word,” an ambiguous phrase interpreted differently by different scholars, but I side with C. H. Spurgeon: “I do not believe that baptism is intended here, nor even referred to. I know that the most of commentators say it is. I do not think it... Christ sanctifies and cleanses us by the washing of water, but what sort of water? By the Word. The water which washes away sin, which cleanses and purifies the soul, is the Word”—in this case, the spoken word (*rhema*), not the written word.
- Why? So that when He returns to take His church home, Christ the bridegroom “might present to Himself” a glorious, beautiful, holy, and blameless bride.

This is how much Christ Jesus loves His church—and, of course, every individual believer in it. His purpose is to establish it, protect it, nurture it, to bring it to maturity pure and spotless.

And that should be our purpose as well.

Why is it so necessary for us to meet together regularly—to be the church? Why is it so necessary for Christ to be continually sanctifying and cleansing His church? Because this fallen world is dedicated to tearing it down, dedicated to its destruction. The outer walls—the edifice—of the church are in need of constant repair from the corruption and erosion of this earthly culture and society. It is not a once-and-done, but a constant process. It is not sufficient for the church to be built (edified) once; the church must be constantly, repeatedly edified just to survive and, by the grace of Christ Jesus, become stronger, more mature, more ready to be His bride in the Day of His return.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:26.

Let all things be done for edification.

In v12 Paul writes, “So also you, since you are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek to abound for the edification of the church.” Why is the gift of prophecy superior to the gift of tongues in vv3-5?

Read 1 Corinthians 14:3-5.

After the worship of our God, the highest priority in our coming together is the strengthening, the reinforcing of the integrity of the church—that is, the individual members that comprise the body of Christ. This is the apostle’s over-arching point in this chapter—and it is in perfect alignment with the priorities of Christ Jesus for His church.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:14-19.

v16

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?

This verse contains an extremely awkward phrase: “...the one who fills the place of the ungifted...” One wants to inquire of Paul, “Could you have possibly said this any worse?” And then one wants to address the translators, “Couldn’t you have helped us, rather than stand on your head to make this even more confusing?”

The earlier NIV comes to our rescue with, “how can one who finds himself among those who do not understand say ‘Amen’ to your thanksgiving” (emphasis added). That’s all. This doesn’t refer to unbelievers (why would an unbeliever be offering an “Amen” anyway?) or necessarily outsiders. It just refers to someone who does not have the gift of interpretation of tongues; as he hasn’t a clue what is being said, he cannot affirm it with his “Amen.”

As Gordon Fee succinctly puts it, “In the assembly the worship must be corporate, not individualistic.” I would append to that, in private you are free to be as individualistic as you like.

v17

For you are giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not edified.

It isn’t that your words and behavior are necessarily unholy or insincere; they are just out-of-place. It serves only yourself.

v18

I thank God, I speak in tongues more than you all;

Just in case the Corinthians have drawn the wrong conclusion, Paul reminds them that he has the Spirit-gift of tongues, and uses it rather often. He is not speaking against the gift of

tongues, as if it is somehow counterfeit (as he makes clear later in this chapter); he is speaking against how it is often misused.

v19

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.

The instruction and edification of his brothers and sisters in Christ is of far greater importance to the apostle. There is no significance in his use of these numbers: the number “five” is simply a round number meaning “a few,” and “ten thousand” is the largest number in Greek. And by “in the church” Paul means, as in the ESV, “in church,” which corresponds best to our contemporary vernacular. That is, in the church service of worship and instruction.

Conclusion

It is no accident that the apostle prefaced Chapter Fourteen with the “love” chapter (Thirteen), for it is the love one has for his or her fellow believers that will govern the careful, orderly use of Spirit-gifts in the body—and not least in the assembly for corporate worship.

The questions we should always ask ourselves in the corporate assembly:

- *Am I doing something just for me—following my heart, following my spirit, following my way of doing things—that might possibly be a distraction, an irritant, or even an obstacle to others in the assembly as they worship or seek instruction?*
- *If I am leading, is it in a way that contributes to the whole in an understandable way, or in a divisive, even self-exalting way?*

This does not mean that we always formulate our coming together for the lowest common denominator—the lowest level of understanding. For example, in preparing this lesson I learned a new word; I could not even find it in my several unabridged dictionaries. David Garland writes, “Tongues are discarnational rather than incarnational and make the word unintelligible and inaccessible” (emphasis added). Well, at first, that sentence was unintelligible to me. Should I have rejected it because the writer was using a fifty-cent word I did not understand? On the contrary, I discovered it was well worth my time to ferret out its meaning.

Most of us are familiar with the word “incarnate,” which means, essentially, “in flesh.” “Discarnate,” at its root, means “without flesh,” and, as it turns out, the word “discarnational” has special application for this passage. In a long paper entitled “The Technological Church,” Jessica Fredricks writes,

Jesus is the mediator—the one who goes between—yet he is whole, present, and real. However, most of what we have created has served not to bring us further into wholeness but to fragment us spiritually and relationally. Our technology encourages isolation and distance instead of presence, and it creates worlds of unreality instead of drawing us further into our true reality in Jesus. We have mediated ourselves so that we reflect not the incarnation of Christ but the opposite. Much of our technology is at work creating a discarnate world. “Discarnate” refers to interactions that are defined by a shattering of wholeness, a lack of physical presence, and a turning away from true reality.

Now back to what David Garland wrote: “Tongues are discarnational rather than incarnational and make the word unintelligible and inaccessible.” We should want what Jesus wants. He wants His church to be pure, spotless, mature, and whole. It is to be distinctive in this fallen world for its unity, its wholeness, and, not least, for the love its members have and demonstrate for each other.

Unintelligible “tongues” in corporate worship do not contribute to the wellness, the edification of the body, but just the opposite. They glorify the individual instead of Christ. They disrupt and divide rather than instruct and unify. Our purpose in and for the church is to be for the latter.

Session 140: Not Childish, but Child-like

1 Corinthians 14:20

Preface

Read 1 Corinthians 14:20-25.

So very often when studying the Bible we are reminded—if not from the text itself, in the various discussions about the text—of the universal truth written by the weary and cynical Solomon in his Ecclesiastes:

**That which has been is that which will be,
And that which has been done is that which will be done.
So there is nothing new under the sun.
Is there anything of which one might say,
“See this, it is new”?
Already it has existed for ages
Which were before us. (Ecclesiastes 1:9-10)**

Our letter to the Corinthians was written in the first century AD, addressing the situation in the Corinthian church at the time. To back up his argument, in v21 Paul cites something the prophet Isaiah wrote roughly 750 years earlier. We are now studying this letter in the twenty-first century—two thousand years after it was written, and when in 1887 Frederic Louis Godet commented on Paul’s call for the brethren to “not be children in [their] thinking” in v20, he wrote the following, which precisely describes the culture in which we live now in 2021: “to prefer the amusing to the useful, the brilliant to the solid.”

Being a student of history, the principal reason I am so uncomfortable in this time and place is its triteness, its superficiality, its preoccupation with the trivial and inconsequential. In other words, in my estimation, we live in a childish time of very little substance.

The church in Corinth was, in some respects, preferring “the amusing to the useful, the brilliant to the solid.” They were easily impressed by eloquent speakers, ignoring, or worse, not realizing that they were speaking against solid doctrine; they were following cultural fads rather than God’s word; and they were far too impressed with themselves. Sound familiar? They were in need of strong, sober counsel—as are we--and Paul is still doing just that.

In the remaining verses of Chapter Fourteen Paul puts the cap on his discussion of the superiority of prophecy over tongues, as well as concludes his discussion of orderly corporate worship in the church with specific guidelines.

v20

Brethren, do not be children in your thinking;

Paul opens our Chapter Three bemoaning the fact that the Corinthians are still thinking and behaving as infants in the faith.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:1-3a.

The Greek *nepios*, translated “infants,” means, literally, “not-speaking,” hence someone so young that they cannot even form words. In Chapter Thirteen Paul uses the same word, but in this context referring to someone who is simply immature.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:11.

In v20 the word translated “children” in all our versions is the Greek *paidia*, which means, depending on the context, an infant, an older child, adolescent, or even young man. David Garland writes that “this first child image in 14:20 calls to mind the natural tendency of children to be self-centered and vain, to call attention to themselves, and to be enthralled by what is showy.”

Paul is still speaking from the context of the use of tongues in corporate worship. For that reason some have drawn from this that Paul “considered speaking in tongues itself as childish behavior to be outgrown” (Fee), but not so. As R. Schnackenburg explains, “Not that [speaking

in tongues] itself is childish behavior, but rather it is childish to have an unreasonable preference for this gift of the Spirit.” The apostle himself speaks in tongues (v18), and it is clear that he considers that gift a plus in his relationship with Christ.

Let’s back up a moment here. What is one of the marks of immaturity, childishness? One sign is a pattern of inconsistency. For example, the opening counsel in James’ letter describes the benefit of trials in moving someone from an immature believer to one who is “perfect and complete”—i.e., mature in the faith. He contrasts this with a description of the one who remains immature and unstable.

Read James 1:6-8.

“...like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind.”

There is the picture of inconsistency: believing one thing one day, believing something else the next; or, as in the case of some in the Corinth church, running headlong into one area of the faith, but behaving inconsistent with the faith in other areas.

It is not a stretch to believe that those in the church proclaiming their deep “spirituality,” as evidenced by their exuberant glossolaly (speaking in tongues), were the same ones behaving so selfish and unloving at the Communion table (Chapter Eleven), and caring so little about how their license to eat meat sacrificed to idols was impacting the faith-life of their brethren (Chapter Ten). These individuals were childish in their thinking.

Paul has been repeatedly making the point that one cannot truly be “spiritual” while treating one’s brothers and sisters in Christ in such an unloving manner. That is the importance of Chapter Thirteen; it is not a sidebar—it is the central focus of most of this letter!

yet in evil be infants.

The second “child” term used by Paul, translated “infants” in all but the NKJV, is not *paidia*, but is a form of the word used in Chapter Three: *nepiazete*, which Paul uses in a positive sense to express the need for “innocence with regard to evil” (Fee).

Innocence gets a bad rap because it has been made synonymous with the more negative “naïveté”—and in some cases it is. I remember moments when I was a child—grade school age—when, in conversation with my schoolmates I was surprised to learn that a popular entertainer was a “negro” (in the fifties not considered a derogatory term for black people—especially in the Midwest). My mates were surprised that *I* was surprised, but when I saw entertainers such as Nat King Cole or Sammy Davis, Jr. on TV, I was just enthralled by their talent; it didn’t even occur to me that the color of their skin was different from mine. When you listen to the late, great Nat King Cole, the last thing you think of is the color of his skin; all you want to do is listen to that velvet voice forever. Was I naïve? I suppose so. But mostly I was just innocent—even ignorant of the evil of prejudice against black people. It simply wasn’t part of my life.

My guess is that today one would have to search long and hard to find a grade school kid so naïve. Would that I was equally so innocent of evil today.

And once again we look back in ancient history to discover that the same thing was going on then—that Israel was indeed quite well-versed in evil. In Jeremiah 6, through the prophet the Lord God was warning the people of Jerusalem that because of their rebellion and sin, He was sending the Babylonians to take the city. He speaks first in the voice of the invading army, then as Yahweh:

Read Jeremiah 6:4-8.

Then the Lord goes deeper into the cause for this punishment.

Read Jeremiah 6:10-15.

“They did not even know how to blush.”

If you no longer blush at evil, you are not an “infant” in evil. God wants us to be so ignorant of evil that when we are accidentally confronted by it, we turn away in painful embarrassment, blushing at the very thought that something like that exists on the earth.

For most, if not all of us, that possibility is already in our past. We have become so inured to the evil around us that, sadly, it has just become another part of life. And in this culture it is nigh impossible to be otherwise; daily the corruption of evil is thrown in our face from every quarter of society and the media to which it is enslaved.

I am convinced, however, that the influence of evil in a believer’s life can be at least minimized, and perhaps even extinguished—that the pattern can be reversed. We need not be enslaved to it. If you are studying God’s word—and you are—you already know the methods; I need not itemize them. But we too easily forget the power of God and His indwelling Spirit in a life. Part of being an infant where it comes to evil is purposely giving ourselves over—like a young child is dependent on his or her parent—to God’s rule over our life: His power, His wisdom, His answers, His love for us. We learn love for others through His love for us. Likewise, we learn how to live a life ignorant of evil through sitting at the feet of His righteousness and purity—much as David portrays in one of his songs of ascents. Here is how King David—no stranger to sin and evil—prepares his heart to encounter a holy God on his way to the temple.

Read Psalm 131.

but in your thinking be mature.

So much of this letter is about, or at least references in passing, Spirit-gifts. Living with our own year after year, we grow accustomed to believing they say something about us. But we are just the ugly clay pots into which the Lord has poured His glory.

Read 2 Corinthians 4:5-7.

The believer who is mature in his or her thinking is one who knows when to think like a child, and when to think like an adult. But over all this is the acknowledgment that God is the source and the power over it all. I would like to close with what Paul writes to the Romans near the end of that letter.

Read Romans 16:17-20.

Session 141: Something the Spirit Can Work With

1 Corinthians 14:21-25

Preface

God, in His boundless wisdom, decided that we were having it a little too easy in our progress through Chapter Fourteen, so He decided to throw in a passage to slow us down and exercise our gray cells. Once again, in vv21-22, we have before us a “notorious crux”—a passage that more than one scholar has deemed to be “one of the greatest challenges in the entire corpus of Pauline citations.”

In v21 Paul presumably quotes Isaiah 28:11-12, but his text does not align with either the LXX or the Masoretic Hebrew text (MT). Moreover, v22 seems to contradict what he will say in vv23-25. This has been so troublesome to scholars over the centuries that even the venerable and honorable J. B. Phillips, in his otherwise laudable NT paraphrase, throws up his hands and, of his own volition, reverses “unbelievers” and “believers,” claiming in an endnote that “he felt bound to conclude, from the sense of the next three verses, that we have here either a slip of the pen on the part of Paul, or, more probably, a copyist’s error.”

Instead of struggling against the apparent contradiction between v22 and vv23-25, we will use vv23-25 to help us interpret v22. As we typically do, I want to begin by reading the paragraph, but as we work our way through it, our understanding will be helped by re-reading it from other versions.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:20-25.

v21

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.

Right off the bat many take issue with Paul for saying, “In the Law it is written...” since Isaiah is in “the prophets,” not the Pentateuch. But Gordon Fee points out that this reference is simply “a carry-over from his Jewish heritage.” That is, it was a common manner of speaking for Jews.

The quotation itself, however, is problematic—indeed, it is better not to refer to it as a “quotation.” Both Fee and Garland use the word “adapt” to describe Paul’s use of the OT passage:

“...by adapting a passage from Isaiah...” (Fee)

“...14:21 represents an interpretive paraphrase of the text that he adapts to this context.”

(Garland)

Paul draws from Isaiah 28:11-12; let’s read that, but add v13.

Read Isaiah 28:11-13.

In the Isaiah passage Yahweh rebukes Samaria and Jerusalem for rejecting His counsel. So now He tells them that since they won’t listen to His word, He would speak with a voice of judgment through the barbarian tongue of the Assyrian invaders. Paul draws from this the key elements of speaking in an alien tongue, along with the phrase, “but they would not listen,” to make the point, “Just as the experience in Isaiah 28:11-12 did not result in the conversion of the hearers but instead expressed alienation between God and His people, so also [according to Paul] the use of tongues in the church will result not in the conversion of unbelievers but rather in their further alienation” (Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner).

Garland: When God speaks intelligibly [to unbelievers], it is to reveal. When God speaks unintelligibly [to unbelievers], it is to judge.

In v22 the apostle begins his application of the OT passage.

v22

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.

We cannot yet breathe easy, as, at first glance, this at least appears to contradict the verses that follow it. We can show that it actually does not by examining Paul's use of the word translated "sign" (*semeion* [see-me'-on]). And, again, the answer lies in understanding this verse in light of what follows—not the other way around.

Semeion is used only once in v22; the second instance in the NASB and ESV is inserted for clarification to denote that it is implied. Here's v22 in the 1900 KJV:

Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not: but prophesying serveth not for them that believe not, but for them which believe.

(The KJV inserts, instead, "serveth" because the Greek hasn't a verb in the second part of the verse.)

Throughout his writings Paul uses "sign" in a number of different ways: as an "outward token," "miracles" (i.e., "signs and wonders," both positively and negatively), as evidence of God's confirmation or approval, and a distinguishing handwriting mark. None of these fit the context of our passage, however.

It will help us understand this by replacing "for a sign," in the first half of the verse, with "an indicator." That is, So then tongues are an indicator, not to those who believe but to unbelievers. Indicator of what to unbelievers? When they step into a church and hear and witness all the incoherent babbling, they can have only one conclusion: That these people are nuts!

It does not indicate the same thing to believers; they may not understand what is being said, or even approve of the use of tongues, but they understand what is going on. So it is not a "sign" or indicator to them in the same way. But Paul uses "sign" here in a negative sense because—just as in the passage from Isaiah—the unbelievers' response will effectively harden their unbelief. "These people are crazy! Why would I want to believe what they believe?" Just as Paul says in v23, if all in the assembly speak in tongues, it will repel the unbelievers.

...but prophecy is for a sign, not to unbelievers but to those who believe.

We can apply the same method to this second part of the verse: but prophecy is an indicator, not to unbelievers but to those who believe. What does prophecy "indicate" to believers? We need to back up here and remember the context, the situation in the Corinth assembly. They were using speaking in tongues to demonstrate (or we might say "indicate") the active presence of the Holy Spirit in their midst, and to demonstrate the speakers' exalted level of spirituality.

Paul's argument in the second part of v22 is that it is not tongues, but prophecy that is an indicator of the presence and blessing of God on the assembly. The believer—the one who already has a relationship with Christ Jesus—is edified immediately, because no interpreter is necessary (as with tongues). And, in harmony with vv24-25, if there is an unbeliever present, he will hear the truth of God in a comprehensible language that just might draw him into a relationship with Christ—or at least the realization that "God is certainly among" them.

Garland: Prophecy delivers the greatest good for unbelievers and Christians alike since it communicates, enlightens, and convicts. For Christians, the conversion of unbelievers through their prophecy is another sign [or indicator] of God's presence among them.

So again,

Garland: When God speaks intelligibly [to unbelievers], it is to reveal. When God speaks unintelligibly [to unbelievers], it is to judge.

Through prophecy God reveals Himself to unbelievers, but when unbelievers hear what is to them the gibberish of tongues, they are driven further away from Him, and hence into judgment.

v23

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?

With our examination of v22 we have already done most of the work for understanding vv23-25. Those “unacquainted with Christianity” (Findlay)—and I might add even Christians ignorant of the use of tongues—will be repelled by such a demonstration and declare the glossolalists insane. Paul will go on to specify that if there are tongues in corporate worship, it must be carefully circumscribed and orderly.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:27.

That is, limited to only a few; not all at the same time, but one after the other; and there must be interpretation.

v24

But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all;

Paul will go on to say that even the more edifying prophetic utterances should be limited to only a few (v29) for good order, but here he does not mention any limitation.

v25

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.

We know that the Holy Spirit is responsible for the conviction that comes upon an unbeliever’s heart—the conviction that leads to faith, repentance, and justification leading to salvation. More often than not, the Spirit works through the agency of human beings as they witness and deliver the gospel to the unsaved.

When considering the difference between tongues and prophecy in the setting of the public assembly of the church—to put it in crass human terms—when everyone is speaking in tongues before an unbeliever, the attendant Spirit responds, “What can I do with this?! How can I possibly use this gibberish to convict the heart of this unbeliever?” Whereas, in a room filled with prophecy the Spirit responds, “Now I’ve got something I can work with.”

In the corporate assembly the Spirit-gift of prophecy has the miraculous ability to convict the hearts of believer and unbeliever alike. By contrast, in the same setting the Spirit-gift of tongues has the capacity to send the unbeliever out the door—and perhaps never to return.

Session 142: Edifying Order in the Assembly, part one

1 Corinthians 14:26-33

Preface

It is indisputable that the inbred proclivity of human beings is to corrupt and debase most everything they touch. Given sufficient time, even things created by other human beings will be infested and defiled. Look at what it currently being tried by our presently democrat-led government: it is doing everything it can to twist and destroy the genius of this nation's founding fathers and their resulting documents. No other nation on earth has the solid foundation of an essential, documented constitution by which it is governed, yet today's democrats are determined to at least ignore it, and if given their way, reduce it to nothing more than the ancient, discardable opinions of a handful of white men.

If we do this to each other, how much more are we capable of corrupting things of the Divine. If we take the long and wide view of the paragraph we are in, vv26-33, it is all about how we, as a body, are to rightly commune with God. Public worship is integral to that relationship and communication, and here the apostle Paul sets forth guidelines—not exhaustive, but specific to his surrounding topic—to prevent, or at least minimize the damage human beings can inflict on this holy intercourse.

Over the centuries man has done a pretty thorough job of lowering the standards for corporate worship. I'm not referring to the contrast between "high" church and "low" church, but to the demeaning of all of the above—to, just as in Corinth, the diluting of holiness, of order, of authenticity in the church as a result of societal pressures. Many today believe the church should reflect the norms of society; but God's word says that the believer and the church are to be salt and light to this fallen world (Matthew 5:13-16). The church—especially in its worship—is not to conform to the world, but to draw the world to itself by conforming to the word of God.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:26-33.

v26

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.

Most agree that Paul's text from here to the end of Chapter Fourteen is not just instructional, but corrective. He is not just answering a general query—if there even was one—but issuing his commands for correcting what the Corinthians have been doing wrong. In v26 he states the "overarching principle," which he will detail in the verses that follow.

In vv20-25 Paul set forth the different effects on unbelievers as they encountered tongues and prophecy in the public assembly. (Not surprisingly, he shows a negative response to uninterpreted tongues, and a positive response to prophecy.) He follows this with the rhetorical question, "What is the outcome then, brethren?"—a common idiom (v15) that means, "What then is the upshot of what has just been said?" Then Paul answers with detailed instructions for the public assembly, which are meant to correct their misuse of the Spirit-gifts.

We are not meant to read the gifts listed in v26 as a specific, line-by-line detailing of an "order of service." Fee suggests that the list could be appended with "et al"—that is, this is just a representational list to set up the instructions that follow. The list "represents various types of verbal manifestations of the Spirit" (Fee) that might occur in the assembly. The words "each one" or "everyone" do not mean that every person in attendance will have these Spirit-gifts. It reflects the idea that everyone in attendance is capable of having one or more of these gifts.

As to the gifts themselves, they are all familiar to us. Regarding the word translated "revelation" (*apokalypsin*), I believe Paul is using this as a catch-all term for prophetic utterances. Look further down where Paul combines the two.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:29-31.

The most important line in this verse is the last one: “Let all things be done for edification.” This continues the thread begun in v1—and one can make the case that it was begun in Chapter Thirteen, for pursuing the edification of others instead of edifying just oneself is a sure mark of using one’s gift with love. Paul reinforces this in v33 and v40.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:33, 40.

Regarding Tongues

v27-28

If anyone speaks in a tongue, it should be by two or at the most three, and each in turn, and one must interpret;

These two verses cover ground we have trod before, except for two or three additional points:

- Paul limits the number of those speaking in tongues to at most two or three, thus correcting the implied practice of the Corinthians of making “tongues” the focus of each assembly.
- The speakers must take this “in turn,” or “one at a time,” thus supplying the necessary order and clarity of the use of this gift. No more a cacophony of incoherent babbling.

but if there is no interpreter, he must keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God.

Speaking in tongues is a supernatural way—a Spirit-enabled way—of communing with God. In private the believer is free to speak with God—and, far more important, let God speak to him—in any way conducive to that intercourse. In public, however, the rules are different: if the glossolalist is within earshot of others, this supernatural communion must be conducted in an orderly fashion (one at a time) and only if the speaker or someone else will interpret what has been said.

This rule from the apostle makes clear that tongues in the church is not associated with—i.e., a “Christian” form of—the mystery religions of the Greek world, which was likened to playing the flute: the “divine” spirit in-breaths the supplicant, playing him or her like a flute; the flute itself has no control over what is breathed (*pneuma*) into it. That is, the supplicant is placed into an ecstatic state, having no control over his words or actions.

Garland: By contrast, Paul does not view tongues as an uncontrollable emotional experience that overpowers an individual. The promptings of the Spirit do not contribute to confusion or unbridled outbursts. In fact, Paul lists “self-control” as one of the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:23). If tongues are of the Holy Spirit, then one should be able to hold one’s peace to maintain order in the worship [service] so that things do not get out of hand.

Fee: It is indeed the Spirit who speaks, but He speaks through the controlled instrumentality of the believer’s own mind and tongue. In this regard it is no different from the inspired utterances of the OT prophets, which were spoken at the appropriate times and settings.

Now, for those who have grown weary of all this about speaking in tongues, some good news: except for a brief mention in v39, this verse is Paul’s final word on the subject.

Regarding Prophecy

v29

Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment.

Though he ranks the gift of prophecy above that of tongues, Paul still places it under similar regulation.

Sidebar: Because Paul, in speaking of prophecy in the assembly, omits the restriction “at the most” that he used for tongues, some assume that instead of limiting the speakers to three, the idea is that two or three would prophecy at a time, let judgment be passed on what they had said, before the next group would speak.

Gordon Fee does an excellent job of debunking an increasingly popular view that Paul here speaks of “prophets” as a “special group of authoritative persons in the community who have been given this gift.” Paul does not mean to suggest that the church has a handful of “official” prophets, in the OT sense of a Jeremiah or Isaiah or Ezekiel—that these and these alone are so designated to “prophesy.”

That is not the picture Paul puts forth. Although it is true that Paul uses the word “prophets” (*prophetai*) here and elsewhere, I prefer to avoid its use, preferring instead, something like “those who prophesy.” For the word “prophet” invariably conjures up the image of the OT prophet speaking for God *ex cathedra* (from the chair)—that is someone so endowed as to give unerring voice to the very thoughts and commandments of God.

Churches today, as well as the NT churches, do not—and cannot—have anyone who speaks *ex cathedra*. The canon is closed; God’s word is closed. What we have, and what the church in Corinth had, are men who have been granted the Spirit-gift of prophecy, whose own spirits are so attuned to the Spirit of God that He uses them to speak the right words at the right time for the edification of the church. And as we understand the gift, it can fall upon just about anyone in the body: the gift does not so designate an “office” in the church, but comes upon various believers as needed. Paul’s desire for them to have this gift is all-inclusive.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:31; 14:1, 5, 31.

and let the others pass judgment.

Those who subscribe to there being a “special group of authoritative persons” in the church deemed “prophets,” read this to mean that others from that group would be responsible for judging what has been said. That is, prophets judge fellow prophets. But since there is not to be an official group of authoritative prophets in the church, it is to be those in the assembly that “weigh carefully what is said” (NIV).

Paul uses a word, translated “others” (*alloi*), that means “others different from the subject.” It is indeed possible for that word to mean “the rest” (i.e., of the same group), but if Paul had intended that idea the more correct term would have been what he used in 9:5, referring to “the rest of the apostles” (*loiipoi*).

Finally, what does it mean to “pass judgment,” or “weigh what is said” in the ESV? The word is *diakrinetosan*, and means to separate one from another, to distinguish, discern, evaluate.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:8-10.

Where Paul writes “distinguishing of spirits” he uses essentially the same word he does in our passage for “pass judgment.” The difference is, however, that in Chapter 12 he speaks of being discriminating about which spirit(s) one listens to or attends; that is, someone with the gift of identifying foreign, or pagan spirits from the true and only Spirit of God.

Here in Chapter Fourteen he uses the word to describe fellow believers verifying that the prophecy being spoken truly conforms to the Spirit of God and conforms to God’s written word.

Let it not go unsaid that this is what every child of God in Christ is to be doing at all times—not just when someone is prophesying. Not with a vindictive, judgmental spirit (in the worst sense of that word), but in love we are to keep one another accountable to the truth of God. No matter the source—preacher, teacher, tongue-interpreter, one prophesying, books, commentaries—we are to ask ourselves, “Does this square with Scripture? Does the Holy Spirit in me affirm to my spirit what has just been said?” Gordon Fee cites A. Bittlinger’s “happy phrase: ‘The Spirit recognizes the Spirit.’”

Whether listening to someone prophesy, or listening to a sermon or Bible lesson, the indwelling Holy Spirit will tell us whether or not the words we have heard are sound, and faithful to God’s Holy Spirit.

Session 143: Edifying Order in the Assembly, part two

1 Corinthians 14:26-33

Preface

One of the important and central takeaways from the passage in our previous session (vv26-29)—and which continues in the next passage—is that, contrary to the position of many today, the use of some Spirit-gifts is not synonymous with an ecstatic, trance-like, out-of-control mind and behavior.

Some Spirit-gifts are indeed more supernatural than others: the biblically sound employment of tongues is indeed more supernatural than, say, the gift of “helps” (12:28); the gift of healing, though rare today, is indeed more supernatural than the gift of teaching. But no matter how extraordinary and supernatural the Spirit-gift, the element of self-control is not removed.

Regarding the gift of tongues in the assembly, Paul commands, “...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” (vv27-28). Paul could not so command, or expect others to obey the command, if in the use of that gift there could be no self-control exerted. And in our passage today we have the apostle expressing a similar level of self-control regarding prophecy.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:29-33.

v29

Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment.

In our previous session we saw that the guidelines for prophecy in the public assembly are similar—but not identical—to those for tongues: so that the body can be edified, there is to be order. And Paul’s injunction for the inclusion of prophecy goes beyond just limiting the number at any one time: just as tongues are to be interpreted, prophecies are to be evaluated—*diakrinetosan*, which means to separate one from another, to distinguish, judge, discern, evaluate. And the conclusion reached is that those who evaluate the prophecy come from the members of the assembly, rather than being limited to other prophets.

v30

But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, the first one must keep silent.

I take from this that along with there being order in the service, there is also to be courtesy—deference shown to another.

Let me reiterate that while I do not agree with those who claim that all authentic tongues and all authentic prophecy ceased at some point early in the church age, those two Spirit-gifts today are different from what they were before the completion and distribution of the canon of Scripture. And this difference may offer another reason for the injunction of v30 in the first century beyond mere courtesy—one that may be less necessary today.

Imagine an “assembly,” what we would call a worship service for the Corinth church around the time Paul was writing this letter. We don’t know the number of its members, so let’s just pick a round number of thirty individuals sitting casually in a room in someone’s home, or maybe outside the city by a flowing stream (cf., Acts 16:13). Those assembled are a mix of Jews, Greeks, and other backgrounds. The Jews would be reasonably familiar with the Scriptures—what we would call the OT, but what they might call “the Law and the prophets,” or just “the Law.” Some of the others might know about the Jewish Scriptures, but would not have studied them, or even heard them read.

No one in the church would have read any of the four gospel accounts about Jesus, since the earliest accounts by Mark and Matthew were—at best—just being written; Luke’s will be written in the next decade, and John’s will not be written for another 30 to 35 years. The only books in our NT that may have been written by then were the epistle of James and, maybe, Paul’s letter to Galatians—but this letter to the Corinthians may well have been his first.

Thus just about everything the members of the Corinth church knew about Jesus, the Christian faith and its doctrine, they knew by word of mouth—and mostly from Paul and his fellow workers speaking in their midst, along with a couple of his written letters. Other than Paul's first letter (now lost) and the second (which we have as First Corinthians), they had no written resource, no handy reference to know the mind of God in Christ. Just as OT Israel relied on prophets to know the mind of Yahweh, the early Christians relied on the spoken word to know the mind of Christ.

Read Hebrews 1:1-2.

The gifts of tongues and prophecy for the Christian church have not ceased, but they have changed—more accurately, they are now a subset of what they once were. Regarding prophecy in the church, in the first century that prophecy could have delivered fresh knowledge, fresh understanding to a relatively ignorant assembly. Unlike God's OT prophets, the Christian prophets in the first century did not speak *ex cathedra*—that is, even if dispensing new knowledge, their words still had to be evaluated to insure they fit into known doctrine (v29).

The early church prophets could also do as prophets today, exclaim not new knowledge, but a fresh reminder of that which is already known: that is, the appropriate word of exhortation at just the right time.

So in the first century especially, deference was to be given to someone who had been given a “revelation” (as in the KJVs, actually a verb: *apokalypthe*), a flexible word that Paul uses in a variety of ways, so we can't be dogmatic about how he uses it here. For example, look at its use in v6.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:6.

Note: “...unless I speak to you either by way of revelation or of knowledge or of prophecy or of teaching” (emphasis added). This statement seems to differentiate between revelation, knowledge, prophecy, and teaching. Yet in v30 he seems to use it interchangeably with prophecy. About all we can say is that it is “some kind of utterance given by the Spirit for the benefit of the gathered community” (Fee). To maintain order in the assembly, and to allow for the possibility that the other person has something more important to share from the Holy Spirit, the first speaker is to give way to the second.

v31

For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted;

Just as with tongues in the assembly, Paul declares that those who prophesy must do it one at a time, not all at the same time—which would, of course, result in a similar unintelligible cacophony, even if in the native tongue.

In his comparison of prophecy to tongues at the opening of this chapter, Paul wrote in v3, “But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation.” After worship of our God—which I consider the believer's highest priority—we assemble at least once a week to learn; to be built up in the faith individually, and to be built up as a cohesive unit (i.e., the church); part of being that cohesive body of Christ is to console, to comfort and encourage those who are our brothers and sisters in the faith. In this chapter Paul also lumps all of these under the word edification, as in v12: “So also you, since you are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek to abound for the edification of the church,” and the end of v26: “Let all things be done for edification.”

v32

and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets;

As Gordon Fee writes,

With these words [in vv32-33] Paul lifts “inspired speech” out of the category of “ecstasy” as such and offers it as a radically different thing from the mania of the pagan cults. There is no seizure here, no loss of control; the speaker is neither frenzied nor a babbler.

As written, this verse sounds as if it is saying, “the spirits of prophets are subject to other prophets,” perhaps referring to those who would “pass judgment” (v29). But as Fee points out, this is saying that the prophet remains in control over when and how he delivers what the Holy Spirit has given his spirit to say. That is, this verse follows up on v30: “The impulse to speak may still be present, but the speaker can restrain those impulses and must yield the floor to another who receives a revelation” (Garland). And now we come to v33.

v33a

for God is not a God of confusion but of peace,

The first half of v33 offers a perfect summation of Paul’s thesis. Our God is not the “author” (KJV) of chaos; that comes from somewhere else, as James points out, giving us a pretty accurate picture of what was going on in Corinth.

Read James 3:13-18.

The word “confusion” in the NASB (*akatastasia*) means disorder, instability, tumult. It is not God’s Holy Spirit bringing that into the assembly of the church, but flesh, incited by the adversary.

v33b

as in all the churches of the saints.

We now are faced with another controversial moment in this letter—and this even before we get to “women should keep silent”!

Scholars, commentators and even our popular versions are divided on whether the second part of v33 goes with v33a or with v34. That is, should it be read

for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints. The women are to keep silent in the churches... (NASB, NIV2011, KJVs)

or

for God is not a God of confusion but of peace. As in all the churches of the saints, the women are to keep silent in the churches... (ESV, NIV84, CSB)

?

Remember, there was no punctuation, distinguishing letter case, or even spaces in virtually all the original manuscripts for the Bible (a form referred to as *scriptura continua*). So here and there in God’s word differences of opinion may arise in passages such as this.

What impresses this layman is how thoroughly the opposing sides can usually validate their position with scholarly evidence: Greek syntax, grammar, whether the text sounds “Pauline” or not. Since all these interpreters invariably know better than this teacher, this makes it a challenge to decide which interpretation is correct. In this instance, our two principal commentators come down on opposing sides, with John MacArthur in agreement with David Garland that v33b should go with v34.

Gordon Fee, in this instance, is a special case. He not only concludes that v33b goes with v33a, but that vv34-35 should be removed from holy writ all together! He claims that vv34-35 are so contradictory and so extraordinarily un-Pauline that they were clearly inserted by someone else. He does not discuss them in his commentary, nor does he even include them in his outline of the letter.

As tempting as it is to declare one’s agreement with Fee’s position and simply not bother with the passage that begins, “The women are to keep silent in the church...,” we will not be doing that. Those two verses are in the canon, so we will be giving them their due attention. I

believe it is possible to harmonize these two verses with so-called contradictory passages such as v11:5, which speaks of women praying and prophesying.

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.

My conclusion regarding the correct punctuation—whether v33b belongs with v33a or v34—is to not be dogmatic. Neither option is heresy; both can be applied to the church:

- The call for peace and order instead of confusion and chaos is indeed applicable to all the churches; and
- If it is right and orderly for women to keep silent in all the churches, it is right and orderly for the church in Corinth.

We will be continuing this discussion in our next session.

Session 144: Decorum in the Assembly, part one

1 Corinthians 14:34-36

Preface

As I pointed out near the end of our study last week, some are of the opinion that vv34-35 should not even be in our Bibles. Gordon Fee, in particular, omits them entirely in his commentary. We will, however, include these verses in our study, for the following reasons:

1. These verses are included in all of our common versions—even without explanatory footnote, except that the NIV2011 points out that in some manuscripts these two verses follow our v40, which would have no effect on their meaning and purpose. In fact, it is my opinion that these verses work even better after v40, so that would be no reason to discard them.
2. All ancient manuscripts include them.

We will endeavor to examine what the apostle says here with unbiased detachment. The reason Paul must address this at all is that the church was allowing too much of this fallen world to invade and corrupt their way of doing things; we will make every effort to not make the same mistake. Our context will be the text itself, and the situation at the time it was written—not the context of our time. That means that our overall context will be that of Chapter Fourteen—the worship service conducted in a proper and orderly manner—with the immediate context being the orderly use of prophecy and its evaluation or “judgment.”

The more I read and digest this letter to the Corinth church, the more I realize that that church had some really big problems with their meetings or “assemblies”—what we would call their worship services, which would include their “love feasts” and observance of the Lord’s Supper (Communion). At least from the beginning of Chapter Eight Paul has been addressing topics pertinent to, or at least tangentially related to, that setting. And now we come upon one more disruptive element that may have been hindering orderly worship in Corinth.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:33-36

This is an issue mostly separate from the role of women in church leadership. For example, in his first letter to Timothy, Paul writes that “...I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet” (1 Timothy 2:12). Further in the letter and in his letter to Titus he outlines the qualifications for those in church leadership, all of which are to be “men” and “husband of one wife.” Our current passage has more to do with order and decorum in the assembly of the church, and holding to a God-honoring relationship between husband and wife.

That is, to understand this passage we look less to the definition of hierarchy of leadership in the church, and more to what Paul wrote in Chapter Eleven about the hierarchy of preeminence or priority between God the Father and Christ, Christ and man/husband, and man/husband and woman/wife.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:3-7.

We cannot take the time to revisit everything of our study of Chapter Eleven, but it will be helpful to revisit a few key points. The word translated “head” (*kephale*) means “that which is most prominent, foremost, uppermost, preeminent.” To be preeminent—i.e., the most prominent—does not necessarily denote ultimate authority or leadership, although it may by extension. Because even Christ has a “head” (God the Father) the position under a head does not connote inferiority. Note how Paul balances the man and woman a bit later.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:11-12.

In God’s sovereign economy every individual has someone who is superior to him. In our church, for example, my immediate superior is our senior pastor; I answer to him; he is my

“boss.” Along with him would be the elder board. But they, too, have a superior: Christ Jesus, who is the Head of the church. They answer to Him.

David Garland: Paul’s primary intent, then, is not to assert the supremacy of man and the subordination of woman. Instead, it is to establish that each has a head and that “what one does or doesn’t put on one’s physical head either honors or dishonors one’s spiritual head” (Blomberg) [vv4-7]. It establishes the need for loyalty to the head.

Paul’s purpose here is not to assert the supremacy of man over woman, but to establish that each has a head, and to point out that each has an obligation to honor that head—principally in, but also beyond, corporate worship.

Henry William Soltau: In the New Testament, the woman is directed to cover her head (1 Cor. 11:3-10) because “the head of the woman is the man;” whereas the man is to be uncovered, because he is the image and glory of God. In the assemblies therefore of the people of God, the woman, standing as a representative [or type] of the Church in subjection to Christ, covers her head; the man, being a type of Christ Himself as the Head of the Church, uncovers his head.

Sidebar: I won’t kid myself that anyone will actually do this, but still I must commend to you a re-reading or review of Sessions 104 to 110. Those sessions lay important groundwork for understanding vv34-35 (go to DLAMPEL.COM).

As in our study of Chapter Eleven, I conclude that a few of the specifics in vv34-35 may not pertain to the twenty-first century church, but the principle set forth does. For example, in Chapter Eleven Paul states that it is disgraceful for a woman to not have her head covered in the assembly, yet that disgrace, that shame simply does not exist today. The reason for that command from the apostle, however, does remain: to not do anything that might disgrace the woman’s “head”—that is, her husband. Similarly, the man is not to do anything that might disgrace his head—that is, Christ.

Many commentators point to v5 in Chapter Eleven as a contradiction to vv34-35.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:4-5.

W. Harold Mare, in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, claims that it is not a contradiction because 11:5 does not say that the woman’s praying and prophesying is in the context of a worship service. With all due respect to Mr. Mare, it is clear from the entirety of Chapter Eleven that the context is one of the church “coming together” (vv17-18, 20).

Instead, v11:5 is not a contradiction to vv34-35 (or vice versa) because the former addresses the woman “praying or prophesying,” but the latter addresses the women breaking the respectful decorum of the assembly by voicing an opinion or asking a question of their husbands, possibly from across the room.

In that time and culture—a time when women in the assembly would probably be sitting together in their own area—such behavior would not just be disruptive, but would actually bring disgrace and “shame” (v35) upon the woman’s husband: her “head.”

One reason we cannot be certain about the physical setting is that, as R. E. Oster points out, “The Roman world was anything but homogeneous in regard to its attitudes toward women.” He goes on to explain that there were dramatic differences between the Roman and Greek cultures regarding what was appropriate and what was considered scandalous. Since the Corinth church included both—and others—we can’t be sure of what placement and behavior of women would have been considered acceptable in the Corinth church. Most likely this clash of cultures was causing confusion, and perhaps even conflict in the church—the reason Paul addresses it here.

In Conclusion

Not surprisingly, there are myriad opinions on what the apostle Paul is saying here; some are legitimate alternatives, some are laughable. It is my position, however, that it should be at the very last extreme—and even then, reluctantly—that we deem any passage in the canon counterfeit, as does Gordon Fee with these two verses.

The passage is indeed awkwardly placed. Some ancient manuscripts place vv34-35 after v33, some place it after our v40—that is, at the end of the chapter. I'm fascinated by a suggestion put forth by a number of interpreters, that

the transposition was attributable to a marginal note added by Paul after reading through a draft of the letter by the amanuensis. This view would explain the differing order and why no manuscript omits it. It could also explain its supposedly rough fit in the context if it were a marginal note added later by Paul. (Garland)

In this session I have laid the groundwork for the interpretation of this passage—specifically, vv34-35—that I believe makes the most sense. In our next session we will examine the verses in detail to determine their message: for the Corinthians, and for us today.

Session 145: Decorum in the Assembly, part two

1 Corinthians 14:34-36

Preface

I would like to begin by reading the extended context for our three-verse passage.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:29-36.

I propose two ways we can hold to a proper perspective on this passage. The first is to keep in mind the context.

- The overall context of the chapter: Spirit-gifts and Order in the Assembly, for the purpose of edification;
- The lead-in: The proper use of *prophecy* in the assembly, including (and importantly) the “judgment” or evaluation of what has been said (vv29-33a);
- The immediate context: “God is not a God of confusion, but of peace” (v33a).

Note: As I said before, I do not have a strong position on the two interpretations of v33 into v34; either can work. But it does seem that the interpretation of the ESV and NIV84 makes the most sense: “for God is not a God of confusion but of peace. As in all the churches of the saints, the women are to keep silent in the churches...”

As I have studied these two verses, I found myself repeatedly returning to that first part of v33 for guidance. The God we worship in the assembly does not respond well to confusion, nor is He its author; His Spirit at work in the assembly does not do His work by means of disorder, loud commotion, instability—chaos.

A second way we can hold to a proper perspective is to note that “women” (or wives) are not the only ones being told to be silent in the assembly. Look at v28, regarding tongues: “but if there is no interpreter, he [the man moved to speak in a tongue] must keep silent in the church.” Now look at vv29-30, regarding prophecy: “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.” And then, in v34, the apostle commands a third category of person to “keep silent”: “The women are to keep silent in the churches.”

We have established the reasons for the first two, both of which have to do with good order in the assembly, and edification of the church. Now we will see that the reasons for the third are similar—but with an added element: the God-ordained relationship of wife to husband, specifically that the husband is the spiritual head of the wife (11:3).

We have seen in this study that many marriage relationships in the Corinth church were, to be kind, confused. In that church

- a man was living with his step-mother (5:1);
- some married couples were eschewing sexual relations with each other (7:3-5), considering themselves too “spiritual” for such things—yet, because they were believing the Greek philosophers who were telling them that (as spiritual beings) the physical body was nothing, so what the physical body did was nothing; hence,
- some men were visiting prostitutes (6:15).

This passage (along with being a treatise on the proper use of Spirit-gifts in the assembly) is also part of the apostle’s continuing effort to repair the husband-wife relationship.

v34

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.

Let us first set the scene: The church is meeting for worship and instruction in the home of one of its members. We can safely assume that the women would be seated together, either in a separate alcove or at least the other side of the same room as the men. While the home may have been a physically more comfortable venue, culturally it was an awkward setting that strained many of society’s rules for men and women. Philo of Alexandria was a Jewish writer

in the first century, a contemporary of Jesus and Paul, who died shortly before this letter was written. He knew well the times and the culture of the Mediterranean world.

Philo: Market-places and council-halls and law-courts and gatherings and meetings where a large number of people are assembled, and open-air life with full scope for discussion and action—all these are suitable to men both in war and in peace. The women are best suited to the indoor life which never strays from the house, within which the middle door is taken by the maidens as their boundary, and the outer door by those who have reached full womanhood. (*quoted by Garland*)

In many ways the Christian church represented a measure of liberation for women; in comparison to our own time we may consider it rather repressive, but in that culture it gave adult women opportunities they had never had before. In the church, women were praying and prophesying, in public and around men (11:5).

Let's take the opportunity at this point to more closely examine that verse in Chapter Eleven—specifically, the background Scripture that supports it.

Read Joel 2:27-29.

Joel's prophecy is often cited as validation for women prophesying in the Christian church. But there is a problem with that: as his prophecy continues, it is clear that he is speaking eschatologically—describing the end times.

Read Joel 2:30-31.

Because of this, is it fair to use Joel 2:28-29 to back up what Paul writes in 11:5? Well, Peter did. In Acts 2 the apostles have just been filled with the Holy Spirit, resulting in them speaking in the tongues of “devout men from every nation under heaven” (2:5). Some witnessing this were impressed, but “others were mocking and saying, ‘They are full of sweet wine’” (2:12). Then Peter stood and, in his first sermon under the influence of the Holy Spirit, cited Joel's prophecy.

Read Acts 2:14-18.

Peter begins the quotation with “And it shall be in the last days...,” and continues to quote even the prophecy that speaks of end-time manifestations. Nevertheless he uses Joel to explain that the time for such things as speaking in foreign tongues and prophesying by anyone so empowered by the Spirit had arrived. It is outside the purview of this study, but it may be that Peter's position was that the coming of the Spirit did indeed inaugurate the eschaton (last things).

Nevertheless, in the first-century church this was to occur within the boundaries of decorum and order, the hierarchy of the church, and the order of priority, or “headship.” This is why in 11:5 the apostle writes, “But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying disgraces her head...” The woman so called upon by the Holy Spirit may speak, but she must have her head covered in the assembly.

We can add to this tension the possibility that because they were meeting in a home—a venue in which women typically enjoyed the greatest level of liberty—some women were forgetting the proprieties required during a meeting of the church.

Although all of our common translations translate the Greek *gynaikes* “women” it seems obvious that the apostle is addressing married women in particular, for in the next verse he instructs them to “ask their own husbands at home,” and in this verse he says they “are to subject themselves”—implied, to their husbands (their “head”).

The women... are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says.

I realize that the difference between one word or another may be small, if not infinitesimal, but I favor the KJV here: “under obedience.” Not only is it the most literal

(*hypotassesthai* = to place or arrange under, obey) but for me it emphasizes not just submission to the husband (“head”) but obedience to his head, Christ and God’s word (“Law”).

Every child of God is called to obey his or her Lord: Christ Jesus. Every child of God is called to take the written word of God seriously, and strive to make it and the life of Christ their highest pattern for a righteous life. Part of that for women is that they are not to question or take issue with what someone else has said in the corporate assembly. The immediate context for v34 is Paul’s instructions for how prophecy is to be managed within that setting. This does not mean that they are not permitted to ask their questions, to understand, to learn and benefit from the prophecy; it means that the proper venue for that is at home with their husband (v35)—and especially (in the first century) not call out to him from across the room in the middle of the service. One can easily see how that might cause “confusion” (v33), and would not lend itself to the service being conducted “properly and in an orderly manner” (v40).

Verse 29 reads, “Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment.” With v34 Paul makes clear that by “others” he means other men. Even so, I believe we have made the case for a woman, moved by the Spirit and gifted by Him to prophesy, may indeed speak.

...just as the Law also says.

Scholars are not sure if Paul has a specific text from the OT in mind with this reference, since there is no passage that tells women, specifically, that “they are not permitted to speak” in the assembly. He may just be referring to the overall order of creation, which is sustained throughout God’s word, and no less in the Christian church.

A. T. Robertson: Certainly women are still in subjection (*hypotassesthosan*) to their husbands (or ought to be). But somehow modern Christians have concluded that Paul’s commands on this subject, even 1Tim 2:12, were meant for specific conditions that do not apply wholly now. Women do most of the teaching in our Sunday schools today. It is not easy to draw the line. The daughters of Philip were prophetesses. It seems clear that we need to be patient with each other as we try to understand Paul’s real meaning here.

In our next session we will conclude our study of this passage.

Session 146: Decorum in the Assembly, part three

1 Corinthians 14:34-36

Preface

In our previous study we examined v34 of this challenging passage; in this session we will look at the details of the rest of the paragraph, vv35-36.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:33-36.

v33

Before we get into v35, let me offer a more detailed explanation for why I prefer the NIV84 and ESV (and CSB) for their transition from v33 to v34. Frankly I'm a bit flabbergasted that the reputable NASB and KJVs translate v33 as "for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints." What does that really mean? Does any Christian church need to be reminded that God is who He is in all churches of the faith? Were any of them thinking, "Oh, I thought His ways were unique in our church." Now, if it said something like, for God does not want confusion but peace in your church, as in all the churches of the saints, that would make more sense. But v33 speaks of God's character, not His preferences.

It makes much more sense that Paul is saying, "As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches." In other words, God has established for the church universal that women should keep silent in the local churches. You, Corinthians, need to do this as well.

v35

Verse 35 contains a number of contextual pointers:

- "If they desire to learn anything" points to the women/wives having questions about what has been said in the assembly—specifically regarding prophecies;
- "let them ask their own husbands at home" points to Paul's assumption that all or at least most would be *married* women;
- "for it is improper for a woman to speak in church" points, again, to the husband/wife relationship, since the Greek word is better translated "shameful," or "disgraceful"—i.e., shaming or disgracing her "head."

If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home;

There is a time and place for everything. In our church the closest we get to "prophecy" on a Sunday morning is the pastor's sermon (though we certainly do not call it such). Would it be disruptive to the worship service if, during the sermon, a woman stood up and asked for clarification of something he had just said? Would it be disruptive if a man stood up and did the same? Yes to both. In our tradition, one does not do that—not just for decorum's sake, but for doing nothing that might hinder the word being preached.

In our church there is a time when that question—from either man or woman—would be perfectly acceptable: during the ABF hour (Adult Bible Fellowship) with the pastor that follows the worship service. The message of prophecy in any form is for all (v31), but there is a time and place for questions and discussion.

The question has been raised, What about non-wives, such as widows or single women? It would then be appropriate for those without husbands to privately seek out the pastor or an elder in the church, a teacher, or even an older, more-knowledgeable woman.

for it is improper for a woman to speak in church.

We addressed this at length in our last session on v34 ("The women are to keep silent in the churches..."); now I would like to focus on the word benignly translated in the NASB "improper." The "speaking" being referred to was and is indeed disorderly and lacking in decorum, but the Greek is saying far more than that.

The Greek word is *aischron*, which our other versions translate as either “shameful” or “disgraceful,” which are both closer to the idea behind the word. Paul has used this word before, in the passage in Chapter Eleven about a woman covering her head.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:5-6.

The root of this word in secular Greek meant something that is ugly, horrible, shameful, contemptible, even evil. The word sometimes includes a sexual or licentious connotation, as in the shameful act of displaying a portion of the human body that should remain private.

Of course, just as we learned in our study of Chapter Eleven, shame, or disgrace, is a moving target; it is localized by time and by region: what is considered shameful in one place or time, may not in another. Similar to the head covering for women, a woman speaking up in the assembly may not be considered literally disgraceful today.

We need to delineate between the two aspects of this situation being addressed by Paul. First, there is the aspect of bringing shame or disgrace to a woman’s spiritual head—her husband—by her behavior in the assembly. Second there is the aspect of decorum, disrupting by her behavior the holy purpose of the assembly: worship and edification. The first may or may not be true, based on time and place; the second is always true. (Which, come to think of it, makes the NASB “improper” not a bad choice to cover both aspects.)

Some interpreters conclude that the apostle in this passage refers to women idly chattering and gossiping to each other, and thus disrupting the assembly. But the fairer sex does not have the exclusive franchise on such things; men can do the same thing. No, the phrase “if they desire to learn anything” lifts this talk out of the realm of idle chatter, and fits very well into the context of their commenting on or posing questions about the prophesying that has just occurred.

We should keep in mind that this call for women to “keep silent in the churches” (v34) is a “temporary renunciation of speech. It refers to ‘holding one’s tongue’” (Garland) for the betterment of others. Let me illustrate this: In our church there is one member of one worship team that does something on-stage that I find distracting in the extreme, to the extent that when this individual is there, I am unable to concentrate on the words, and hence my worship is disrupted. I considered putting my hand up to my face as a blinder to block my vision of this individual, but realized that my doing this odd behavior could be just as disruptive for others in the congregation. So I am left to close my eyes, and if I do not know the lyrics to the song, I cannot sing. The point? It is better for me to restrict what I would like to do, so as to not disrupt the worship of others in the assembly.

This is what Paul is talking about when he three times limits the speech of individuals in the assembly. If we were to get inside the heads of those individuals, we might hear these thoughts:

- v28: *There is no one present to interpret my tongue, so for the sake of order, I will be silent, and reserve my Spirit-speech for when I am alone.*
- v30: *My prophecy seems important, but I can see that Joe over there is fit to burst. I’ll sit back down and hold my prophecy for later. His may be more important than mine.*
- v35: *I really don’t understand what has just been said, but my learning is not more important than the learning and edification of others—and I don’t want to embarrass my husband. I’ll wait until we get home and talk to Harry about it.*

Paul captured the philosophy behind this earlier in the letter, in the context of eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:23-24.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:31-33.

And in his letter to the Philippians Paul states this even more directly:

**Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.
(Philippians 2:3-4)**

To summarize, in vv33b-35, the apostle gives one more command for the church to meet in a dignified, orderly, and respectful manner. He states that only the men in the congregation should evaluate prophecy, and that wives (along with women in general) should discuss such things at home with their husband, rather than interrupt the assembly with their comments or questions. This injunction sustains both orderly, meaningful worship and edification, and the God-ordained order of the home.

v36

Was it from you that the word of God first went forth? Or has it come to you only?

Verse 36 forms an inclusio, of sorts, with 33b: “As in all the churches of the saints,” (“the women are to keep silent...”). We might paraphrase this, Do you think you can just go your own way? With these two rhetorical questions, Paul accuses the church of being so off the rails, it was as if they imagined they had exclusive rights of interpretation of God’s word—i.e., the gospel. Using obvious hyperbole (Did you actually write it? Or was it written just for you?), he attacks their “maverick practices” (Garland), especially permitting women to speak in the assembly.

And, again, there is nothing new under the sun. Many churches today are behaving the same way, conducting themselves openly, brazenly in opposition to God’s word. Heretofore solid evangelical congregations (even entire denominations) are not just placing women in positions of church and denominational leadership, but now homosexuals, lesbians, and even transsexuals; and openly conducting marriages between two men or two women. In fact, the rebellious behavior of some churches today make the church in Corinth look tame.

Conclusion

We have spent three sessions examining this challenging passage. We as individuals can draw a number of lessons from the text, but the key lessons the apostle Paul wants us to take to heart from vv26-36 are

1. Let all things be done for edification (v26b).
2. Do not imagine that what you have to say is more important than what your neighbor has to say (vv28, 30, 34-35).
3. The priority of “headship” should be observed at all times (v34b).
4. All things in the assembly must be done properly and in an orderly manner (throughout, but also v40).

Session 147: Being “Spiritual” is not Enough

1 Corinthians 14:36-40

Preface

More than just a few in the Corinth church thought rather highly of themselves; the evidence for this is scattered throughout this letter, as Paul responds to the troubling letter they wrote to him. And if we were to reduce down these instances of rebuke, we learn that at the root, the Corinthians’ problem was their perspective, their philosophy, of what it means to be people of the Spirit.

Our passage in this session includes the third time Paul has spoken the words, “If anyone thinks he is...” Each time he has used this phrase it has been to address an errant position taken by the church in Corinth. Please turn back to Chapter Three. In the first two chapters the apostle rebukes the church for considering themselves to be so “wise.” Unfortunately, much of their “wisdom” had come not from God, or from the indwelling Spirit, but from the world.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:18-20.

The Corinthians made a claim not just to wisdom, but knowledge. Sadly, their knowledge—if it was really there at all—was absent the essential component of love. This is what Paul addresses in his second use of this phrase in Chapter Eight, in which he makes the application to their eating of food that had been sacrificed to idols.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:1-3.

Now for the third time Paul employs the phrase to answer their claim to a superior level of “spirituality.” Thus, in the three major sections of this letter the apostle “highlights the Corinthians’ perception of themselves as wise, knowing, and spiritual” (Garland). He will now close this discussion by pointing out, especially in vv36-38, that the proof of this (if it indeed is true) will come not from their self-perception, but from their obedience to the Lord and His truth. That is, a truly spiritual person (*pneumatikos* = “a person of the Spirit”) validated not by his ability to speak in tongues or prophesy, but by his devotion to the commands of the Lord, and his willingness to accept Paul as a legitimate apostle of those commands.

Let’s read our passage—and let’s include v36, for it just as well sets up the final paragraph, as concludes the previous.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:36-40.

v37

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.

These two verses (37-38) make a powerful and sobering statement about who we might think we are; who we are actually, in God’s eyes; and the fateful consequences when the two fail to match. This passage hearkens back to something someone in our class said several weeks back. She took issue with the repeated identification of Paul as the writer of this letter, since it is really God’s word, as communicated by the Spirit. (My response was that this is true enough, but considering the makeup of our class, I know that that distinction need not be hammered home every week. We all are well aware of that truth.)

That point she made is at the heart of these two verses. As we have seen repeatedly, some of the Corinthians—certainly not all, but many of the leaders responsible for penning the letter they sent to Paul, which he is in the process of answering—considered themselves to be deeply, profoundly “spiritual” people, and they saw their gift of speaking in tongues as the mark of this self-considered distinction. In the meantime, however, they were arguing against some of Paul’s teaching—even those he declared to be from the Lord.

Here Paul states in unequivocal terms (paraphrasing): OK, if that's what you think of yourself, let me tell you that the true prophet, the true person of the Spirit acknowledges that what I have written and continue to write to you are from the Lord—they are His commands. (Paul will expand on this in Chapter Fifteen.)

This was not a position unique to Paul; we have John's words that say much the same.

Read 1 John 4:4-6.

The Corinthians in the first century had the benefit of the *ex cathedra* apostle and prophet, Paul, communicating the words—the precepts, the commands—of Christ Jesus. On occasion he transmitted to the church the commands spoken by Christ (e.g., in 7:10 Paul's basis is what Jesus said in Mark 10:11-12). At other times he spoke/wrote commands that were in agreement with the gospel via the illumination and inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

The lesson for us here in the twenty-first century, who no longer have *ex cathedra* prophets in our midst, is that our level of "spirituality" is determined not by what we think of ourselves, nor by any supernatural gifts we may possess, but in our faithful obedience to God's word—as penned by Paul, John, Peter, et al. They were merely the pens, the writing instruments; the author was God, speaking through the Holy Spirit to the pens.

v38

But if anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized.

Paul employed the same train of thought here, regarding a person's "spirituality," as he did at the beginning of Chapter Eight, regarding "knowledge."

Read 1 Corinthians 8:2-3 (again).

In v3 he states in the reverse what he does in v38 of our present passage: If you love God, He knows you. Here it is, If you do not recognize His word, He does not recognize you.

What happens when someone, as did at least a few in Corinth, reject this counsel, that is, they "[did] not recognize this"? There are some interesting things going on here behind the various translations of the repeated word *agnoeo*, translated in the NASB, "recognized."

One can see right off that our common translations do not—at least on the surface—agree. The first thing to note is that in the NASB of vv37-38, the same English word is used: in v37, "...let him recognize that the things which I write to you..." and in v38, "But if anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized." However, the words are different in the Greek.

v37: *epiginosketo*, which means to know exactly, to recognize, recognize to be so, acknowledge (that something is true). In other words, more than just seeing or recognizing something exists (surface), this word means "to know thoroughly," and to acknowledge what it truly is.

v38: two forms of *agnoeo*: *agnoei* and *agnoeito*; these are the words translated so differently across our common translations.

NASB: recognize/recognized

ESV: recognize/recognized

TLV (Tree of Life): recognize/recognized

NIV84: ignores/ignored

NIV2011: ignores/ignored

KJV: ignorant/ignorant

NKJV: ignorant/ignorant

Except for the KJVs ("ignorant") these are not really far apart. The difference between the NIVs and the first three is essentially just using a synonym to say much the same thing. If one does not "recognize" Paul's authority, that is much the same as "ignoring" his claim. Likewise, the penalty of such is essentially the same: to not be recognized is, in practical terms, the same as being ignored. Ignored by whom we will get to in a moment.

By following different original texts, and thus different tenses for these two verbs—the first active, the second passive—the KJVs take a different tack. If one persists in remaining ignorant of Paul's authority, let him remain/continue in his ignorance.

Most modern scholars and interpreters, however, favor the former (as in NASB, ESV, NIV), based on the Alexandrian, Western, and Palestinian texts. This also would agree with Paul's usage in 8:2-3 (W. Harold Mare). Because the second verb tense is passive, that means that the one who rejects the authority of Paul is being acted upon by someone else—that is, he is being “not recognized” or “ignored” by someone else. Who? Paul? The Church? The gospels help us discover the answer to this.

Read Matthew 7:21-23.

Jesus, in His sermon on the mount, says much the same thing as the apostle Paul.

It is not enough to just give lip-service to Christ; some people will call Jesus “Lord,” but not obey “the will of My Father who is in heaven” (v21). When facing Christ on His judgment seat, they will protest, saying (very much as the Corinthians) “Did we not prophesy in Your name?” Christ's response to those who failed to do the will of the Father, the one who, as He says in v26, “...hears these words of mine and does not do them,” will be met by these chilling words: “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness” (v23).

So in vv37-38 Paul is saying that a truly “spiritual” person would understand that what he, Paul, writes comes directly from the Lord. Anyone who does not acknowledge this truth, will one day stand before that same Lord hearing those terrible words, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.”

vv39-40

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.

One can look at vv36-38 as something of an aside, or parenthetical. If so, in vv39-40 Paul returns to the topic on which he has spent most of this chapter: well-ordered worship in the assembly. In v39 he repeats that both prophecy and tongues can be part of that worship and edification of the church, but by the manner in which he words this it is clear that he favors prophecy (“earnestly desire”) over tongues (“do not forbid”). But of course, these and all other components of the authentic assembly must be conducted “properly and in an orderly manner” (v40).

Session 148: Holding Fast to the Gospel

1 Corinthians 15:1-2

Preface

Although it is true that we have now left behind the discussion of Spirit-gifts, and how they are to be used for the edification of all in the well-ordered corporate assembly, we have not left behind the necessity for the apostle Paul to be dealing with the ramifications of the Corinthians' self-exalting "spirituality."

Frankly, from this study I have gained a new respect for Paul—specifically his persistent willingness to do battle with the situation in the Corinth church. A lesser man would have given up on them long before. *(That he didn't is evidence for his Spirit-gift as an apostle.)* The evidence is plentiful that something went horribly wrong in that church after he left. After he committed a lengthy eighteen months to establish and nurture the new church, upon the apostle's departure it skewed off-course in so many respects. The evidence also shows that this was not out of misunderstanding, or misguided ignorance, but more out of willful obstinacy, expressed in their argumentative letters to Paul. It is as if after he gave the church a healthy birth, it skipped right over puberty and moved immediately into its teenage rebellion years.

Imagine how much easier it would have been for him to turn his back on a church that had, in so many ways, turned its back on him. But he didn't. He not only committed himself to answering their rebellion with its errant positions, but he continues to respond—in the chapter before us—with profound eloquence. Some of the most memorable passages from Scripture are contained in this chapter.

Chapter Fifteen is all about resurrection. Why did he write it? We have the answer in v12.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:12.

Some in the church—best guess: a vocal minority that was influencing the rest—held the position that Christ Jesus had indeed been raised from the dead—they were in agreement on that—but, for them, that didn't mean that believers would be bodily resurrected like Him. Why did Paul consider it important to deal with this errant position at such great length—fifty-eight verses? Verses 13-14:

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.

So this is a vital point in Christian theology and doctrine. Before he closes this letter he will address it thoroughly.

Chapter Fifteen is easily subdivided. Following Gordon Fee's organization:

Verses 1-11: The Resurrection of Christ

Paul declares their common ground, that Christ was indeed raised from the dead. He also echoes some themes from the previous chapter, that this is (and must be) common ground for all who believe in and preach Christ, and that their belief in Christ came through his (Paul's) apostolic ministry (14:33-38).

Reminiscent of the approach he used in Athens when speaking before the Areopagus, Paul begins with where the Corinthians are at, then uses that as the basis to take them where he wants them to be. To the Athenians he began, "Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects" (Acts 17:22). From that common basis—your religious; I'm religious: Let's talk—he leads them to the God of creation, to Christ, and even to His resurrection. To the Corinthians *(not coincidentally the city to which Paul went directly from Athens)*, he also begins with that which is common to them all: the objective truth that Christ Jesus was raised from the dead. From this he then leads them to that which they do not (yet) believe (or have forgotten, or rejected)—that all believers will be raised bodily from the dead.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:20.

If Christ's resurrection was the first fruits, then that means more "fruit" will follow.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:23. (He had to be first, but we follow)

Verses 12-34: The Certainty of Resurrection

Paul then addresses and refutes the folly of their position, that even though Christ was raised from the dead, believers will not be raised bodily.

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. (vv16-17)

Verses 35-58: The Resurrection Body

The apostle concludes by answering the hypothetical questions of v35: "How are the dead raised? And with what kind of body do they come?" As he closes this last section, beginning with v50 Paul crescendos into a triumphant hymn of praise and thanksgiving for what God has accomplished in Christ.

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. (vv51-52)

Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-2.

So now, after that rather lengthy preface, we're ready to dig into these two verses.

v1-2

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.

Paul begins with an introduction that sets the stage for what is to come. More than that, it begins, in v1, with a positive, affirming statement regarding their reception of the gospel he preached to them, followed by, in v2, an implicit warning for them not to deviate from that gospel.

Verses 1-2 with v11 form an inclusio defining the first section of this chapter, the purpose of which is to remind the Corinthians of the knowledge and belief in which they stand:

v1: "the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved..."

v11: "...so we preach and so you believed."

Verses 1-2 comprise one convoluted sentence that is difficult to diagram grammatically, but is easy enough to understand. Paraphrasing:

When Paul came to them he
 preached the gospel,
 they received the gospel,
 they stand in the gospel,
 they are (being; present passive tense) saved by the gospel
 That is,
 if you hold fast to the gospel I preached to you
 unless
 you believed in vain. (more on this later)

Note: Paul's use of "gospel" (*evangelion*) in v1 and "the word" (*tini logo*) in v2, in using these two terms Paul does not refer to the reasoning he used or the form of his speech, but to the content of his message, as Thiselton states it, "the substance of the gospel I proclaimed to you."

Hinted at in the introduction of vv1-2, and stated explicitly in v12, some of the Corinthians were saying that there is no resurrection of the dead—at least human dead. We have to ask: Where did this come from? Where did they get such an idea?

Here we have one more example of the beliefs—the “spirituality”—of the surrounding culture seeping in and overwhelming the true gospel preached by the apostle.

Surely influenced by the Grecian philosophies—and philosophers—predominant in the society in which they dwelt, they were at odds with Paul over what it meant to be *pneumatikos*—a Spirit-person. Blending together the Christian doctrine of the Spirit with the idea of “spirituality” from the Greeks—putting those two together, as people still do today; they may call themselves Christians, but they have combined Christianity with other beliefs, into a hybrid, which, of course, you cannot do. Some in the Corinthian church were creating a hybrid that started with the indwelling Spirit that Paul preached from the gospel, with the “spirituality” from the Greek culture in which they lived—From that they believed that having acquired the Holy Spirit at conversion, they had now entered the state of true spirituality that is to be: they had already attained (4:8), they had already begun a form of almost angelic-like existence in which the body is no longer necessary or even wanted. This was a core belief of that Greco-Roman idea of spirituality—mostly Greek—that we are spiritual beings, and as such the body, the flesh, is nothing, it doesn’t count for anything. So the body is no longer necessary, or even wanted.

In Chapter Six Paul railed against their idea that, (in accord with the Greeks) being now “spiritual,” flesh was nothing, meaningless, hence what the flesh did (or what one did with the flesh) meant nothing. One could call oneself a Christian, be married, yet still visit the pagan temple to partake of the prostitutes there. What did it matter; it’s just the body, just the physical body. It doesn’t mean anything; I’m a spiritual person now. The body is nothing. So put yourself in their shoes. If that is how you think, if that is what you believe, the very thought that their present “body would be raised would have been anathema” (cursed, damnable) to them. (Fee) A horrible thought! This body, that is nothing, you’re telling me that God is going to bring it back, raise it out of the tomb? I don’t want to live with this body for eternity. It was a horrible thought to them based on what they thought he was saying.

Paul fought this in v6:19 with “[To the contrary], 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?” What he was saying there was, no your body is not useless: it’s a temple—your physical body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. He will go on to detail to them, in the last section of this chapter, that in any case, this present body is not the one that will be raised. Let’s jump ahead and look at that. This is why, based on what they have been believing, based on the Grecian influence, this is why he needs to tell them this.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:42-44.

Here we go, Corinthians, get this, “it is raised a spiritual body.” He’s telling them, No, the body that will be raised will be a changed body: “we will [all] be changed” (v52). It will be a spiritual body suitable for eternity with God. You cannot dwell with a holy God with a natural, perishable body. No, everything around God must be new, fresh, clean, sinless—perfect. And that’s the body that will be raised.

In a sense, then, the Corinthians were correct: this present flesh is throw-away; it will eventually be discarded (“dust to dust”). They were just doing it too soon. Even so, their present position is not just wrong—it is fatal. Note how this ends:

...if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.

There are a couple of ways we can interpret the idea of their belief, their faith being “in vain.” First, as John MacArthur puts it, they never believed in the first place—i.e., their “faith” was just vanity.

MacArthur: A professing Christian who holds to orthodox doctrine and living and then fully rejects it proves that his salvation was never real. He is able to let go of the things of God because *he* is doing the holding. He does not belong to God and therefore God's power cannot keep him. Such a person does not **hold fast the word** because his faith is **in vain**. It was never real. He cannot hold fast because he is not held fast.

Second, as Gordon Fee puts it, "If they do not hold fast to the gospel, that is, if their current position as to 'no resurrection' is correct, then Christ did not rise, which in turn means that they did indeed believe in vain. If they are right, everything is a lie, and they cease to exist as believers altogether."

So understand the difference: MacArthur say, You thought you believed, or you were play-acting that you believed, but you didn't really believe, and that's why you cannot hold to the truth. Gordon Fee puts it, You did believe, you are a Christian, but that in which you believed was a lie. Either can be true.

Either way, as Paul will write later, if this is so, "we are of all men most to be pitied." If you are correct, Corinthians, we are all fools and have been horribly deceived. But they are not correct—they were not correct—and Paul will spend the rest of this chapter proving it.

Session 149: A Succinct Delivery

1 Corinthians 15:3-5

Preface

Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-5.

In a sense, the question is implicitly asked in v2: “the word which I preached to you.” What word? What “word” did the apostle preach to the Corinthians in which they stand, and to which he now expects them to hold fast? Answer: vv3-5.

Don’t make the mistake of being complacent about this succinct summary of the gospel. Don’t just yawn and pass it by, as if you’ve heard it all before—old stuff. Though familiar to anyone raised in the church, it is not just profound, but essential. That is, it requires all of its component parts to be an effective, evangelistic message. Strip down even this brief statement to its skeleton and for the gospel to be the “good news” that it is, each part is required for the world to believe it is true.

1. Christ died
2. He was buried
3. He was raised
4. He appeared

After one has believed, only the first and third are required—Jesus died and was raised—but as a message going out to the unsaved world, all four are required. Let me illustrate; imagine a conversation between a Christian and non-Christian.

Christian: Let me tell you the good news of Christ: He died for your sins.

Non-Christian: Oh yeah? Prove it. Maybe he didn’t really die. Maybe he just passed out and was revived later.

Christian: Well, He was buried in a sealed tomb from Friday to Sunday.

Non-Christian: OK, I’ll buy that. So he died and was buried. He was just a martyr for his cause. So what?

Christian: Ah, but God raised Christ from the dead. He came out of the tomb after three days.

Non-Christian: Sure. Right. Prove it.

Christian: He showed Himself to many people for the next forty days, starting with the women who visited the tomb and then His disciples.

Non-Christian: Could have been a vision. Just an hallucination.

Christian: But He appeared to many more after that. He was there—in person, in the flesh. He ate with them, they touched Him; He was real.

Statements two and four confirm statements one and three. That Christ was buried proves that He really died; that Christ appeared to so many (more than 500) proves that He was raised from the dead. As I said, once the Holy Spirit is residing in a believer, the proof of two and four are not necessary; the proof they offer has been replaced by faith.

At great risk of being struck by lightning, I would add only one more necessary component that Paul does not include here—again, necessary from an evangelistic viewpoint, as well as pertinent to our study of Chapter Fifteen. Let’s give just a few more lines to our two characters.

Non-Christian: All right, I’m with you so far. But just one more thing: If he was raised from the dead, in flesh, then that flesh surely died eventually. Somewhere there is a second grave with his remains.

Christian: Nope. Christ was raised from the tomb in a glorified body—not the kind of body you and I have. It could not die; it was eternal. During those forty days Christ spoke with His followers and ate meals, but he also walked through walls and would disappear from their sight and reappear moments later many miles away. He did not die again; Christ’s resurrected body was eternal.

Non-Christian: Now you’re really pulling my leg. C’m—prove it.

Christian: His disciples watched Christ ascend into heaven. They are His witnesses: Christ lives on with God the Father.

Non-Christian: They could have made it all up.

Christian: Hmmmm... Would you allow yourself to be tortured and put to death for something you know is a lie—something you just made up?

v3

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,

Let's look at the second phrase first. Although the word *protois* can be used in a temporal sense—as in the KJVs, “first of all,” i.e., first in time before anything else—most interpreters say that what the apostle delivered to the Corinthians was (as translated by all our other common versions) the most important thing, the chief thing. The most important words out of the mouth of the apostle—or any other evangelist—are “Christ died for [your] sins,” followed by the rest of the fundamental gospel. No detailed doctrine, no liturgical instructions, no nuanced theology—just the facts, ma'am:

Christ died.

He was buried.

He was raised.

He appeared.

And, being the most important, these words may also have been the first stated.

For I delivered to you ... what I also received,

When the UPS driver brings you a box, he did not make what is in the box; he just picked it up from one place and delivered it to another. The apostle Paul did not create himself what he delivered to the Corinthians. He did not invent the gospel; he did not dream it up. Because, it is assumed, he was not a direct witness to the teaching and subsequent crucifixion of Jesus, he learned of it from other sources. The hard facts of the passion he probably received from the other apostles, but what about the meaning of those events?

Read Galatians 1:11-12.

Paul's commission, handed down directly from Christ Jesus Himself, and explained to him by Ananias. I would guess that most everyone in that region had heard of Christ, that He was killed, that He was buried. But did they know what it meant? Paul was to deliver the meaning behind these events—the gospel—to the Gentiles. Paul offers more details later when giving his defense before the Jews.

Read Acts 22:12-15.

Some see a contradiction between v3 and the passage in Galatians, but in v3 Paul does not say he received the gospel message from men; he may have heard the cold facts about what happened, but he did not learn from them the gospel he delivered to the Gentiles. He just says he received it—from the Holy Spirit and Jesus Himself, we learn from other passages.

...that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,

This is the first of the four necessary components. The apostle launches immediately into an itemized description of that which he “received” and subsequently “delivered.” This first clause reflects not just the prophecy of Isaiah 53:4-5, but specifically that passage in the Septuagint (ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew OT):

He bears our sins, and is pained for us: yet we accounted him to be in trouble, and in suffering, and in affliction. But he was wounded on account of our sins, and was bruised because of our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and by his bruises we were healed.

In v3 the apostle does not cite chapter and verse when he says, “according to the Scriptures,” but he certainly would have had a passage such as this in mind. This is the language of atonement: one dying on behalf of others. Jesus used it when He taught His disciples about servanthood—

Read Matthew 20:28.

—and during the Last Supper, when Jesus instituted the ordinance of Communion.

Read Matthew 26:27-28.

v4

and that He was buried,

It is no small thing that we—as well as the world at large—understand that Jesus truly, objectively died on the cross. Absent His death, there would have been no need for the tomb; without the tomb there would have been no resurrection; without the resurrection, we are all lost (vv16-19).

Note: This pertains to Christ Jesus—“the first-fruits of those who are asleep” (v20). Our being resurrected to a new, glorified form does not depend on our being dead first. As Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians, “For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).

That is, since those who are alive at His coming for the church will “always be with the Lord,” they, too, will be raised (from the earth) into a glorified state.

Just as, on the Day of Atonement, the goat slaughtered for the atonement of the sins of all Israel must be a real goat and really shed its blood and die, so too the sinless Lamb slaughtered on the cross for the sins of all mankind must really shed His blood and die. The tomb verifies the reality of His death.

...and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,

Now we get to the nub of Paul’s concern with the Corinthians in this chapter. Permit me to get down into the Greek weeds here for just a moment; it’s important. Understanding what is going on beneath the surface can really bring this to life for us. Back up to v3, where it says, “Christ died.” The tense of the verb translated “died” is aorist active indicative, which means it objectively occurred (indicative) in the past (aorist), and Christ did it all by Himself (active); He died.

Now look at v4, where it says “He was buried.” The first verb, translated “was buried,” is in the aorist passive indicative tense, which means it objectively occurred in the past (aorist indicative), but someone else did it to Him (passive)—because He was dead. Obviously, if one is really dead, one does not bury oneself.

Finally, consider the next verb, which is translated “was raised” in all our common versions, but for the KJVs. “Was raised” is just fine (Gordon Fee suggests that “He has been raised” is better). This verb is not aorist but perfect passive indicative, which means it is an objectively completed act done by someone else, the effects of which are still felt in the present; Fee says it implies “that He was both raised and still lives, [and that] the passive is an example of the ‘divine passive,’ with God as the implied subject... It is absolutely crucial to Paul’s view that Jesus did not so much rise [cf., KJVs: “He rose”] as that God raised Him, thus vindicating Him.”

...on the third day according to the Scriptures,

The end of v4 is a little more difficult to understand, for there is no crystal-clear passage in the OT that speaks of the Messiah being raised from the dead on the third day. There are a couple of passages that nibble around the edges of this. The first is found in Psalm 16:

**I have set the Lord continually before me;
Because He is at my right hand, I will not be shaken.
Therefore my heart is glad and my glory rejoices;
My flesh also will dwell securely.
For You will not abandon my soul to Sheol;
Nor will You allow Your Holy One to undergo decay. (Psalm 16:8-10)**

Hold that thought, “undergo decay.” The second is in the prophecy of Hosea.

Read Hosea 6:1-2.

Both of these passages may turn on the popular Jewish belief that corruption of the corpse set in only after the third day. In Psalm 16 he says that “You [will not] allow Your Holy One to undergo decay”—commonly seen as a Messianic prophecy. He would have to be raised by the third day, for after that corruption would have set in. Beyond that, there are a number of references to things occurring in or after three days—“on the third day you shall go up to the house of the Lord” (Hezekiah), “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up” (Jesus). In any case, this clause does, admittedly, remain an enigmatic statement.

v5

...and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

The sentence ends in v5 with the fourth essential component, confirming the third: Jesus appeared to Peter and the rest of the disciples (“the twelve,” a collective designation for the group; at this point there were only eleven; at this point His disciples were just called “the twelve,” no matter the number).

Once more the verb tense becomes important in substantiating this phenomenon of someone who was dead being raised from the dead. Again, all of our versions save the KJV translate this “He appeared,” which is appropriate since the verb is aorist passive indicative—that is, in relation to the one seeing the resurrected Jesus, the verb is passive because Jesus is the one doing the appearing. Something is happening to the ones seeing Jesus. Read again the familiar passages outside the tomb, on the road to Emmaus, and others. In all these it is Jesus who is in control of each situation, in control of who and when He is recognized for who He truly is. In these scenes no one knows it is their risen Lord standing before them until He wants them to realize that. He is in charge, and He is in charge of His appearing. In these Jesus was not an apparition, nor a puppet being manipulated by someone else. It was the risen Lord, in the flesh, confirming His return for Himself.

Because this fourth component is so important to Paul’s argument in this chapter, he will continue, in vv6-8, to add more sightings, more occurrences of Jesus showing Himself to His followers.

This we will pick up in our next session.

Session 150: Even to Me

1 Corinthians 15:6-11

Preface

In our last session, we dealt primarily with the four essential gospel components that Paul lists in vv3-5. Whittled down to their essence they are,

1. Christ died
2. He was buried
3. He was raised
4. He appeared

The point was made that were we to remove any one of those essentials, in sharing the gospel with an unbeliever, the logic would break down. That is, a reasoning individual could rationally take issue with the gospel message at several points along the way if certain components were missing.

- Christ died—He *really* died
- His burial proves that He really died (not alive and just hidden away somewhere, so as to later fake His resurrection)
- Christ was raised by God the Father
- His appearing to over 500 during His last forty days on earth, along with His burial, proves that He was indeed raised from the dead

Keep in mind that Paul's focus in Chapter Fifteen is resurrection: the certainty of Christ's resurrection being the "first fruits" (v20) and guarantee of the believer's resurrection, which is his answer to those in the church who were saying there is no resurrection of the dead (v12). The apostle begins our passage today by extending the appearances narrative beyond just Cephas (Peter) and the rest of the immediate disciples.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:3-11.

v6

After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time,

While it is true that we do not know why all these people were together in one place at the same time, it is clear from its nature this was not a mystical vision experienced by all these individuals at different times, but an actual, objective event in which a single group of more than five hundred individuals, at once, saw the risen Christ.

The word "brethren" is indeed plural masculine (*adelphois*; feminine singular would be *adelphe*), but it is not wrong for the NIV2011 to translate this "brothers and sisters." We know that there were both men and women who followed Jesus during His ministry—indeed, several of the women supported it financially.

Read Luke 8:1-3.

The word means, literally, from the same womb. *Adelphois* is often used to refer to a group of followers, of both sexes, that are united in one cause or belief. For Christians this is almost literally true to the definition of the word, for we are all born "from the same womb"—born again, by the Holy Spirit, in Christ.

most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep;

Why would Paul append this to the statement? Two reasons spring to mind. First, he adds "most of whom remain until now" to make it clear that there are witnesses to this appearance from which one could hear an eye-witness account. Second, he adds "but some have fallen asleep," a common euphemism for dying, which could serve to remind the Corinthians that even being in the presence of the risen Christ does not preserve one from death. More likely, however, he employs this euphemism to emphasize that for the Christian, death is a temporary state not to be feared. Thiselton writes that the idea of sleep "carries with it the expectation of awaking to a new dawn in a new day" (as quoted by Garland).

David Garland: Their deaths are nothing alarming. Death precedes resurrection, and using the figure of sleep for death implies that it is not a permanent condition but one of waiting.

v7

then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles;

Only here in God's word is this statement that Jesus appeared to his half-brother James. James, along with the rest of Jesus' siblings, did not initially believe in Him as the Christ (John 7:5), but quite soon after Christ's ascension he is identified as an apostle, and became one of the principal leaders in the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:13-21). Though we cannot say for certain, it is tempting to imagine that Jesus' visit with James after His resurrection may have had something to do with James' conversion from unbeliever to leader in the church.

If v6 refers to a large group of common followers of Jesus—"disciples" in the sense that we might call ourselves disciples—then this reference to "apostles" would be those specifically called and commissioned personally by Jesus to carry the gospel to the nations—which would include the twelve. This unnumbered group would include, for example, the seventy (or seventy-two) sent out by Jesus in Luke 10.

Note the progression of the appearances thus far from v5:

- Christ appeared to Cephas
- then He appeared to the rest of His immediate disciples (11 in all at this point)
- next Christ appeared to a very large group of followers—more than 500 men and women
- then to James, Christ's half-brother
- and to "all the apostles"

It is fair to ask, then, Why? Why offer such a detailed account of all these appearances of the risen Lord? There could be more than one reason:

- The first and most obvious reason would be that the more people Paul can say actually witnessed the resurrected Christ, the harder it would be for the naysayers to reject the historical fact that Christ was raised from the dead.
- Another reason would be that Paul wanted to connect the dots from Peter and the rest of the disciples/apostles to himself, and his claim to apostleship (v8). In so doing Paul is claiming that Christ's appearance to him was not unusual, but in line with Christ's appearance to both larger groups and individuals, such as Peter and James—and himself.
- As noted earlier, Paul's use of the euphemism "fallen asleep" prepares his audience to accept that when a Christian dies, he or she is just, as it were, "asleep," and just waiting to be "awakened" from that sleep—i.e., resurrected.

Sidebar: We may wonder why Paul does not include, first of all, the women at the tomb. The probable reason for this would be that in that time and place "a woman's testimony was not received in law courts... it was not evidence the world of that day would accept, because it came from a woman" (Guzik). This would seem to support the position that the apostle was offering substantial evidence for the historical fact of Christ's resurrection.

v8

and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also.

Speaking of euphemisms, our various translations go to great lengths to soften—even hide—what Paul is really saying when he refers to himself as "one untimely born" (NASB, ESV, TLV).

NIV: one abnormally born

KJVs: one born out of due time

CSB: one born at the wrong time

The word *ektromati*, used only here, means, literally, "a lifeless abortion," stillbirth, or miscarriage. In fact, the word came "to be used figuratively to refer to something horrible or freakish" (Fee). The abhorrent imagery of this term is amplified by Paul's use of the definite article "the" (YLT: "And last of all—as to the untimely birth—he appeared also to me"). Many

commentators struggle to explain just what Paul means by this, but the man himself answers that in v9.

One final note about v8, What does he mean by “last of all”? No doubt two things: First, Paul has been listing these appearances in chronological order, and his was the last in that order. But, by this, he may also be saying that his was the last and final apostleship. Second, we learn from v9 that he also means that he was the least apostle—least worthy to be commissioned by Christ Jesus.

v9

For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

When studying God’s word one always wants to glean application for our lives today, and thus far that has been a bit slim in these verses. In vv9-10, however, we turn the corner on that and discover something all of us can write into our own lives. We all know ourselves better than anyone else, and could easily paraphrase this verse, I am the least of Christians, and not fit to be called a Christian, because I_____.

The apostle here reveals why he uttered the outrageous statement of v8. From the *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, “If [*ektromati*, translated one ‘untimely born’] is thus understood, not as premature birth, but as still birth, the significance of Paul’s choice of the word lies in his joyful gratitude that God has chosen him to be an apostle despite his utterly reprobate life as a former persecutor.” That is, he is the living embodiment of what he wrote to the Ephesian church.

Read Ephesians 2:1-7.

Each of us, like Paul, was stillborn, born dead, without life; we ate, slept, worked in that deadness until, by His grace alone, God saved us and granted us life in Christ. In the case of Paul, his sins in the persecution and murder of followers of the Way (Acts 9:2) were probably more egregious than ours, yet even so, in God’s grace he was granted the title of honor, “apostle.” He not only saved him, but used him more mightily for His kingdom than anything we might imagine for ourselves.

v10

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.

“Paul was unfit for the task God called him to do. God’s grace does not remove this obstacle [2 Corinthians 12:7-10] but overcomes it so that it is clear that God, not the messenger, ‘is responsible for the message’” (Hollander and van der Hout).

David Garland: He was not worthy, but grace takes persons who are not worthy or sufficient and makes them fit. Grace does not so much require response as it enkindles response. It empowers and equips.

It sounds at first as if Paul is bragging when he says “I labored more than all of them,” but he immediately declares that none of it was from himself. Another commentator team, Robertson and Plummer, liken this to the child who joyfully gives the parent a birthday present after having spent the parent’s own money to buy it.

v11

Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

Verses 9-10 are essentially parenthetical, just a bit off-topic for the paragraph. It was logical to add his name to the preceding list of those to whom the risen Christ appeared, but because he modified his entry with “as to one untimely born,” it was necessary for him to flesh that out, so to speak, in vv9-10.

But now, with v11, he is back on-track. He closes this paragraph—as he often does—by both concluding his previous thoughts, and cuing up his thoughts in the next paragraph.

Paraphrasing this verse, Whether it was any one or more of all the apostles I have just mentioned, or it was I, we preach the same message—the same message you believed. What was that gospel message? In this context it was the creed he “delivered” to the Corinthians in vv3-5:

Christ died.

He was buried.

He was raised.

He appeared.

Thus, as Gordon Fee puts it,

On the matter of their denial of the resurrection, they are following neither Apollos, nor Cephas, nor Christ [v1:12]; they are simply going off on their own, and in effect abandoning truly Christian faith and discipleship.

Paul has just declared (v10) that the work God is doing in him, by His grace, “did not prove vain.” It was not for naught; it is still at work. He will close this chapter, in v58, with a plea that the lives of the Corinthians—and ours—would prove the same. Let’s close with that.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:58.

Session 151: The Necessity of Resurrection

1 Corinthians 15:12-19

Preface

In my preparation for our next class I have come to realize that resurrection from the dead—not just Christ’s, but everyone’s—is central to the end-times story. Without it the entire narrative would fall apart; without it there would be no Rapture, there would be no judgment of the dead. For both those in and not in Christ, what we think of as death is simply a way-station. No one stays dead. Everyone, except those alive when Christ returns for the church, dies the “first death”—what we call death. Everyone who dies that death will be raised from that death—even the enemies of Christ. The first death is just a way-station. All those who die in Christ experience only one death.

Read Revelation 20:6.

Those who are not in Christ, however, will be judged—and at that judgment there will be only one verdict: guilty. Their sentence? The second death. Earthly death is not final for anyone. Near the end of the Last Things (eschaton) even death itself will be cast into the second death: the Lake of Fire. The true and final death—the second death—will not be hell, nor will it be nothingness; it will be an eternal, unending torment by fire.

Read Revelation 20:11-15. (Just a thought: Maybe we do a disservice to unbelievers by telling them only the good news of the gospel, rather than scaring them to death with the bad news of what will happen to them without Christ.)

In the passage before us the apostle Paul lists a number of consequences of—as some in the Corinth church were claiming—there being no resurrection. David Garland claims that Paul, here, is not railing against their rebellious rejection of what has been taught them—i.e., the gospel (vv3-4)—but is, instead, addressing, like a patient teacher, their illogical ignorance. This apparent subset of the church did not realize the ramifications of their position, so Paul sets out, by orderly argument, to fill in the blanks of their reasoning.

We have seen Paul periodically rail against their obstinacy and arrogance in rejecting what he had taught them—intentionally working against what he had taught. Most scholars believe that is not the situation here. They just haven’t thought this through.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:11-19.

v12

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?

This verse begins the second section of Chapter Fifteen. The first, just concluded, was where the apostle gave evidence that Christ was, indeed, raised from the dead. In that section he laid out sequentially the order, what happened—the proof that Christ was, indeed, raised from the dead. Now through v34 he will offer evidence for the certainty of our resurrection.

Just as do some believers today, this group of Corinthians hadn’t fully thought through this business of resurrection. They had indeed believed the gospel preached by Paul and others, and the resurrection of Christ from the dead was an essential part of that gospel. Yet somehow these individuals, because of the influence of philosophies they had previously followed, were convinced that there would be no bodily resurrection for believers. Interestingly, the ancient Job (ancient even to the first century) had no problem with bodily resurrection. In fact, he held to a pretty accurate concept of the Eschaton.

Read Job 19:25-27.

The position Paul now speaks against was probably a holdover from the Hellenistic philosophies the Corinthians had previously held, in which there is a bright line between the body and the soul.

David Garland: According to this view, humans are composed of two inharmonious parts, body and soul, that are of unequal value. At death, the mortal body is shed like a snake's skin, and the immortal soul continues in a purely spiritual existence.

From their perspective, the bodily resurrection of Jesus was a special case that would not apply to them. To the contrary, Paul insists in v20, "But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep" (emphasis added). The "first fruits"—Christ set the pattern, for you.

v13

But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised;

Now Paul begins his defense of bodily resurrection by means of a series of five unimpeachable "if" statements, a methodical argument ad absurdum, (establishing a claim by showing that the opposite scenario would lead to absurdity or contradiction; for the sake of the argument, let's allow that your position is correct; let's see how things fall into place if what you believe is true).

He begins by stating the obvious: absent resurrection, even Christ would not have been raised. He was not a special case; Christ set the pattern for all of us; He was special only in that He was the first. Since Christ Jesus is the one who made possible the resurrection of the dead, if that did not happen, then that means He did not make it happen by being raised Himself. If there is no resurrection then Christ was not raised. If Christ was not raised then the pattern was not set. No one can be raised from the dead because Christ wasn't!

v14

and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain.

Note what this verse does *not* say, that "our preaching was in vain," as in the ESV. That would mean that an authentic gospel was preached to them without effect; it didn't find a purchase in their lives—which, of course, happens every day around the world. The gospel is preached but finds no purchase. It is rejected. But that has no bearing on the gospel itself. What Paul is saying is that if Christ was not raised—which we preached to you!—then what we preached was empty of truth—a *lie*—devoid of any spiritual value (vain = *kenon*). The NKJV captures it with, "And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty."

v15-16

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;

If there is no resurrection, then Christ was not raised. If that is the case, then all the apostles and teachers of the gospel are liars; they have been lying about God raising Christ from the dead, which He did not, if the dead are not raised. Moreover, better than 500 individuals are also part of this conspiracy, perpetuating a lie that Christ showed Himself to them alive.

Here Paul also reaffirms his position that Christ did not raise Himself, but God raised Him in an act that vindicated the work of His Son. Earlier, in v4, Paul made the point more subtly by means of the verb tense—perfect passive indicative, which means it is an objectively completed act done by someone else, the effects of which are still felt in the present—but here he states it flat out: "we testified...against God that He raised Christ." If your position is true, Paul is saying, then we blasphemed by preaching in God's name that He raised Christ Jesus from the dead, when He did not.

Verse 16 repeats, almost verbatim, v13. He is repeatedly punching this home: For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. You must believe in the resurrection of believers to believe that Christ was raised from the dead.

v17-18

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.

Here is the part even many of today's believers do not realize: Absent His resurrection, Christ's death was meaningless and ineffective. And in these two verses Paul applies this hypothetical to both the living and the dead.

I was born and raised in the church, sat on an endless succession of miniature chairs to listen to flannel-graph stories from my earliest years. Over the span of my life I have listened to multiple thousands of sermons. And throughout all of that the impression with which I was left was that Christ's death on the cross was the be-all and end-all of faith and salvation. Oh, His resurrection was not ignored, or even downplayed. But the punchline was "Christ died for the ungodly," and "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (from Romans 5:6-8; emphasis added). It was the cross! He became the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

None of that is false; it is absolutely true. It, too, is essential. Yet it was not until this study of First Corinthians that I fully appreciated that without His being raised from the dead—without God resurrecting Him from the tomb—the death of Christ would have meant nothing. Earlier in this letter, in Chapter Six, Paul lists what the Corinthians were before they came to Christ, ending with v11: "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."

Let's take just a moment to consider justification, because it is critical here.

What is justification? As Wayne Grudem defines it,

Justification is an instantaneous legal act of God in which He (1) thinks of our sins as forgiven and Christ's righteousness as belonging to us, and (2) declares us to be righteous in His sight.

When are we justified by God? Grudem again: "Justification comes after our faith and as God's response to our faith." That is not to say that it is our faith that justifies us; that would be dangerously close to being justified by works, by something we did. No, just that our faith in Christ must be in place before God will justify us. Now to the important question pertaining to this study and Paul's ad absurdum argument to the Corinthians:

What act in the final days of Christ Jesus made possible our justification? I grew up thinking it all happened at the cross—at His atoning death. But that is not correct, or at least the whole story—though there is measure of truth in it.

Read Romans 4:23-25.

Grudem: In the resurrection, God was saying to Christ, "I approve of what You have done, and You find favor in My sight." If God "raised us up with Him" (Ephesians 2:6), then, by virtue of our union with Christ, God's declaration of approval of Christ is also His declaration of approval of us.

I don't think it is possible to state this any clearer or dramatically than Paul does in these verses: "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" (vv16-18). Done. Full stop. It's all over. If there is no resurrection, it is all a lie, a worthless empty facade of papier mache that crumbles to dust. No forgiveness of sin, no justification—nothing but a dead "messiah" moldering in the grave. Those who have died have simply perished. And you, when you die, will be the same. No Rapture, no rewards, no reigning with Christ—because there is no Christ; he remains in the grave.

v19

If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.

The apostle concludes this dark hypothetical by stating the obvious:

Garland: [If all this were true,] the world would be right: the cross is utter folly (1 Corinthians 1:23). The joy that characterizes the basic orientation of Christian life is based on the confidence that Christ will return, the dead will be raised, and all wrongs will be made right. If that is not true, then joy is replaced by despair. [But then there is v20.]

Session 152: The Inevitability of Resurrection

1 Corinthians 15:20-22

Preface

At times when one is studying Scripture, one can be overwhelmed by the wonder of it all. This week I once again experienced that sensation—not just from the truth recorded in our target verses, but from how that miraculous, mind-boggling truth is woven throughout passages written by different authors; in this instance, Paul, Matthew, Jesus, John, and Luke. Of course, just as there are practical, scientific explanations for the glorious sunset that to the sensitive heart speaks of God, we know that, in truth, there was only one author of God’s word: the Holy Spirit. But that fact removes none of the wonder and glory of how the continuity of Scripture is woven so intricately, from beginning to end, with the power to take one’s breath away.

One challenge presented in these situations, when one is slammed back against the wall by the sheer weight of what God’s word is saying, is working out how in the world to express that same wonder to others. When all one wants to do is lean back and meditate on the supernatural genius of God’s economy for the salvation of man, it can be a challenge to focus that down into a thirty-minute session.

In our last session the apostle Paul detailed the resulting consequences if the resurrection of the dead is not true. Now, from v20 to v28, he argues the resulting consequences since the resurrection of the dead is true—specifically the resurrection of those in Christ.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:20-26.

In his commentary on First Corinthians, John MacArthur quotes theologian Erich Sauer:

The present age is Easter time. It begins with the resurrection of the Redeemer and ends with the resurrection of the redeemed. Between lies the spiritual resurrection of those called into life through Christ. So we live between the two Easters, and in the power of the first Easter we go to meet the last Easter.

Sauer’s “last Easter” refers to the bodily resurrection of those who are saved in Christ at what we call the Rapture, when Christ returns for His church before all hell breaks out on earth. God’s word refers to this as the “first resurrection”; the second resurrection—that of the unsaved—will take place after the Millennium, just before the Great White Throne of judgment. Jesus spoke of both in the gospel of John.

Read John 5:25-29.

Everyone gets a resurrected body—everyone: the redeemed get one fit for the purity of eternal life with God; the unredeemed get one fit to endure an eternity in the lake of fire (Revelation 20:15)—neither of which would occur if Jesus had not been raised first. The passage before focuses on the former, the first resurrection. And because we cannot hope to include in one thirty-minute session the entirety of Paul’s thesis—which he takes the rest of this chapter to set forth—we must digest it in small bites, while reserving for the future the pleasant state of being satiated to the full.

v20

But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep.

After his eight-verse journey into the “what-if” of no resurrection, Paul opens the flip-side argument with a thunderous, “But now Christ has been raised from the dead...” (emphasis added). And he will now systematically establish the evidence for his thesis, which is, as Gordon Fee puts it, “Christ’s resurrection demands our resurrection; otherwise death is never defeated and God cannot be ‘all in all’ [v28].” Believers must be raised from the dead, otherwise what’s the point of it all? Christ’s bodily resurrection to a new body and form is

what makes our resurrection possible. And for this Paul terms Him the “first fruits of those who are asleep.”

It is true that the concept of “first fruits” has a rich heritage in the OT, referring to bringing the first and best of the year’s crop (or womb) to the temple for it to be dedicated to the Lord.

Sidebar: In this it is much like the concept of a “tithe.” We do not tithe from what is left over after all the bills have been paid. No, we tithe right off the top, before everything else. Thus rendering absurd the excuse, “We can’t afford to tithe.” God is due the first of our fruits—not what is left over.

That is not how Paul uses “first fruits” here, however. Here that term is used by the apostle to refer to a down payment or earnest money—a pledge that something more will occur.

Read 2 Corinthians 1:21-22.

Read 2 Corinthians 5:5.

(pledge, guarantee, earnest, down payment = *arrabon* = part of the purchase-money or property given in advance as security for the rest)

Just as with the pledge of the Holy Spirit, given to every believer, God raised Christ from the dead as a guarantee—a pledge—that He will do the same for us. “As the first fruits, Christ’s resurrection is a pledge of the full harvest of resurrection to come” (Garland).

As we discussed in v6, “those who are asleep” is more than just a polite euphemism for death. We say someone has “passed away,” which sounds better than saying they died. Saying someone has “fallen asleep” is sort of like that, but Thiselton writes that the idea of sleep “carries with it the expectation of awaking to a new dawn in a new day.” For believers death is little more than a period of waiting; as Fee writes, “Not all who have died are raised to life in Christ, but only those who have fallen asleep in Him.”

v21-22

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.

Verses 21 and 22 present a double parallelism. Here Paul emphasizes the literal humanness of the God/Man, Christ Jesus. There are some that say that Jesus, as the Son of God, could not really die, that His was a different sort of “death” because He was divine. But here Paul says no, Christ’s death was the death of a man—*anthropos*, a human being, mankind—and His resurrection was the resurrection of a man (Garland).

The NKJV retains the slightly more poetic “by man” of the KJV, rather than “by a man” used by our other common versions. The Greek is singular masculine, so not only is “a man” a more precise translation, but it removes the possibility of the reader misinterpreting the verse to mean, Death came out of mankind, as did the resurrection of the dead. That’s not what is being said here. Of course, v22 also removes that possible interpretation.

Verse 22 also clarifies something else. While both death and believer resurrection came through “a man,” the first is by means of lineage, by inherited depravity, but the second is by means of justification by faith in Christ. In a sense, both are by faith, or trust; a rejection of Christ is the same as leaving one’s trust in one’s corporate head: Adam. When modern men and women place their trust in themselves, or in the philosophies of a fallen race, they are, in essence, placing their trust in their father Adam. That faith means death, while trust in Christ means life.

Note: Don’t confuse “all die” with the fact that all flesh eventually perishes. Verse 22, especially, is eschatological. In an earthly, human sense all flesh eventually ends up either in a grave or destroyed, but if one never leaves the posterity of Adam, one will eternally die. The timeline is dramatic and tragic: those in Adam will indeed be

resurrected, but they are immediately judged, condemned, and thrown into the eternal lake of fire; they will be resurrected—the biblical second resurrection—only to a cognizant, tortuous, eternal death. They “all die.” But those who are “in Christ” will be resurrected to a cognizant, joyful, eternal life. They “will be made alive.”

This is why, although all our versions translate v22, “...in Christ all will be made alive,” at great risk of being zapped, I would suggest (and most commentators agree) that this is to be understood as if the word order were slightly changed to all in Christ will be made alive, or, for those in Christ, all will be made alive. For Paul, in that phrase, is speaking only of the resurrection of believing dead.

Garland: The analogy assumes human solidarity with those at the beginning of a line who then become representatives of those who follow. Adam leads the way and represents the old order; Christ leads the way and represents the new order. Paul assumes that the representative determines the fate of the group. All those bound to Adam share his banishment from Eden, his alienation, and his fate of death so that death becomes the common lot of his posterity. All those bound to Christ receive reconciliation and will share His resurrection and heavenly blessings.

By the way, the concept of “in Adam all die” is not unique to Paul, nor is it unique to the NT. We find it even in the extra-biblical texts of the OT Apocrypha.

I answered then and said, this is my first and last saying, that it had been better that the earth had not given you Adam: or else, when it had given him, to have restrained him from sinning. For what profit is it for all that are in this present time to live in heaviness, and after death to look for punishment? O you Adam, what have you done? For though it was you that sinned, the evil is not fallen on you alone, but upon all of us that come of you. For what profit is it to us, if there be promised us an immortal time, whereas we have done the works that bring death? (2 Esdras 7:116-119)

Conclusion

The biblical concept of sonship is less about blood than behavior. By our behavior and appearance we are identified with our father or mother. We are born into this world the sons and daughters of our corporate head, Adam. Unless we are “born again” (John 3:7), we will continue to behave and look like Adam—to a bad end. Born again in Christ, however, we lose our sonship in Adam; we throw off the restraints of his sin, and live in a new hope of life and light. We are remade in the likeness of our new Father and new Lord, and anticipate with joy the moment when—even after physical death—we are “made alive” for all eternity.

Session 153: Then Comes the End, part one

1 Corinthians 15:23-26

Preface

Our God is a God of order, and that fact, which is established throughout His word—but especially in the OT—always reminds me of the precise order Yahweh dictated for the layout of Israel's camp whenever their exodus came to a halt, along with the order in which each tribe would pack up to continue the march. We find it in Numbers 2; let me read an abridged version of that chapter.

The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, "The people of Israel shall camp each by his own standard, with the banners of their fathers' houses. They shall camp facing the tent of meeting on every side. Those to camp on the east side toward the sunrise shall be of the standard of the camp of Judah by their companies... Those to camp next to him shall be the tribe of Issachar... All those listed of the camp of Judah, by their companies, were 186,400. They shall set out first on the march. On the south side shall be the standard of the camp of Reuben by their companies... All those listed of the camp of Reuben, by their companies, were 151,450. They shall set out second. Then the tent of meeting shall set out, with the camp of the Levites in the midst of the camps; as they camp, so shall they set out, each in position, standard by standard. On the west side shall be the standard of the camp of Ephraim by their companies..." [etc.] Thus did the people of Israel. According to all that the Lord commanded Moses, so they camped by their standards, and so they set out, each one in his clan, according to his fathers' house. (from Numbers 2:1-34 ESV)

God never changes who He is. He remains a God of order, and no less regarding His intricate plan—already set in motion—for the redemption of His elect, and their subsequent resurrection at the beginning of (as Paul puts it in our passage) "the end."

In our previous session on vv20-22 I made the following statement about Paul's use of the "first fruits" imagery—especially whether he was employing this in line with the idea of the first and best of a year's harvest. Here is what I said:

That is not how Paul uses "first fruits" here. Here that term is used by the apostle to refer to a down payment or earnest money—a pledge that something more will occur.

Now I'd like to take some of the sharp edge off that statement. From vv23-24 we can deduce that Paul is using that imagery in both ways, as W. Harold Mare points out.

Mare: By "first fruits" Paul brings to bear the rich imagery of the OT. The "first fruits"—the first sheaf of the harvest offered to the Lord (Leviticus 23)—was not only prior to the main harvest but was also an assurance that the rest of the harvest was coming. So with Christ. He preceded His people in His bodily resurrection and He is also the guarantee of their resurrection at His second coming.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:23-26.

v23

But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at His coming,

In vv21-22 Paul emphasized the promise of Christ's resurrection, that everyone "in Christ" is promised their own resurrection at His coming. Now Paul emphasizes the necessary order in which the resurrections must take place.

But each in his own order...

This phrase adds a slightly different nuance to the imagery. Taken from the military, *tagmati*, translated "order," refers to ranking or class, or the organization of companies, or units, and is not far afield from the passage about the arrangement of Israel's camp in the book of Numbers. Every group (and every rank within that group) has their designated place and order of movement.

On the U.S.S. Chicago, deployed in the Gulf of Tonkin during the Vietnam war, there were deckhands, engineers, the black gang, clerks, officers and enlisted men—and a motley group of guys who were the flag band; each group on the ship, and each individual in that

group, were assigned both a battle station or general quarters and an abandon ship post. Being of vital importance to the security of the ship if attacked, the band's general quarters were in the ship's library, buried deep (and out of the way) in the bowels of the ship. Unfortunately the band was never assigned an abandon ship post; apparently the powers that be did not deem us worth saving, but would have us go down with the ship, all the while playing "Abide With Me," as did the ship's band on the Titanic. That's a pretty accurate picture of what they thought of the band on that ship. Nevertheless, everyone on that ship had their assigned order; the officers at the top, the enlisted men further down. Every group had their assigned work and stations—ours just happened to be in the ship's library.

...Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at His coming,

This is God's order. We, the various members of the family, cannot be raised before our Head, Christ Jesus. He not only set the pattern, but He paved the way. Christ is the one—the only one—who has conquered death. Death must be conquered before there can be a resurrection. His resurrection makes it possible for the rest of the "troops" to follow our Captain out of the grave when He returns for us (*parousia*). Verse 23 harmonizes well with Paul's first letter to the Thessalonian church.

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17.

v24

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.

As in earlier passages, we should not let ourselves be sidetracked into an examination of the end-times sequence. That is not Paul's purpose here; that's not his agenda. His purpose is to demonstrate the surety and importance of believer resurrection because of Christ's prior resurrection. Many have tried to read too much into this passage, sensing, somehow, a third resurrection in "then the end," inventing a new meaning for "end" as "the rest"—i.e., the resurrection of the rest, the resurrection of the unredeemed—the unsaved. This is not a passage to be used to work out a detailed analysis of the Eschaton (last things); the apostle has his mind and focus on resurrection, not a road map for the Eschaton.

One indication of this is Paul's choice of *hotan*, translated "when"—used twice in this verse: "when He hands over the kingdom... when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power." The word is decidedly vague; it could be translated "whenever," or even "while." It denotes something that occurs at some indefinite point in the future. Paul is perfectly capable of being more specific about order and timing, but he doesn't do that here. Likewise, Paul does not address here the resurrection of the unjust, the unregenerate. He is not denying that it will occur; it is just not part of his present concern: the relationship between Christ's resurrection and that of His followers. We can deduce from this passage only that once the church is raised at Christ's *parousia*, "then the end" (the Greek has no verb). It is not clear what the apostle means by "the end" (*to telos*).

It can mean the ultimate "end" to something—no more, fine. Fee points out that the moment described here—the return of Christ with its accompanying resurrection of the dead in Christ and the airlift of those still alive—will indeed mark "the end of history as we now know it." Anyone left behind will surely realize that he has just witnessed an epochal, cataclysmic moment; whatever follows, he will know that nothing will ever be what it was before.

However, *telos* can also mean that something has been completed, which may be the better way to read this. For those in Christ, the coming of Christ will signal the completion of His plan and the end of their battle against the flesh. What up to this point has been academic—on the left side of the "now—not yet"—will now be actual reality. God's word has been telling us that Christ has conquered death (e.g., 2 Timothy 1:10), but we still see our loved ones dying. Christ's return, and the church bodily removed from the earth will mark the completion of man's history and the dawning of a new epoch. From this point on, God and His Christ will be calling all the shots. No one can ever again say, "There is no God." And Paul highlights two things that will confirm this.

*when He hands over the kingdom to the God and Father,
when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power.*

These two clauses are presented in logical reverse order, which makes the NIVs and ESV, if not the most literal translations, the more helpful rendering of this verse.

Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. (ESV; emphasis added)

That is, Christ cannot hand over the kingdom to the Father until He (Christ) has abolished all rule and all authority and power, for nothing impure can be permitted in His presence.

I want to close this session at this point, for when one digs into the fullness of this text in v24—especially these last two clauses—it is simply too breathtaking, too deep, too glorious to be reduced down to a paragraph or two at the end of a session, when everyone's stomachs are growling for their Sunday pot roast.

Next time we will dwell fully on v24, giving it its due; there is so much here, that is so profound. We will dig into it in depth, and then proceed to v26.

Session 154: Then Comes the End, part two

1 Corinthians 15:23-26

Preface

There are times in the study and teaching of God's word when Scripture reveals itself in relatively simple, obvious, easily interpreted ways. We digest it, then move on. Then there are times when the revelation is less clear at first, but reveals itself, bit by bit, as the passage is excavated down to the bare metal. Very often this excavation reveals not just facts, and understanding, but wondrous truth. Just such a passage is before us now.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:23-26.

v24

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.

As I stated in our last session, the last two clauses of v24 are in reverse order; we find that interpretation reflected in the NIV:

Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power.

Thus, whatever Paul means by "the end" (and it is not clear) is somewhat described, but also follows the actions in these two clauses. First Christ will "destroy (abolish) all dominion (rule) and all authority and power," then He will "hand over (deliver) the kingdom to God the Father." Here's how Eugene Peterson, in his paraphrase *The Message*, interprets this verse:

the grand consummation when, after crushing the opposition, he hands over his kingdom to God the Father.

As stated before, Paul is not concerned with timelines here; he is describing events that are indeed part of the Eschaton, but is not bothering to fit them into their respective place with other events. So we will try not to do that either. Even though v23 seems to clearly speak of the resurrection that takes place at the Rapture, v24 apparently speaks of a transitional point later in the Eschaton.

when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power.

There is general agreement that by "all rule and all authority and power" the apostle refers to "all the malignant powers" (Garland). That is, the demonic influence on the earth in all its various forms. The Greek word—here, *katargese*, from the root *katargeo*—is elusive in translation. It can refer to absolute destruction or just the rendering of something or someone inoperative, inactive, useless. There are moments in the Eschaton when evil is rendered inoperative, such as when Satan is "jailed" in the abyss during the Millennium. But then, later, after he has been released, he is thrown into the lake of fire, to suffer an eternity of living death.

So, again, let's not waste our time trying to pinpoint this on the timeline, but rather conclude, as I did last week, that Christ cannot hand over the kingdom to the Father until He (Christ) has dethroned or rendered inoperative or abolished "all rule and all authority and power," for nothing impure can be permitted in the Father's presence. In any case, since this cleansing is required first, it seems to suggest that "the kingdom" at this point does not speak exclusively of the church immediately after the Rapture—a beautiful picture, but it does not quite fit—but of something more cosmic, more "all in all." For the church is lifted out from a world still rife with demonic influence—indeed, one that will soon be under the thumb of Satan's lapdog, the Antichrist. Clearly at that point Christ has neither rendered inoperative or destroyed all the malignant powers.

when He hands over the kingdom to the God and Father,

That leaves us with the first, but second in sequence, clause, “when He hands over the kingdom to the God and Father.” Seeking an answer to an apparent contradiction, I was inexorably pulled into the wonder lying beneath the surface of v24. Verse 24 states that Christ will hand “over the kingdom to the God and Father.” My immediate response to that was the recollection that Jesus Himself stated that God the Father had given that to Him.

Read Matthew 11:27.

Read John 5:21-22, 25-27.

In these two passages, Jesus speaks of receiving from the Father

- all judgment; the authority to execute judgment;
- self-existent life;
- the power to reveal the truth about the Father;
- and beyond that, the all-encompassing “all things.”

But can we include in this “the kingdom”? D. A. Carson gives good evidence that the concept of the, or God’s, kingdom, or “the kingdom of heaven” is dynamic and fluid. For example, Jesus says in Matthew 16:28, “Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.” “See the Son of Man coming in His kingdom”—clearly a reference to the Rapture, Christ’s return for His church. But later, in Matthew 26:29, Jesus says to His disciples, “But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father’s kingdom.” Carson draws the obvious conclusion: “The kingdom of heaven is simultaneously the kingdom of the Father and the kingdom of the Son of Man.”

I find the most dramatic contrast to v24—“when He hands over the kingdom to the God and Father”—in the prophecy of Daniel.

Read Daniel 7:13-14.

There is only one everlasting, eternal kingdom: David’s kingdom. When King David planned to build a “house” for the Lord, the Lord God through the prophet Nathan declared that it would not be David, but his son Solomon who would build the temple. In a prophecy that spoke of both Solomon and the future Messiah, God told David,

“When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me; when he commits iniquity, I will correct him with the rod of men and the strokes of the sons of men, but My lovingkindness shall not depart from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever.” (2 Samuel 7:12-16)

This is the kingdom over which the Son of Man will rule. In a sense He already does; but just as death is now conquered in principle but not yet absolutely, Christ’s kingdom today consists only of those who follow Him in a fallen world ruled by Satan; but there will come a day when before Him “every knee will bow” to His sovereign rule (Philippians 2:10). This is the eternal kingdom the prophet Isaiah spoke of when he foretold the birth of the Messiah.

Read Isaiah 9:6-7.

We have been speaking of the Son of Man and God the Father, but did you hear in that passage how they are combined in v6? “A child will be born...a son given...” That is, the Messiah will be born on earth (and His favorite title for Himself will be “Son of Man”). But then it goes on to say that He will be called “Mighty God, Eternal Father”! See how Christ and Father God are blended together. Hold that thought. We will return to it.

However, in His answer to Pilate's question—"Are You the King of the Jews?"—Jesus broadened the scope of His kingdom, making it more cosmic in nature.

Read John 18:36-37.

So then, what are we to do with this? What are we to do with all these passages that speak of a "kingdom" that God the Father gives to Christ, but also Christ gives to the Father? What are we to make of passages that seem to interchange Father and Son? What is the picture presented to us in v24? Jesus Himself gives us one—if not the critical component to the answer to our questions. Please turn to John 10:25. One day at the temple Jesus was verbally accosted by a group of Jews demanding that He, once and for all, answer their question plainly. Quit spiritualizing His response, quit cloaking it in euphemisms and parables; answer plainly: Are You the Christ?

Read John 10:25-29.

Did you hear that? Jesus just said, "...and no one will snatch them out of My hand," followed by "...and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand." Well, which is it? Are we in Christ's hand or the Father's hand? The answer: Yes. The Father gave Christ His sheep, His followers, and they are simultaneously in His hand and the Father's hand. There is no difference between the two—which is confirmed by Jesus' declarative statement in v30: "I and the Father are one."

The picture I have in my mind is a blending of v24 and the Daniel prophecy. Christ, the Son of Man, approaches the Father's throne carrying in His arms "the kingdom." He ceremonially places it into the Father's hands, declaring, It is done. It is finished. The Father then hands the kingdom back to the Son (paraphrasing Daniel 7:14), To You I have given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations and men of every language would serve You. Your dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and Your kingdom is one which will not be destroyed. Now go down and rule! Be King over all.

There is the wonder of it all. There is the glorious evidence for the unity of the Godhead. The three manifestations—Father, Son, Spirit—may work in different areas; they may have different "job descriptions." But they remain One. Jesus said to another group of antagonistic Jews, "...the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner... I can do nothing on My own initiative. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just, because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me." (John 5:19, 30)

Because the Father loves the Son, He has placed Him in charge of judging and ruling the kingdom. The Father has made Christ king over all that is. But that is not an earthly picture of a king who answers to no one—that's how we might think of it: there's no one above a king, a king can do anything he pleases—but this is a heavenly picture of a Father working through His Son, and the Son behaving precisely as does His Father.

Gordon Fee: The question of whether the passage is basically christo- or theocentric is perhaps a red herring. It is both. That is, God is the ultimate source of all things; but He works out His purposes in history through Christ. Hence both Christ and God can alternatively function as the subject of most of the verbs in this paragraph.

The apostle clarifies the relationship of the two, as regards the Lord's rule over the kingdom, in v28: "When all things are subjected to Him [Christ], then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One [God the Father] who subjected all things to Him [Christ], so that God may be all in all."

I find helpful the words of the late Matthew Poole (1624-1679), with which we will close.

Poole: When he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father: Christ shall then deliver up those keys of life, and hell, and death to his Father, yet shall not Christ's kingdom cease (for the prophet saith, Isaiah 9:7, that of it *there shall be no end*): Christ's essential kingdom, which is his dominion, which he hath and exerciseth over all created

beings, together with his Father, and the Holy Spirit, (all being but one Divine essence), that shall hold and abide for ever; but his mediatory kingdom, by which he ruleth over his church in the midst of his enemies, that shall cease, and be delivered up unto the Father. So that Christ's delivering up the kingdom to his Father, proveth no inferiority of Christ to his Father, more than his Father's committing that mediatory kingdom to him can prove his Father's not reigning, or inferiority to him, which it certainly doth not. It signifieth only the ceasing of that dispensation, or Christ's exercise of his mediatory kingdom on earth, in the rule and government of the church, and subduing his and his people's enemies.

We will continue this in our next session.

Session 155: The End of Death

1 Corinthians 15:25-28

Preface

We remain in the second section of Chapter Fifteen. In the first section (vv1-11) Paul makes the case for the “The Resurrection of Christ”; the Corinthians already believe this, but Paul is employing a rhetorical tactic he had used before the Areopagus in Athens: Begin where people are, then lead them logically to where you want them to be. The Corinthians believed Christ was raised, but did not believe they would be raised from the dead. In the first section Paul begins with what they believe for the purpose of leading them to what they should believe: that they, too, will be raised from the dead. In the third section (vv35-58) the apostle answers the question, “How Are the Dead Raised?”, but in the second section (where we are now: vv12-34) he establishes the evidence to prove “The Certainty of Our Resurrection.”

Read 1 Corinthians 15:25-28.

v25

For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet.

Scholars have long argued over the pronouns in this verse: Is it God or Christ? But Gordon Fee has a good response to this.

Fee: The one and only God stands as both the source and goal of all that is; and since God has set in motion the final destruction of death, when that occurs, God will be “all in all.” Christ’s role is to bring about this destruction through the resurrection of believers, which is inherently tied to His own. When that occurs, all of God’s enemies will be subjected to Christ, so that in turn He may be made subject to God, who, it turns out, has been the one who subjected all things to Christ in any case.

And then he footnotes this with what I cited last week:

Fee: The question of whether the passage is basically christo- or theocentric is perhaps a red herring. It is both. That is, God is the ultimate source of all things; but He works out His purposes in history through Christ. Hence both Christ and God can alternatively function as the subject of most of the verbs in this paragraph.

David Garland adds:

Garland: It is impossible for Paul to think of Christ acting independently of God, or of God acting independently of Christ, or of one doing all the work while the other does nothing.

Christ Jesus does not reign passively, as if His work was complete after His resurrection, so He just patiently waits for the moment when the Father removes all opposition to His rule. No, He remains actively engaged in vanquishing all powers hostile to God (Garland).

It may be common for the average Christian to think of Christ’s “reigning” as absolute—that is, if He reigns, then this means He has already nullified all opposition. In ancient times it was customary for someone desiring the throne of a kingdom to murder not just the sitting king, but his entire family—especially his brothers and sons. He might even murder his own brothers, to eliminate any chances of insurrection from within his own family. Nevertheless, a king always had enemies somewhere, and, at this writing, Christ’s reign is still in process; He is indeed on the throne, but the opposition remains—and will remain until they are all placed “under His feet.”

Sidebar: A number of commentators say that “He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet” refers to Christ’s Millennial reign, but I’m not comfortable limiting it to that. Christ has been reigning, in one way or another, since His bodily resurrection. A very long time ago, and, perhaps, a long ways into the future—only God knows.

...put all His enemies under His feet.

Part of a king's physical throne would be a raised footstool for his feet, and a common motif for such a foot rest would be to display around the circumference of that footstool carved or painted images of the foes the king had defeated in battle—more often than not portrayed chained or tied together in procession (another favorite way this was portrayed in Egyptian motifs was of the king holding a group of his enemies by their hair). Thus, in his throne room the enemies of the state were shown “under the feet” of the king—an unavoidable statement of intimidation to any foreign ruler standing before him. “See what I can do,” it tacitly announces.

The apostle draws from—but does not quote verbatim—Psalm 110:1 (please turn there), the most frequently cited OT passage in the NT, and without question the most fascinating Messianic prophecy in the OT. Here is a verse and psalm in which the superscription is of critical importance: “A Psalm of David.” Because of the manner in which some versions of the Bible format the text, we might think that the superscription has been tacked on after the fact. But it is as inspired as the rest of the psalm. What we have in v1 is King David prophesying, Yahweh says to His Son, who is my Lord (*adonai*, who would not be on earth for almost another 1,000 years), “You, my Son, take Your place on My right until I subdue all Your enemies.” So here is the king of Israel, who has no earthly “lord,” claiming that there is a “son” of Yahweh who is lord over the king.

During the last days of the Last Things, just before the Eternal State of “the new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21:1), at the Great White Throne all remaining enemies of Christ will be cast into the Lake of Fire. And...

v26

The last enemy that will be abolished is death.

Death “died” the day Christ was raised from the grave. Up until then, that was the worst day of Satan's life. Imagine, on that day that Christ walked out of the tomb, Satan realized the jig was up for him; his fate was sealed. It was only a matter of time. Donald Trump would say Christ's resurrection was HUUUUUGE! And in the scope of God's plan for mankind, it was indeed, for it guaranteed man's own resurrection—and his eternity with God. More than that, however, it inaugurated Christ's reign and set the stage for everything that would come after.

Death will be present—abnormally so—during the Tribulation, and it will be present even during and just after the Millennium. But there will come a day, a very long time from now even if Christ returns tomorrow, when death will be literally and finally abolished: removed from existence never to return. Done. Gone.

David Guzik: Paul reminds us of something important: death is an enemy. When Jesus came upon the tomb of Lazarus, He groaned in the spirit and was troubled, and Jesus wept (John 11:33, 35). Why? Not simply because Lazarus was dead, for Jesus would raise him shortly. Instead, Jesus was troubled at death itself. It was an *enemy*. Today, some are told to embrace death as a friend, but that is not biblical thinking. Death is a defeated enemy because of the work of Jesus, an enemy that will one day be destroyed, and therefore an enemy we need not fear. But death is an enemy nonetheless.

Read Revelation 20:11-15.

In v13 the “the sea” refers to the literal sea, but also to all those left unburied. “Hades,” which in some instances can be synonymous with how we use the term “hell,” and generally the same idea as “sheol,” simply stands for the place of departed souls, or place of the dead. Unlike the “Lake of Fire,” Hades does not have a direct reference to either torment or eternal happiness (Guzik).

In v14 both death and Hades are personified and thrown into the eternal lake of fire. I like what Guzik has to say about this.

Guzik: The last echoes of sin are now eliminated. Death is the result of sin, and it is gone. Hades is the result of death, and it is gone. The last vestiges of sin's awful domination are done away with.

[Back to 1 Corinthians](#)

Whether we consciously consider it or not in our daily life, this world system, down to its core, is based on, surrounded by, and preoccupied with death. From big-city streets to the forest glen we cannot escape death and the resulting nauseating corruption. Wherever we encounter death, it is ugly. All of this began in Eden with Adam; look at vv21-22, just above.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:21-22.

With the eternal death of death, Christ's reign will finally be complete. The last domino will have fallen. And it makes perfect sense: if all who are dead are raised from that death—not just believers, but everyone—then it only follows that death has been, once and for all, conquered.

v27-28

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.

When reading vv27-28 one can feel as if one is chasing one's tail. In these two verses Paul uses the word "subjection" or "subjected" six times. But the point is made, and even though these two verses are packed with pronouns, this time we can easily label the pronouns with their respective owners. Permit me do that for us now.

A paraphrase: For GOD HAS PUT ALL THINGS IN SUBJECTION UNDER CHRIST'S FEET. But when God (in His word) says, "All things are put in subjection," it is evident that God is excepted who put all things in subjection to Christ. When all things are subjected to Christ, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to God who subjected all things to Christ, so that God may be all in all.

We have seen that the apostle Paul considers God to be the one who raises the dead. We showed in the first section that the verb tenses reveal that Christ was "acted upon" when He was buried and raised from the dead.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:4.

This is continued into the second section. Verse 20: "But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep." (emphasis added) Thus it follows that God is the one who defeats this last foe: death (Garland). Christ's sovereignty takes nothing away from the sovereignty of God. "All things" (referring back to Psalm 8) refers to all things in creation, as well as the hostile powers at work in it. It does not include Father God. All things on earth, all demonic powers...

Even as we read of the authority and kingship Christ will demonstrate during the Eschaton, the words of Christ Himself, recorded in the gospels, make clear His submission to and subservience before God the Father. Verse 28 does not end, "...so that Christ may be all in all," but "...so that God may be all in all."

Session 156: What's the Point?, part one

1 Corinthians 15:28-34

A Clarification

In class last week we discussed the “reign” of Christ Jesus, and I made the statement, “Christ has been reigning, in one way or another, since His bodily resurrection.” While driving home after class, my good wife raised the point that maybe we should move that beginning point back to an earlier moment, for Jesus Himself declared that He was a king. Please turn to John 18. In v33 Pilate asks Jesus point blank: “Are You the the King of the Jews?” In His immediate reply Jesus toys with the procurator a bit, but then answers more fully.

Read John 18:36-37.

So it is true that before the resurrection Jesus stated that He was a king. Linda and I discussed this for a while, and concluded that there can be a difference between *being* a king, and *reigning as* a king. Jesus as much as told Pilate that if His kingdom slapped the governor in the face he wouldn't recognize it, for it was “not of this world.” And we likened it to the “now—not yet” kingship of David: He was anointed king by Samuel well before he actually reigned as king from upon a throne. Was he a king? Yes, God had anointed him. Was he ruling as a king? Not yet. And that is the difference: Jesus was born a king (John 18:37, Matthew 2:2), but He did not begin to reign—and even then not in its fullness—until after His resurrection.

v28: “So that God may be All in All”

Before we proceed into the next paragraph of our text, just a few remaining thoughts about the last phrase in the previous: “so that God may be all in all.”

This side of the Pearly Gates—and perhaps even after—we will not fully grasp the intricacies of the Godhead: each Member's relationship to the other two, the manner in which they relate to each other, the mystery of their unity in spite of their pecking order and various responsibilities. Gordon Fee tells us that this phrase is “a Pauline idiosyncrasy,” which I take to mean it is something peculiar to him. Contributing to our confusion, the apostle says much the same thing in Colossians—but there referring to Christ, albeit in a different context.

Read Colossians 3:11.

One thing that impresses me, as I have been preparing for our next class, is the dramatic contrast between the Christ of the gospels and the Christ of the Eschaton. Even though Jesus, in the gospels, did not hesitate for a minute to put the religious hypocrites in their place, for the most part He was there to be a compassionate Shepherd, to be the Suffering Servant, the one who gives His life for His friends.

During the Eschaton, however—principally from the end of the Tribulation through the Great White Throne—Christ will be the foretold Messiah described in Psalm 2.

Read Psalm 2:5-12.

The point Paul is making to the Corinthians is that no matter how much power and rule, how much judgment of the nations is given into the hands of Christ by the Father, He still answers to Father God. J. Calvin (1960, cited in Garland) put it this way:

Of course we acknowledge that God is the Ruler, but His rule is actualized in the man Christ. But Christ will then hand back the Kingdom which He has received, so that we may cleave completely to God.

Note: “God” in v28 clearly points to Father God. The Greek *Theos* is the word most commonly used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew Yahweh.

We need only look at how Paul ends this chapter to know how to interpret this instance of “all in all.”

Read 1 Corinthians 15:56-57.

That is, during those days, from an earthly perspective it will seem that Christ Jesus is the absolute ruler; He will be reigning on earth with supposed absolute authority. But we give our thanks to God the father, for He is the one giving the victory, but doing it through “our Lord Jesus Christ.” Ultimately it is Father God (*Theos*) who will be “all in all.”

Read 1 Corinthians 15:28-34.

v29

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?

It may be that at the reading of v29 you were left scratching your head. If so, you are not alone. There are at least forty different solutions that have been offered to explain what Paul is speaking of in this verse (Fee). His purpose is obvious, that some actions or behavior are pointless if there is no resurrection of the dead. He offers two “for instances”—the first of which borders on the bizarre. As I have before, I will spare you from an itemization of all these possibilities; I will even spare you from the details of the interpretations of the three commentators I have been using on a regular basis in this study—all of which differ from the other two. The common denominator among all of these attempts is the interpreter’s conclusion that he could very well be wrong, but then, so is probably everyone else!

There is no way to fit the practice of being baptized for someone who has already died into the salvation doctrine of the NT—much less Paul’s teaching. So there is no point in trying to shoehorn this verse into that environment. As for our three commentators, I found MacArthur’s solution to be nonsensical; Garland’s solution to be intriguing, but ultimately a bit too clever by half; but Fee’s to be simple and sensible. So we will go with that.

We do not have any historical evidence that this was a common practice in Corinth, much less in the church there. It is common today in the Mormon church, but we’ll not waste our time detailing that farcical doctrine. MacArthur is helpful in setting the scene for us (it is only his conclusion with which I disagree). He points out that in the NT “baptism is closely associated with salvation, of which it is an outward testimony.” Baptism is not required for salvation, but in the NT it would be assumed that if one were saved, one had also been baptized, “and a person was not baptized unless the church was satisfied he was saved. To ask, then, if a person was baptized (in the first century), was equivalent to asking if he was saved.”

In such an environment (the first century) it is easy to imagine that if a loved one died saved, but not baptized, those left behind might feel the need to supply the baptism vicariously—to, as it were, complete the person’s salvation. Or, to confuse the two even worse, some may even have done this for a loved one who was “on their way to becoming [a] believer” but then died before that happened (Fee).

The apostle is not sanctioning either of these practices, of course, and one can easily surmise that if this were occurring in the church, it was being done by a small minority. Paul is simply pointing out the obvious: What’s the point if there is no resurrection! What have you bought them by being baptized for them if they will not be raised from the dead? Answer: Not a blessed thing.

v30

Why are we also in danger every hour?

The apostle then offers a second “for instance” in vv30-32. We might reasonably ask, To what is he referring when he says “we” (possibly the other apostles or his fellows in ministry, but probably an editorial “we”) “we are in danger every hour,” and in v31, “I die daily”? He gives an accounting in his defense to the Corinthians in his second letter to them.

Read 2 Corinthians 11:23-27.

Thiselton renders this verse, “From day to day I court fatality.” This is not the statement of a self-righteous zealot hoping for a glorious martyr’s death, but an apostle of Christ stating the cold fact that to be one meant the very real possibility of physical harm—even death (v31).

I favor the NIV for v30: “And as for us, why do we endanger ourselves every hour?” *If there is no resurrection, if we will never make it out of the grave—that is, if we’ve all been played for fools—why place ourselves in danger every day? That would be really stupid.*

v31

I affirm, brethren, by the boasting in you which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily.

We don’t expect v31. As Fee rightly points out, Paul could have made his point (and more succinctly) by leaving out v31 and v32a, which would have given us “Why indeed do we ourselves face dangers every hour? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” (Fee). But he had his reasons for bringing the Corinthians—and his regard for them—into the discussion.

The NASB “I affirm” is essentially an oath; we would say, “I swear by...” Paul swears that he dies daily, and he swears this by his “boasting” in the Corinthians. (I find it bordering on the bizarre that the ESV runs back to the KJV with “I protest”—something even the NKJV does not do. Using “protest” here sends the modern reader in entirely the wrong direction.

J. Moffatt offers a helpful paraphrase: “Not a day but I am at death’s door! I swear it by my pride in you, brothers, through Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Gordon Fee: What a telling oath this is. To make sure that they understand the truth of his constant facing of death, he swears by that which is dearest to him, their own existence in Christ, which also came about by labors that had exposed him to such dangers. That seems also to be the point of the qualifying addition, “which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

The boast is his, but it is not self-serving, nor self-exalting. It rests completely on what Christ had done among them through his labors. Thus they are his boast; but for Paul that ultimately means boasting in Christ.

We will continue this paragraph in our next session, but before we leave it, let’s remind ourselves of the punchline to all this.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:16-19.

The resurrection of believers is incredibly important in the full scheme of God’s plan. The resurrection of Christ Jesus paved the way and made our own possible. If none of this is true, we have already perished, and “we are of all men most to be pitied.” We have been played for fools.

But, praise God, *it is true.*

Session 157: What's the Point?, part two

1 Corinthians 15:28-34

Preface

Why do we study God's word? Why do we worship God and seek His perspective on all things? Why is it important that we think rightly about God and the gospel of Christ? Why do we bother with such things?

As the apostle Paul wraps up his thoughts for this middle section of Chapter Fifteen, he reminds the Corinthians—and us—that what we believe affects how we live. This business of the resurrection of believers is not just some intellectual exercise with no bearing or influence on daily life. No, in these last three verses Paul will make clear that not believing in resurrection will color many of our life-decisions—more often than not, leading us into bad company and bad habits. And the root of this is, as Jesus put it to the Sadducees, that we “do not understand the Scriptures, or the power of God” (Mark 12:24). Many of us today do indeed believe that there will be a future resurrection for everyone, but I dare say that few of us grasp the true immensity of that fact, as well as the influence it has on our lives this side of the resurrection.

In addition, these three verses shed an important light on much of the errant behavior going on in the Corinth church. Since Chapter One of this letter we have watched as the apostle has addressed so many shortcomings and instances of downright abhorrent behavior in the church body, and we have struggled to understand how supposed Christians could behave in such a manner. These three verses reveal much of the “why” behind that behavior.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:30-34.

v32

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.

In our last session I agreed with other commentators that Paul could have made his point (and more succinctly) by leaving out v31 and v32a, which would have then been rendered “Why indeed do we ourselves face dangers every hour? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” (Fee). I went on to conclude, however, that Paul must have had his reasons for bringing the Corinthians—and his regard for them—into the discussion. Today we discover that reason.

If...I fought with wild beasts at Ephesus,

It is thought by most scholars that the apostle wrote this letter to the Corinth church while he was in Ephesus. It is also thought by most scholars that if Paul had indeed done battle with wild beasts in Ephesus that he would not have survived to write v32. He is not tacking this on to his list of actual persecutions and tribulations suffered while serving Christ—suggesting he has stood in the arena against ravening beasts, and somehow survived. He is speaking, at least, metaphorically, referring to the strong opposition he is experiencing in Ephesus (Fee, Garland), to which he refers in the next chapter.

Read 1 Corinthians 16:8-9.

It is also possible, I would contend, that more emphasis can be placed on the leading “If,” which might be rendered, Even if I fought with beasts...what does it profit me? This first sentence of the verse is a strong, punchy coda to what he said in v30 and v31: “Why are we also in danger every hour?” and “...I die daily.” From the literal to the hyperbolic: the first two speak of actual suffering and challenges on the road, while the third may be a bit of hyperbole to drive home his point.

Whatever is behind Paul's use of this phrase, it was a common metaphor in secular literature of the time, and stems from the use of wild beasts in the arena to torture and kill. Interestingly, “in Jewish legend, the willingness to sacrifice one's life in the arena for God is

evidence of faith in the resurrection” (Garland). The entire Chapter Seven in the apocryphal Second Maccabees tells the story of a family of seven brothers and their mother who were tortured and killed for their faith. It opens, “It came to pass also, that seven brethren with their mother were taken, and compelled by the king against the law to taste swine’s flesh, and were tormented with scourges and whips.” It goes on in rather gruesome detail to record the horrible torture of the brothers—which I will spare you. But for our purpose let me lift out a few of the dying words of the brothers:

And when he was at the last gasp, he said, Thou like a fury takest us out of this present life, but the King of the world shall raise us up, who have died for his laws, unto everlasting life. (2Ma 7:9)

After him was the third made a mocking stock: and when he was required, he put out his tongue, and that right soon, holding forth his hands manfully. And said courageously, These I had from heaven; and for his laws I despise them; and from him I hope to receive them again. (2Ma 7:10-11)

Now when this man was dead also, they tormented and mangled the fourth in like manner. So when he was ready to die he said thus, It is good, being put to death by men, to look for hope from God to be raised up again by him: as for thee, thou shalt have no resurrection to life. (2Ma 7:13-14)

It was the hope of resurrection that gave these men and their mother the strength and courage to suffer so for their God. As David Garland pithily writes, “Resurrection means endless hope, but no resurrection means a hopeless end.”

...what does it profit me?

What’s the point of it all? Why go to all this bother? Why collect so many scars and so often risk my life if there is no resurrection? Why should Christians suffer and die, as they do daily, for the amusement of the profane mob if there is no hope for the future?

If the dead are not raised, LET US EAT AND DRINK, FOR TOMORROW WE DIE.

If there is no resurrection, we may as well just party hearty, since our grave will indeed be our final resting place.

If from human motives...

But what does Paul mean by the phrase that begins this verse? The evidence we have looked at thus far provides us the manner in which we are to understand this. The NASB in this instance is not helpful; the NIV2011, with “If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus with no more than human hopes” takes liberties, of course, but takes us in the right direction; the KJVs are best, with “If, in the manner of men, I have fought with beasts at Ephesus” (emphasis added). In the Greek it is *kata anthropon*, which can mean “Like men, for applause, money, etc.” (Robertson), or “As men ordinarily do, for temporal reward; and not under the influence of any higher principle or hope” (Vincent). But the context of this verse and paragraph would suggest that Paul is referring to the shortsightedness of “mere men”—that is, men with a strictly earthbound perspective. If that sounds familiar, it is because Paul has used the term before in this letter.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:1-4. (v3: “mere men” = *kata anthropon*)

How ironic that Paul would accuse the Corinthians, of all people, of being “mere men,” “men of flesh”—that is, men who are not spiritual. These are the ones whose behavior regarding marriage and sex and meat sacrificed to idols was so bizarre (for supposed Christians) based on their self-perception of superior spirituality!

J. Hering employs the idea and imagery of a horizon. Paul is saying to the Corinthians, If my horizon were limited to earthly perception, the shortsighted vision of mere men, on a merely human level, what would be the point of suffering so for the name of Christ? It would be utterly wasted and futile. But my horizon is boundless, ending only in an eternity with my

Savior and Lord. With all that in my mind I can suffer ridicule, physical danger, stones and beatings, yes even wild beasts and death, because, just like Christ Himself, one day I will be bodily raised from the dead to enjoy His presence forever.

v33

Do not be deceived: "Bad company corrupts good morals."

Paul cites an ancient epigram to splash cold water on the errant Corinthians. Since v29 he has been employing the rhetorical device of argumentum ad absurdum (the form of argument that attempts to establish a claim by showing that the opposite scenario would lead to absurdity or contradiction) to convince the church of the absurdity of their position that there is no resurrection. For Paul, it is now time to put away the rhetoric and go for the jugular.

This will make the third time Paul has exclaimed, "Do not be deceived!" And the use of the epigram makes his point clearly: Quit hanging around and listening to the wrong people! We have seen the evidence for this right from Chapter One of this letter; so many in the church have been listening to the philosophies and mimicking the practices of the fallen society in which they dwell, and it is corrupting their faith and their relationship with Christ.

The KJV translates this verse, "Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners." This is because the word translated "company" in our other versions (*homilia*) can mean either companionship or conversation—which makes sense, since we typically converse with those whose company we keep. And actually it seems apropos: it isn't the physical proximity to the unsaved that necessarily corrupts our theology and habits, but giving credence to what they are saying—hence, what they believe to be true. If you hang around long enough with people who deny the resurrection of the dead, you'll eventually start agreeing with them.

v34

Become sober-minded as you ought, and stop sinning; for some have no knowledge of God. I speak this to your shame.

Again, remember that Paul is writing to a group of believers—he refers to them as those "sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling" (1:2) and "brethren" (1:10)—who consider themselves to be so highly "spiritual," so wise that they

- wink at incest taking place in the body,
- take their brother Christians to court,
- eat food sacrificed to pagan idols,
- frequent temple prostitutes while abstaining from relations with their spouse,
- selfishly hoard their expensive food at church love feasts,
- shame others in the church,
- and get drunk at Communion.

The KJVs, while not at all inaccurate, soften this with "Awake to righteousness," while the NIVs, (again not inaccurate, but as the NIVs often do, speaks of the result of the text rather than the text itself) make it "Come back to your senses." The ESV, while sounding like a paraphrase is really the best translation in my opinion, with "Wake up from your drunken stupor." *Eknepsate* means to become sober, sleep off a drunken fit; *dikaio*s means rightly, that which is correct, the right thing to do.

...and stop sinning

The verb *hamartanete me* is present, active, imperative; that is, stop doing what you are already doing!

for some have no knowledge of God. I speak this to your shame.

It is remotely possible that when the apostle states that "some have no knowledge of God" he is referring to the world outside of the church, but it is far more probable that he is pointing his finger at those leaders in the church who are "taking this church down its present disastrous course. Those who are leading others into a new understanding of *pneuma*, *sophia* and *gnosis* (spirit, wisdom, and knowledge) are here said to be, as the pagan world that surrounds them, people who are altogether 'ignorant of God'" (Fee).

In their disputes with Paul they have claimed to be in possession of a special spiritual knowledge; here Paul calls them out on that. This is a damning statement that should have elicited from every member of the Corinth church a deep, humbling self-evaluation. Let's close by reading from Mark's gospel a passage referenced at the beginning of this session. One day some Sadducees quizzed Jesus with a ridiculous, hypothetical situation about a woman being married to a string of seven brothers. Because Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection, they were attempting to trick Jesus.

Read Mark 12:23-27.

These were religious leaders in the Jewish community, yet Jesus rightly points out their ignorance. He nails them with "Is this not the reason you are mistaken, that you do not understand the Scriptures or the power of God... Have you not read in the book of Moses...? ...you are greatly mistaken."

It was to their shame that the Corinthians were so ignorant of God and His ways. That being the case, what's our excuse? Like them, we have the Spirit of God living within—but we have His complete written word at our fingertips—in multiple versions and just about every known language. We are to stop listening to the Siren Song of this fallen world and learn—learn fully and deeply—the eternal truth from above.

Session 158: New Life from Death

1 Corinthians 15:35-38

Preface

We are now ready for the third and final section of Chapter Fifteen. The first section was vv1-11: The Resurrection of Christ, in which the apostle establishes the fact of Christ's resurrection. The second section was vv12-34: The Certainty of (our) Resurrection because of the certainty of Christ's—which had to come first, for He was “the first fruits of those who are asleep” (v20). And now we begin the third section, vv35-58: The Resurrection Body, in which Paul either anticipates the questions in the minds of the Corinthians, or has already heard them—to wit, How will this resurrection actually take place?

Read 1 Corinthians 15:35-38.

v35

But someone will say, “How are the dead raised? And with what kind of body do they come?”

Paul's strong, even coarse response at the beginning of the next verse would lead us to believe that if this was indeed a set of questions sent to the apostle, it was not submitted in good faith. We have seen it before in this letter, that the Corinth assembly (or at least certain individuals in it) is actually prone to be argumentative, rather than humbly, honestly seeking answers, from the one who founded their church. It is also possible that he is simply supplying the questions himself, as a device to further his argument. There really is only one “question” being asked; the second specifies what the first leaves vague, and the second illumines the specifics behind the Corinthians' misgivings about resurrection.

To a certain extent we can sympathize with the Corinthians—those who “say that there is no resurrection of the dead” (v12). Their position is understandable if they thought of “resurrection” as meaning a dead and decayed body being raised “as is”—i.e., nothing more than a reanimated corpse. No one—especially one under the influence of the Greek culture—would wish for that to be the case; if even living flesh was abhorrent to them, how much more so flesh that had been corrupted by the grave!

Back in Chapter Six of this letter we were discussing the licentious behavior of some in the church.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:13-16.

The Corinthians had picked up the Grecian idea that the flesh, the physical body is nothing, that as “spiritual” beings we can look on our bodies as not even part of our essential being. The Corinthians were saying, “Hey, I'm now a ‘spiritual’ being. The body is nothing—it's just sex. For the physical body, everything is lawful for me.” But in the economy of God for man, sex is more than that; it is reserved for the marital state, and there it becomes something deep and profound. Sex outside marriage perverts God's eloquent and sublime plan for man and woman.

It only follows that to someone subscribing to that philosophy the very idea of reanimating the long-dead body with resurrection (i.e., without some sort of change) would be a repulsive thought.

v36a

You fool!

The NASB and the original KJV are the most literal with “You (Thou) fool.” Gordon Fee points out that here is a “translator's dilemma, since [You fool] is what Paul says, but the English ‘equivalent’ is almost certainly more harsh than Paul would have intended.” Hence we have our common translations attempting to smooth it out a bit. The Greek *aphron* refers to someone who is senseless, foolish, or, in this context, someone lacking “wisdom,” which would have been received by the Corinthians as a most disagreeable cut. The ESV is pretty good with, “You foolish person!”

The apostle Paul does not just think in eschatological terms—invariably placing his teaching in the context of the Last Things (Eschaton)—but he is also probably more knowledgeable of the Hebrew Scriptures than most. As he delivers the new and good news of Christ, his mind remains a catalog of what God was speaking before the incarnation of Christ Jesus. So when he reprimands the either representative or actual questioner of v35 with “You fool!” he is not just letting off steam, but hearkening back to the strength of that term in the OT.

Read Psalm 14:1-4.

Repeatedly in the OT the “fool” (same Greek word *aphron* in the Septuagint) is used to describe the one who fails to understand or even acknowledge God. Based on what he writes in the rest of this chapter, Paul could very well be accusing the Corinthians of either not knowing or forgetting the authoritative and creative power of Almighty God. And let us not be too quick to throw stones at that ancient congregation, for with all the ready distractions of our own time we can easily do the same.

In a 2019 issue of *Reflections by the Pond* entitled “O God, Have We Made You Too Small?” I wrote this:

When we think too much of ourselves, it is easy to think God too small. When we become consumed with our small and transient trials, the result is that we fill our world with self. The more room taken up by self, the less room remains for God.

Then I followed it with this quote from A. W. Tozer:

While we are looking at God, we do not see ourselves—blessed riddance.

Caught up in their own temporal lives, the Corinthians could well have stopped thinking very much about God, and forgetting that the One

- who created the universe and everything in it;
- who, as we will see, invented the idea of a seed, moldering in the wet soil, that would spring to new life in a form different from itself;
- who raised the flesh-bound Son of God from the dead to a body that could not be held by time or space or physical barriers—yet could also eat food—that this One could and would also do the same for every believer.

vv36b-37

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.

Not being a farmer, I nonetheless take note each summer and fall of the growth and wonder of the planted crops on either side of the road. As expensive as it can be to plant and harvest acres of corn, for example, it is a pretty good return: plant one kernel of corn in exchange for two ears of kernels. But even before that, I marvel at the creative genius of a God who invented the process by which a solitary seed can be buried underground, to eventually become a tall, healthy plant that looks nothing like the seed from which it emerged—a plant that comes equipped to start the cycle all over again by bearing fruit that can also be buried to produce another plant!

Like the Greeks, an agronomist might take issue with Paul’s use of the word “dies” (*apothane*) to describe what happens to the seed; the Greeks would say that the seed “springs to life.” But turn to John’s gospel.

Read John 12:24-25.

Drop a kernel of corn into a baggy and place it in a drawer. Twenty years later that corn will not have changed. Place it in soil and water it, however, and a brand new plant will result. As D. A. Carson points out in his thoughts on the John passage,

To love one's life is a fundamental denial of God's sovereignty...and therefore an idolatrous focus on self, which is the heart of all sin. Such a person loses his life, i.e., causes his own perdition. By contrast, the one who hates his life...will keep it for eternal life. This person denies himself...i.e., he chooses not to pander to self-interest but at the deepest level of his being declines to make himself the focus of his interest and perception, thereby "dying."

Now, while the illustration is the same, it is true that Jesus was making a different point from Paul in this letter. Jesus' point was centered around death being necessary for fruit, while Paul's "concern is with death as the precondition of the life to come, not in the sense that all must die [v51] but in the sense that the seed itself demonstrates that out of death a new expression of life springs forth" (Fee).

Nevertheless, I contend that the two points can be harmonized. Jesus spoke of denying self to serve Him. In the next verse He says, "If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also..." (John 12:26). "Life eternal" means life with Christ. Jesus says that we get there by serving Him. Paul says that "life eternal" is not just a spiritual life but a physical one that will require a new body—one springing forth from the death of the old.

I would also contend that there is no real tension between what Paul says here about "unless it dies" and what he says in v51 about some being changed who do not "sleep." For that change to an imperishable, spiritual body (vv42-44) does indeed require the "death" of the former body; it ceases to exist. In Paul's analogy, the "seed," that which is sown, is not "the body which is to be," but one utterly different. And the kernel of corn planted in the ground, once from it the new plant has emerged, dies; once its work is done, it withers and decays into nothingness.

v38

But God gives it a body just as He wished, and to each of the seeds a body of its own.

Paul is not yet ready to move from the analogy of the seed to the human application, but he hints at it in his three uses of the word "body" (*soma*) in vv37-38. Stand back and look at an entire field of corn; the plants all look the same. But they are not—and that is how God designed it. Whether wheat, or corn, or the human body it is all worked out according to the will of God. This is why the apostle called the questioner a "fool" in v36: the question itself left the creative genius of God out of the equation. God will do as He pleases because He is God, and it pleases Him to raise to new life and a new body that which has died.

Read Philipians 3:20-21.

Session 159: Difference

1 Corinthians 15:39-41

Preface

It seems appropriate to preface our study of vv39-41 by reading, once again, an earlier passage in this letter.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:13-16.

In that passage the apostle Paul makes the very important statement: “The body is...for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body.” Paul goes on to express the importance of the human, earthly body in vv19-20:

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.

I'll not repeat all that I've said about how many in the Corinth church perceived the fleshly, human body; we have covered that several times before. Let it suffice that they saw the human body as being utterly unspiritual, worthy only of being discarded at death—and good riddance.

Back in Chapter Six, however, Paul was saying, No, no, God has a use for the earthly body. He places His own Holy Spirit in that body to sanctify it, and as a promise—an earnest—of what is to come for the believer. Then he concludes with the command to bring glory to God “in [or with] your body”! Remarkable. The Corinthians said, Nah, the earthly body, the flesh, means nothing: do whatever you want with it, and when we die it just rots in the ground. No, God has a use for this body.

Now in our current passage, he will extend this concept by stating that bodies of all sorts—even heavenly bodies—possess a glory of a sort.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:38-41.

v39

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.

In the previous passage the apostle employed an agricultural example to illustrate his point regarding the resurrection body: the planted seed “dies,” then is “raised” with a new body—its own body, just as God desired. And I used the illustration of a kernel of corn; you plant that kernel of corn and it “dies”: it sprouts roots and is “raised” above ground in a brand new body that looks nothing like that original kernel.

Here now, to make his point further, he presents “different kinds of terrestrial flesh and different kinds of brilliance among celestial bodies” (Garland). and perhaps you noticed, when the passage was read, all the repetition. There are three key words in this passage which, by their repetition, emphasize its message:

flesh (*sarx*): used five times in v39;

another (*alle & hetera*): used six times in vv39-41;

glory (*doxa*): used six times in vv40-41.

We're not here to count words, but repetition in God's word serves to drive home the point of a passage. Any time you are reading God's word and a word or two is repeated, take note of that, and ask yourself why? The Corinthians fear that resurrection means something like a reanimated corpse; since v35 Paul has been employing various imagery to get them to understand that resurrection means that flesh is changed to something different (“another”).

We also need not get lost in the minutia of differences and the hierarchical positioning of the various species listed in v39. Down here on terra firma “flesh” takes on various forms: for different species and genii, the “body” is different from others—it is “another” (*alle*, another of the same sort).

Read John 14:16. (Jesus speaking)

Here Jesus says that the one to be sent—another—will be different from Him, but one like Him: the Holy Spirit. But then in v40 Paul uses a different Greek word translated “another.” And now we can see where he is going with this.

v40

There are also heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one, and the glory of the earthly is another.

In this context the word “glory” (*doxa*) can mean “radiance.” Earthly bodies have a certain inherent radiance, and heavenly bodies do as well. Both have a measure of radiance—but between the earthly and the heavenly that radiance is different: “another.” Here it is the Greek *hetera*, another of a different sort. *Alle* (v39) is one of the same sort; Jesus, Holy Spirit: same sort, same genus, as it were. Here it is the Greek *hetera*.

Although the meaning is getting lost in this “woke” generation, there are men and there are women: each is a different sort from the other—no matter what they think in this culture, no matter what society says, man is different from woman. A man who prefers to lie with a woman, or a woman who prefers to lie with a man, is called a heterosexual—another of a different sort. Human being, but very different.

v41

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.

When we gaze into the night sky with our naked eyes we perceive the difference between the radiance of the moon from that of the sun, and the radiance of the stars is different from both of those. We don’t require a telescope to reveal that. Nevertheless, that difference is another of the same sort (*alle*)—a difference of degrees, not kind. All these bodies dwell not on earth but in the heavens, so their radiance is *hetera* from the bodies of living beings on earth, but *alle* to each other. That is, in English, these bodies dwell in the heavens, so their radiance is another of a different sort from the bodies of living beings on earth, but another of the same sort to each other.

Notice, however, that while a certain “glory” is assigned to both those on earth and those in the heavens, note how for those on earth, in v39, he uses the word *sarx* (flesh) to describe the container for that glory, but for those in the heavens, in v41, the container is that glory. Here Paul subtly broaches the reality of the resurrected “glorified” body. In heaven, we will not have flesh that is glorified; we will just have glory. What an amazing thought!

Note too that—just as our naked eyes tell us—“star differs from star in glory.” Here Paul uses a third Greek term: *diapherei*, which means to carry through (by extension) with a difference. It is, admittedly, a little confusing. In this context I take that to mean that different heavenly bodies carry their glory (brilliance; NIV: *splendor*) differently from each other. And we see that: the splendor of our sun is carried to earth far differently from the splendor of the moon, and each of those different from the far-distant stars. From Paul’s use of these examples, we can draw the following conclusions:

1. God is the designer of this world, and according to His wishes (v38), there are different forms of terrestrial flesh (bodies), but their difference from each other is only a difference of the same sort—they all have a form of earth-bound flesh.
2. God also designed the *heavenly* bodies; though of differing radiance from each other (v41), they too share with each other a difference of the same sort.
3. The difference between the terrestrial bodies and the heavenly bodies, however, is a difference of a *different* sort—they are *completely* different from each other.
4. Even so, all—terrestrial and heavenly—have been given, by God’s design, a measure of glory, or splendor. The Corinthians thought that there was no glory in human flesh. No, God has given glory even to earth-bound, human flesh.
5. Nevertheless, the “body” God gives the resurrected (by His wishes) with which to dwell with Him will be utterly different—of a different sort—from the buried fleshly body. Resurrected believers will *not* be simply a reanimated corpse. We will have a different glory—a different being.

Session 160: Contrasting the Now to the Future

1 Corinthians 15:42-44a

Preface

Since v36 Paul has been easing into his response to the rhetorical questions he posed in v35: “How are the dead raised? And with what kind of body do they come?” He has employed a series of metaphors, beginning with the sown seed (vv36-38); earthly, multi-species flesh (v39); and heavenly “bodies” (vv40-41). Now, in v42, the apostle sets aside metaphors and launches into one of the most eloquent and dynamic descriptions of believers’ resurrection in all of God’s word. Were the rest of this chapter written as a musical score it would be one long, extended crescendo, culminating in the climactic *fortissimo* of vv55-57, followed by the *pianissimo denouement* of v58. So let us begin this symphony by examining its opening bars. Let’s begin with v40, to give us the context.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:40-44.

v42a

So also is the resurrection of the dead.

This verse begins with *houto kai*—“So also”—which explicitly ties it back to the metaphors Paul has been using to set the stage for this pronouncement.

Lately it would seem that I have been inordinately kind to the NIV translations, but for the moment I would like to counter-balance that. There is no verb in the opening sentence, which is not really required: So also the resurrection of the dead would be more poetic. Nonetheless, all of our English translations insert the verb “is,” except for the NIVs, which insert “will it be.”

Gordon Fee: Since the verbs that follow are expressed in the present, that seems preferable here as well. These are gnomic presents, and therefore timeless.

The NIV throws it into the future—which doesn’t really fit in the verbal context of this passage. Fee sloughs off the NIV version as “understandable, but slightly off-center”; it is true that the resurrection of believers does take place in the future, but I believe the difference between “is” and “will be” is a little more important in this context, as we may see as we proceed with our examination of this passage.

Right off we see that the first few sentences of this passage contain a series of comparisons: something is “sown” and then it is “raised.”

- That which is sown perishable, is raised imperishable.
- That which is sown in dishonor, is raised in glory.
- That which is sown in weakness, is raised in power.
- That which is sown natural, is raised spiritual.

Except for the last, in v44a, there is no expressed subject; in v42b the NASB, NIVs, and NKJV insert “body,” but it is not in the Greek text. It is a natural assumption that Paul uses the word “sown” (*speiro*) as he did earlier in the example of the seed (vv36-37), and that he refers here to the deceased being “sown” to the ground for burial. But that interpretation breaks down when we get to v43: “it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power.” Briefly, “dishonor” (or “humiliation” [Fee] or “disgrace”) does not seem appropriate for the burial of a believer; nor does “weakness” (*astheneia*), a word which does not refer to an absence of power, but just diminished power. That does not seem right for a corpse.

There are a number of options from which we could choose to determine the use of “sown,” but the one that tracks best for me is that instead of referring explicitly to the buried corpse, it refers to “human existence in general (‘the present state from birth to death’ [Edwards])” (Garland). This also tracks best with Paul’s statement in v51: “...we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed.” Being “sown” into a grave is not necessary for the believer to receive the benefit of the right-hand side of these clauses: imperishable, glory, power, and a spiritual body. Not all believers will die before they get that.

In the Greco-Roman world in which the Corinthians lived, “sowing” was a common metaphor for human origins, and this is surely how the Corinthians would have understood it (Garland). We each have our origin in Adam, and from birth we each dwell in fallen, perishable, dishonorable, weak, and natural flesh. Thus we were “sown” into this earthly existence. So now let’s read an earlier portion of Chapter Fifteen in this light.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:20-22.

“In Adam” there is only death—and we understand that to mean something more than just being lowered into a grave—the cessation of physical life. In contrast, “in Christ” there is life—“all will be made alive”—and we understand that to mean something more than just being raised from a grave. We have life in the here and now because of Christ.

42b

It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body;

I favor the KJVs (also the far newer *Christian Standard Bible*) that translate this “sown in corruption.”

Read Romans 8:19-23. (go back to v21)

I am reminded of something I read just this week—especially important if you are uncomfortable with this interpretation.

Breitbart.com: The *New York Post* reports that Facebook employees are criticizing CEO Mark Zuckerberg [for not censoring conservative content more vigorously.] One staffer reportedly wrote on the day of the January 6th Capitol riots, which were partly organized via Facebook: “History will not judge us kindly.” The consistent message throughout the messages is that the company’s overwhelmingly leftist staff feel the company hasn’t done enough to suppress and censor conservative voices.

Perception is all. From a conservative perspective, social media has been brutally censoring conservative viewpoints, but from the perspective of the left, they have not done nearly enough—and shame on them. From an earthly perspective the joyful parents of their newborn see only a perfectly beautiful, innocent baby—and rightly so. What could possibly be “corrupt” about such newborn innocence? From God’s perspective of holiness, however, we are—from conception to the grave—born into ruin, decay, corruption. The one who trusts in Christ becomes a child of the Father in heaven, and is granted His Spirit as an earnest for his future with Him. But physically, even the believer’s flesh cannot dwell with God the Father, and must be transformed by Him into “incorruption”—that is, imperishable, eternal, and suitable for dwelling with a holy God.

We can see in our minds the Corinthians nodding their head in agreement with the statement that this present, fleshly body is corrupt; what they are denying—and what Paul is endeavoring to convince them—is that we are raised into an incorruptible state. This first comparison lies at the heart of Paul’s argument; thus he will employ it several more times in the orchestral climax of this chapter.

v43a

it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory;

Again, from a heavenly perspective, the lives of human beings are ones of dishonor, shame, disgrace, ignominy. It is God’s indwelling Spirit who reveals this to us; even now, as believers, our flesh wants to deny this truth.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:14.

In the resurrection, however, we will become beings of “glory”—not shame. And this time the apostle uses the Greek *doxa* not to describe a level of radiance, but to express the “Jewish

eschatological language for the future state of the righteous” (Fee)—a state so marvelous we cannot even imagine it.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:9. (quoting Isaiah)

v43b

it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power;

No one in his right mind would dispute the fact that, from birth to death, the flesh is weak (*astheneia* = frailty, feeble, pain, worry, sickness). There is strength of a sort, but it is a fragile, undependable strength. This is our nature; it is built-in.

Coming forth from the grave, or at the Rapture, however, we are given a power heretofore unknown by us. The word is *dynamei*, meaning pretty much how we understand the word “power.” But we must also understand what it does not mean.

Albert Barnes: This does not denote power like that of God, nor like the angels. It does not affirm that it shall be endued with remarkable and enormous physical strength, or that it shall have the power of performing what would now be regarded as miraculous. It is to be regarded as the opposite of the word “weakness,” and means that it shall be no longer liable to disease; no more overcome by the attacks of sickness; no more subject to the infirmities and weaknesses which it here experiences. It shall not be prostrate by sickness, nor overcome by fatigue. It shall be capable of the service of God without weariness and languor; it shall need no rest as it does here (see Revelation 7:15; compare Revelation 22:5); but it shall be in a world where there shall be no fatigue, lassitude, disease; but where there shall be ample power to engage in the service of God forever.

v44a

it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.

We will just touch on this now, but develop it further in our next session when we develop the remainder of this verse and the rest of the paragraph (to v49).

With this first part of v44 Paul concludes his list of comparisons, but also supplies a segue into the next passage. There is more here beneath the English words, but for now let us understand that a member of the Corinth church hearing this clause would have stiffened in his seat; it would have been a shocking statement to them.

We today, with benefit of a completed canon and the myriad resources available to us two thousand years later, can comfortably grasp this. We are born into this world in a condition for this temporal world: natural, sensual, of flesh. At the resurrection (or Rapture), we will become something else: *pneumatikon* = of the s/Spirit.

The problem for many in the Corinth church was that they considered themselves already to be *pneumatikon*—not just as we might understand it, as beings now in possession of the Holy Spirit, living a life under His influence and support, but in their eyes as truly, completely spirit-beings—even (again, in their eyes) superior to the apostle Paul in this regard. More on this next week. For now, let us close with the encouraging words Paul wrote to the church in Philippi, in which the apostle makes clear that this earth—and this body—is not our real home.

Read Philippians 3:20-21. (“citizenship”= community, commonwealth, our country)

Session 161: We Are Not What We Will Be, part one

1 Corinthians 15:44b-49

Preface

Before we get into the next passage I would like to add just one more thought about Paul's use of the word "sown" in vv42-44. In our last session I said that instead of interpreting the word to mean "being buried," I favored the interpretation stated by Jonathan Edwards (for one): "the present state from birth to death"—that is taking "sown" to mean something like "sown into this world at birth."

As I have thought about our discussion on this in class last week, I concluded that there is no appreciable difference between the two. One position looks at the moment a body is buried; the other looks at the moment of birth inaugurating the life that follows. In both cases, however, the object under consideration is fallen flesh ("natural body" = *soma psychikon*)—in any state—in contrast to the glorified flesh that comes after the grave. Thus I conclude that this is a rather minor point of disagreement. That being said, the "birth to death" position remains the better interpretation, and one that will serve us best in digesting the verses before us.

Correction/Clarification

Finally, let me offer a possible correction, or clarification. I say "possible" because I cannot recall every word I have said in class—especially in those times I veer off my printed notes. In some of my comments I may have stated or implied that the resurrected believer will be (in opposition to the previous fleshly existence) now a completely, 100%, Spirit-being. If I said or implied that, it is not true, as we will see in this session.

We learn from Jesus Himself the nature of our glorified body: It was material and could consume food (Luke 24:39-43), yet it was not bound by the laws of nature (Luke 24:31, 36-37). It was not "pure spirit," but still possessed a level of physicality.

M. R. Vincent: The expression natural body signifies an organism animated by a ψυχή soul; that phase of the immaterial principle in man which is more nearly allied to the σὰρξ flesh, and which characterizes the man as a mortal creature; while πνεῦμα spirit is that phase which looks Godward, and characterizes him as related to God.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:42-49.

v44

it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.

Let's begin by more precisely defining the two terms the apostle employs to express the difference between the corporeal, earthly body and the body fit for an eternity with Christ.

it is sown a natural body... If there is a natural body,

This is a challenging term in the Greek (*soma psychikon*) because of how we typically might think of the word "soul." Literally, the word *psychikos* means "belonging to the soul," which, to us, we may relate to the spirit. We very often confuse the two terms: soul and spirit. But in the Greek this word, which comes from the Greek *psyche* (soo-kay), refers to that which motivates the physical. In secular Greek "the soul can be equivalent to the person. The soul, bound as it is to the body, is so much a personal force, that psyche can be used instead of the personal pronoun, so that 'my soul' is equivalent to 'I'" (Brown).

Thus Paul uses *soma psychikon* to contrast the natural, physical body with the resurrected spiritual body. Remember, his purpose here is to dissuade the Corinthians from their position that resurrection means just a reanimated, *soma psychikon*. No, Paul says, it is something entirely different; it is not *psychikon* but *pneumatikon*. I like the way the Jamieson, Fausset and Brown Commentary explains the difference:

JFB: ...a natural body—literally, "an animal body," a body molded in its organism of "flesh and blood" to suit the animal soul which predominates in it. The Holy Spirit in the spirit of believers, indeed, is an earnest of a superior state (Romans 8:11), but meanwhile in the

body the animal soul preponderates; hereafter [after resurrection] the Spirit shall predominate, and the animal soul be duly subordinate.

In his second (extant) letter to the Corinth church, Paul revisits this idea of our natural body—this time comparing it to an impermanent tent or hut yearning to be replaced by “our dwelling from heaven.”

Read 2 Corinthians 5:1-5.

Whether, as the JFB puts it, our heavenly body will be little more than a reversal of influence or animation from soul to spirit, or the entirety of the “animal nature” will be forever expunged, the fact is that we will be raised in a body compatible with the holiness of heaven.

it is raised a spiritual body ...there is also a spiritual body.

Soma pneumatikon is how the apostle describes our resurrection physicality. Gordon Fee makes a salient point regarding the resurrected body:

Fee: These terms do not describe the “stuff” or composition of the body... Rather, they describe the present body in terms of its essential characteristics as earthly, on the one hand, and therefore belonging to the life of the present age, and as heavenly, on the other, and therefore belonging to the life of the Spirit in the age to come. It is “spiritual,” not in the sense of “immaterial” but of “supernatural” ...because it will have been re-created by Christ.

Fee concludes,

The transformed body, therefore, is not composed of “spirit”; it is a *body* adapted to the eschatological existence that is under the ultimate domination of, and animated by, the [Holy] Spirit. Thus for Paul, to be truly *pneumatikos* is to bear the likeness of Christ (v49) in a transformed body, fitted for the new age.

v45

So also it is written, “The first MAN, Adam, BECAME A LIVING SOUL.” The last Adam became a life-giving spirit.

For some, this verse represents a jarring break in the apostle’s flow of thought, but it does not if one subscribes to our interpretation (after Edwards, Garland, and Fee) of his concept of “sowing” in vv42-44. If we think of that as referring to the human being’s life, as born into fallen, corrupted flesh as a result of Adam’s rebellion against a holy God, then v45 and what follows flows logically.

In v44b Paul established his foundational principle: “If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.” This will form an *inclusio* ending with v49: “Just as we have borne the image of the earthy, we will also bear the image of the heavenly.” Paul’s purpose is for the Corinthians to accept—and thus believe—his “if...then” principle: If there is a natural body (and, of course, we know there is), then there must be a concomitant spiritual body at the resurrection. And in this passage (vv45-47) Paul illustrates this principle by means of a comparison between the “first man, Adam” and the “last Adam” (i.e., Christ).

it is written, “The first MAN, Adam, BECAME A LIVING SOUL.”

Paul cites the Septuagint version of Genesis 2:7:

And God formed the man of dust of the earth, and breathed upon his face the breath of life, and the man became a living soul.

He quotes literally from Genesis only “man” and “became a living soul,” which is how, in our common versions, only the NASB shows the distinction. Here Paul combines citation with interpretation (referred to as a “midrash pesher”). Paul draws from the creation account to tie the use of “soul” (or “being”) to the contrast between soul and spirit in his letter. “Soul” is the cognate noun for the adjective *psychikos*.

The last Adam became a life-giving spirit.

If it sounds odd to you to hear Paul refer to Christ as the “last Adam,” remember that “Adam” is simply the personalized form of the Hebrew *adam* (aw-dawm’), the word for human being, or mankind. “Last,” here, has the sense of being the ultimate (man). Look at v49.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:49.

The word translated “have borne” here, *ephoresamen*, means to carry a burden or to constantly wear something as clothing—both make sense from our viewpoint: we, as humans, “wear” the image of the earthly, and, at times, it can indeed be a considerable burden.

But Paul’s point in v45 is to show that both the first Adam and the last Adam were each the progenitors of their respective “clothing.” Adam in the Garden was the first to wear earthly and earthy human flesh (later, fallen flesh); Christ Jesus was the first to wear the spiritual “flesh” of the resurrection. This all ties back to the earlier passage.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:20-22.

That last statement on v22 brings something to mind. I don’t mean to make too much of this; take it for the little it is worth. But note that “in Adam” (because of Adam), “all die.” Adam himself became a “living soul” (v45), but for others, he only took life. By contrast, because of Christ “all will be made alive.” The first Adam took away life (or rather spoiled life for the rest of us); the last Adam gives life—and because of His resurrection, every believer has eternal, perfect, spirit-life. The first Adam spoiled earthly life for the rest of us, but the last Adam will restore what might have been ours from the beginning, had the first Adam not rebelled.

In this is revealed the selfishness of man, and the sacrificial unselfishness of the Savior.

Session 162: We Are Not What We Will Be, part two

1 Corinthians 15:44b-49

Preface

John MacArthur helpfully breaks down this current discussion into four points. To Paul's rhetorical question posed in v35—"But someone will say, 'How are the dead raised? And with what kind of body do they come?'"—the apostle, in the subsequent verses, answers his own questions in four ways:

1. vv36-38: he cites illustrations from nature;
2. vv39-42a: citing the different forms of earthly flesh and heavenly bodies, he hints at the makeup of resurrected bodies;
3. vv42b-44: he offers four contrasts between the earthly body and the resurrected body.

Now, in a fourth answer,

4. vv45-49: he contrasts the earthly prototype ("the first man, Adam") with the spiritual prototype ("the last Adam").

Sidebar: Pertinent to our discussion in class last week regarding the created nature of the first Adam's body, MacArthur writes this: "Adam and Eve originally were in a probationary period. Had they proved faithful rather than disobedient, their bodies would have been glorified and immortalized by eating of the fruit of the tree of life, which they then could have eaten (see Genesis 2:9). Because they sinned, however, they were put out of the garden lest they eat of the tree of life and live forever in a state of sin."

Read Genesis 2:8-9.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:44b-49.

I think of our natural, earthly bodies as I do the earth itself; thus I think of our practical stewardship of our bodies as I do our stewardship of this earth. God has called us to be good managers of the earth He has given us. Even as it has been given us to use for our benefit (Genesis 1:26ff), we are to be good stewards of its resources, keeping its water clean, its air breathable, its soil healthy and fertile. In none of this, however, are we to exalt or worship this earth as if it is a living being more important than its inhabitants. That is heresy; it is idolatry.

Just so our natural, physical bodies. We are to be good stewards of the bodies God has given us. We are to do what we can to keep them healthy and vital, and to keep them useful to our God in His service. Like the earth on which we live, our bodies belong to their Creator, to do with as He sees fit. Beyond that, however, these natural bodies are little more than the "tent" (2 Corinthians 5:1-5)—a non-permanent structure—in which we dwell. They are not to become the focus of our attention; we are not to pedestalize them, making them more important than they really are. That, too, is heresy; it is idolatry.

v46

However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual.

At first glance, our response to v46 might be, "Yeah... your point?" But there is more here if we back off and consider this through a wide-angled lens.

It is understandable that mankind would be preoccupied with what they know firsthand: this earth in its present state and our physical bodies as we know them. It is also understandable that we could come to think that this is all there is and things will probably be like this always—just ask the young.

Paul opens his argument about the order of things in v46 by stating the obvious, but also by voicing an axiom that has been true since the beginning of time: the "lower life precedes the higher" (Vincent)—e.g., "bare grain" to standing wheat (v37). This puts a slightly different spin on what Paul states in v22: "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive." It is God's order that the movement is from the lesser to the greater—that is, "in Christ." Not so "in Adam." In Adam the movement is toward inevitable degeneration, sickness, and ultimate death, and after that, eternal damnation and misery.

But God's economy in Christ is the reverse of that. The essential "natural" comes first, just as it was necessary for the Son of God to be incarnated, for only then could He be nailed to a cross for our transgressions. Even for Christ, the "natural" had to come first (for our salvation) before He could be clothed in His spiritual form. Just so man.

Matthew Henry: We must bear the image of the earthy before we can bear the image of the heavenly. Such is the established order of Providence. We must have weak, frail, mortal bodies by descent from the first Adam, before we can have lively, spiritual, and immortal ones by the quickening power of the second. We must die before we can live to die no more.

v47

The first man is from the earth, earthy; the second man is from heaven.

No one since has been so "earthy" as the first man, Adam. We can easily say that all since were "from the earth," for this is our home; we did not come here from somewhere else. But Adam, uniquely, emerged from the literal "dust" of the planet.

Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. (Genesis 2:7)

The picture is of Yahweh *elohim* reaching down into the soil of Eden with His own hands and fashioning, shaping, crafting the first human being. After He had done this, Yahweh "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life," thus transforming the lifeless, earthen figure into a living being with a soul.

In contrast, "the second man"—second Adam, Jesus the Christ—was not at all of this earth, not to mention, earthy. Neither of these men were born: the first man was created, personally by God from the soil of earth; the second "man" was eternal deity, incarnated on earth through the normal birth process of a human virgin. And, from an earthly perspective, the earthy man (the lesser, natural man) came first; the second, spiritual man came second. Indeed, if things had gone better in Eden, there would have been no need for the spiritual man to come at all!

All that may be true, but Paul's purpose goes beyond this. He is not really concerned here with origins—the next two verses make this clear. A literal rendering of v47 reads,

The first man of earth made of dust;

The second man of heaven. (Fee)

That is, "of" instead of "from." Of our common translations, only the NIV2011 faithfully renders this:

The first man was of the dust of the earth; the second man is of heaven.

As vv48-49 reveal, the apostle's interest lies less with where they came from, than the difference in their qualitative characteristics: the first man had an earthbound perspective. He was "earthy" in the sense that he could not see beyond the immediate horizon. In Yahweh he could have had it all; instead, he chose the instant gratification of what Satan offered. In that choice he doomed not just himself, but all of humanity to follow. His body started dying the moment he bit into that fruit.

Jesus, of course, was and is the antithesis of this. And we could wax poetically about the contrasts between the two—believe me, I'd love to—but then we would lose our hold on the apostle's purpose in these verses. Yes, Christ Jesus was from heaven, and it is true that while in His incarnated state He held to a heavenly mindset and character. But Paul is not building his argument around Christ's heavenly perspective while in the flesh. This is all about resurrection, and when he states that the second man is of heaven, he refers to Christ's resurrected, glorified state—a state that we as believers will share when we are resurrected (v49).

Gordon Fee: Believers are said to share both kinds of existence, that of Adam through their humanity, that of Christ through their resurrection. They do not share Christ's heavenly because, *as He*, they are *from* heaven, but because at the resurrection they will receive a heavenly *body* that is just like His.

vv48-49

*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.*

Reading v48, I am reminded of something Jesus said in His parable about the rich man and Lazarus. From his misery and torment in Hades, the rich man cried out for Abraham to send Lazarus to cool his tongue with a bit of water. Abraham gave two reasons why this request would not be met: For the rich man it was too late; he had had his fine life prior to death. Abraham said as well, “And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, so that those who wish to come over from here to you will not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us” (Luke 16:26).

Now, the “great chasm fixed” in the parable referred to the impassable gulf between Hades and heaven—“Abraham’s bosom.” But there is a similar great chasm between earth and heaven.

*As is the earthy, so also are those who are earthy...
Just as we have borne the image of the earthy...*

Right now believers still living are “earthy,” of dust, natural, fleshly. We are sown into this world so, and so we are sown into the grave. From birth to the grave we wear the clothing (*ephoresamen*, “have borne”) of the earthy. So clothed in the apparel of the soil, there is no entrance for us into glory.

*and as is the heavenly, so also are those who are heavenly.
we will also bear the image of the heavenly.*

Likewise, those who have preceded us—human beings—cannot sally back and forth between. They are now free of the burden of the earthy, and in their present state they must remain (not having the passports of either deity or of the angelic messengers).

Thus we are either one or the other: we are born of Adam, earthy; in Christ, and through His groundbreaking resurrection, we are reborn of the last Adam, heavenly. In that we will be in a body imperishable, glorious, with power, and, at long last, spiritual (vv42-44).

We are either one or the other, but for those who are in Christ, (look at the end of v44) “If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.” The higher life will indeed follow the lower—it must.

Albert Barnes: As we are so closely connected with Adam as to resemble him, so by the divine arrangement, and by faith in the Lord Jesus, we are so closely connected with him that we shall resemble him in heaven. And as he is now free from frailty, sickness, pain, sorrow, and death, and as he has a pure and spiritual body, adapted to a residence in heaven, so shall we be in that future world. The argument here is, that the connection which is formed between the believer and the Saviour is as close as that which subsisted between him and Adam; and as that connection with Adam involved the certainty that he would be subjected to pain, sin, sickness, and death, so the connection with Christ involves the certainty that he will like him be free from sin, sickness, pain, and death, and like him will have a body that is pure, incorruptible, and immortal.

Session 163: We Will All be Changed, part one

1 Corinthians 15:50-52a

Preface

We are now ready for the climax of this chapter—and perhaps of the entire letter. In the remaining verses of Chapter Fifteen, the apostle Paul clarifies a number of aspects on the resurrection that the Corinthians (we presume) did not understand.

1. Some Christians will still be alive when Christ returns for the church (v51).
2. Whether living or dead, all Christians will receive new, glorified bodies at His coming; they will be “changed” (vv51-52).
3. This change will occur instantaneously and completely for all Christians, whether living or dead (v52).
4. The change will be from one kind of body to another (vv51-54).

In this passage Paul at last answers his rhetorical query of v35 definitively and with a declarative majesty.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:50-58.

v50

Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

Man seems to be born shortsighted. The first man, Adam, certainly was, and that proclivity has come down to all of us from his loins. As we are nearing the end of this letter to the Corinthians, I have begun compiling a summary list entitled, “What I Have Learned from Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians.” And one of the more dramatic takeaways from this letter, in my opinion, rises out of this closing passage of Chapter Fifteen. We have run into it before, in this letter and in other studies, and it is here as well. It is the surprising number of instances of the “now—not yet” pattern in unsuspected places.

Those of us who have been raised in the church from childhood, have typically been taught that certain passages are to be interpreted as applying to a certain time frame, say, for instance, our life in Christ on this earth—only to discover in study that those same passages relate to different time frames as well. Reading v50 in the context of Chapter Fifteen we understand that Paul is speaking about the moment of resurrection for every believer, in which we will exchange our perishable “flesh and blood” for “the imperishable.” That moment is set in the future: it may be tomorrow, in the next five minutes, or one thousand years hence, but in this moment it is in the future. Yet when I read this verse earlier this week, it reminded me of something from God’s word that I had never before associated with the Eschaton.

Read John 3:3.

We grow up reading a passage such as this in light of our conversion experience; the phrase “born again” (more literally, “born from above”) is our standard currency for “becoming a Christian.” Perfectly true, of course. Perfectly valid.

Read John 3:4-7.

When Jesus speaks of the role of the Holy Spirit, and when He says, “You must be born again,” we immediately take that to mean that one must be a Christian to get to heaven (i.e., “the kingdom of God”). Again, perfectly true. But, being shortsighted, we think that’s all there is, and we move on. Jesus, however, was speaking eschatologically. Yes, He is speaking of the necessity of being converted, to becoming a follower of His before we can see heaven. But He is also referring to believers’ resurrection.

born of the S/spirit

Yes, part of the package when we bow before the Lordship of Christ is that we receive the Holy Spirit as a permanent part of our life. In that, we could rightly say that we have been

“born of the S/spirit.” It can be said that we are now spirit-kind. Yet the flesh remains—the natural, perishable body. This is the “now.”

At the resurrection, however, this earthly, earthy, perishable flesh—the “flesh and blood” of v50—must and will be exchanged for a body—a tangible body—that is truly spirit-kind, for it will be imperishable.

...cannot see the kingdom of God.

...cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

...cannot inherit the kingdom of God. (v50)

When we come to Christ we immediately gain the promise of sonship; we gain the promise of being fellow heirs with Christ—that is, we inherit what He inherits (not all, but some).

Read Romans 8:14-17.

This is a promise not yet realized; the check has been written, but we cannot yet cash it. That day will come at the resurrection, for the promise cannot be fulfilled by someone clothed in perishable mortality. Only once we are clothed in imperishable immortality can we see, off in the distance, the kingdom; only then can we enter through its gates; and only then can we receive our due inheritance as brothers and sisters of Christ.

A kingdom requires a king, and D. A. Carson points out that that, too, is another example of “now—not yet.”

Carson: The resulting tension is no different from the corresponding Synoptic tension as to when the kingdom dawns. In Matthew, for instance, Jesus is born the King (Matthew 1-2), He announces the kingdom and performs the powerful works of the kingdom (4:17; 12:28), but it is not until He has arisen from the dead that all authority becomes His (28:18-20).

v51

Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed,

The Thessalonians were concerned that just maybe those who had previously died would miss out on Christ’s return. Like some friends of ours who, years ago, finally started using e-mail, and asked if they had to be there to receive an incoming message at its moment of arrival, the Thessalonians thought it would be necessary for them to be alive and waiting for them to be included in the Rapture. Paul assures them that not only will the dead be included, they will go first.

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-15.

Did the Corinthians fear the opposite situation—that one must die to claim this new glorified body? No, their impediment was that—based on their view of the body (not to mention a dead body) as utterly irredeemable—they imagined the Christian’s eternity to be enjoyed as some form of immaterial, “spiritual,” nonsomatic (i.e., without body) form. Remember the questions Paul is answering: “How are the dead raised? And with what kind of body do they come?”

Before he can describe the “what kind,” Paul must declare, most solemnly and earnestly, “Behold, I tell you a mystery...”; he is about to address something previously hidden (*mysterion*) but which is now revealed in Christ. “...we will all be changed.” The Greek is *pantes de allagesometha*, but the operative word translated “changed” means to alter, to make different, and can include the idea of “exchange”—here to exchange one body for another.

we will not all sleep,

Some have taken this to mean something like, “there is not one of us now living who will die before the Lord’s coming,” but Paul is simply stating the obvious fact that whenever it is that Christ returns, some Christians will still be alive.

but we will all be changed,

Living or dead, however, all believers will be changed into a body suitable for eternity. (Thiselton: *allagesometha* = “undergo transformation”)

Note: One more note about this word “changed.” At some point in our discussion of this passage, in an earlier session, someone in our class pointed to Christ’s transfiguration (Matthew 17:2) as a second example for the nature of the resurrected body. But the word translated “transfigured” is a different Greek word, *metamorphoo*, which Paul uses elsewhere of the transforming of our lives into the likeness of Christ. Only here in this passage does Paul use *allagesometha*. (Fee)

Do keep in mind that even with Paul speaking (in the next verse) of the dead being raised, “the contrasts that have been set up” between “perishable” and “imperishable,” and later, “mortal” and “immortality,” are not about a dead and decaying body. Because of Adam, we are born perishable and mortal, and yes, corrupt. Paul is contrasting our living, flesh-bound bodies (dead or alive) with our brand new glorified body, received at the resurrection.

v52

...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.

I can think of few passages of Scripture more dynamic, or more exhilarating for the believer, than this verse. No wonder Handel put to music vv51-57, opening the last section of his masterwork, *The Messiah*, with a recitative and air for bass. In fact, almost all of the final section of Handel’s *The Messiah* is based on this paragraph from Chapter Fifteen.

Sidebar: I’ve always wished to have a chat with the guy who broke up the Bible into chapters and verses. The divisions are helpful, but some of those decisions are real head-scratchers—as here. vv51-52 should read this way:

**Behold, I tell you a mystery : [as some already do]
we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; [where the verse break should be]
for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.**

Thus we will close our study in this session at the point where the verse break should have been placed.

This passage cannot be used to work out a sequence of events for the Parousia. He leaves out any mention of the Rapture, Judgment, et al, for that is not Paul’s purpose here. He is just describing the moment of resurrection, and the nature of the resurrection body.

...in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye,

The word translated “a moment” is the Greek *atomo*, which refers to something so small it cannot be subdivided (at the time, the atom was considered too small to split). Paul expresses this further by adding the phrase, “in the twinkling of an eye”—the equivalent of one in our time saying, “in the blink of an eye.”

In other words, something occurring instantaneously, the smallest conceivable instant—it will all happen in a flash.

at the last trumpet;

The call of the trumpet is “Jewish prophetic-apocalyptic” imagery used in a variety of settings to herald the Eschaton. (Fee) Let’s look at just one example from Zechariah, where the trumpet is used during the Eschaton—not at the Resurrection of the church, but at the rescue of the chosen people, Israel.

Read Zechariah 9:14.

Throughout God's word the "trumpet" may indeed refer to a musical instrument, but it can also be used metaphorically (one commentator states that the "trumpet" in Zechariah 9 refers to thunder). The common denominator, however, is that the "trumpet" sends the alarm that something important—even cataclysmic—is about to occur. In this passage the occurrence being called forth by the trumpet may very well be the summoning of the dead from the graves.

The phrase "last trumpet" does not mean the final one in a series, but that this trumpet signals the End.

In our next session we will continue into v52 and the rest of this paragraph.

Session 164: We Will All be Changed, part two

1 Corinthians 15:52b-55

Preface

This passage in God's word describes an astounding moment—we believe it to be the curtain-up moment for the final act of the Eschaton. The Rapture (from the Latin for “caught up”) does not mark the beginning of the Last Things; in our next class I will give evidence to show that that took place in Bethlehem. But it does indeed mark the beginning of this drama's final act.

This moment is mentioned in a number of other passages; let's look at just one.

Read Philippians 3:20-21.

Christ Jesus will “transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.”

Here in the letter to the Philippians is a reminder that this will not be the same Jesus with whom we are so familiar from the gospel accounts. That was the earthly Son of God, described by the writer to the Hebrews as one “who was made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone” (Hebrews 2:9).

At the Rapture and resurrection of the dead, it will be this same Son of God, but not the same Jesus. He is now glorified; He, too, was changed from earthly flesh back to His native, glorified state—a state not native to us, but our glorified state will be “in conformity” with His. The two will be compatible. I favor the KJV of v21:

Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself.

In a manner of speaking, Christ Jesus has always wanted His followers to be like Him, to live like Him, think like Him. After the Rapture, we truly will be like Him—not deity, of course, but now fully of the same kind: glorified. When Christ was in His earthly body, we could easily live with Him. Now we must be so “transformed” before we can live with Him in eternity.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:50-57.

Sidebar: Before we proceed into our passage, I want to pass along a few more thoughts from John MacArthur and others on the use of the word “last” in 52a: that at the coming of the Lord for His church there will be the call of “the last trumpet.” As I said last week, “The phrase ‘last trumpet’ does not mean the final one in a series, but that this trumpet signals the End.” I stand by that interpretation, and the comment from MacArthur does not negate it. Nonetheless it is an interesting—and probably true—interpretation.

MacArthur: I do not think that this trumpet necessarily will be the last heavenly trumpet ever to be sounded. It will, however, be the last as far as the living Christians are concerned, for it will sound the end of the church age, when all believers will be removed from the earth.

And David Guzik shares a different perspective from Ironside:

Ironside says that the last trumpet was a figure of speech that came from the Roman military, when they would break camp. The first trumpet meant, “strike the tents and prepare to leave.” The second trumpet meant, “fall into line.” The third and last trumpet meant “march away.” The last trumpet Paul speaks of describes the Christian's “marching orders” at the rapture.

We begin this session where I think v52 should have begun. A number of our translations (ESV, NIV, NKJV, CSB) at least begin a new sentence at this point.

v52b

...for the trumpet will sound,

As I mentioned in our previous session, while it may be, there is no requirement that this literally be the sound of a brass musical instrument. These words were used in the Septuagint to refer to the ram's horn, or any wind instrument, blown at temple sacrifices and feast times. The base word in the Greek (*salpinx*) can refer to either the trumpet or the sound the trumpet makes. And it is often used in a metaphorical sense, sometimes referring to the voice of God or Christ.

Read Revelation 1:10.

It is used the same way in Revelation 4:1. "After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven, and the first voice which I had heard, like the sound of a trumpet speaking with me, said, 'Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things.'" Thus it is quite possible that both references to a "trumpet" in v52 could be referring to the voice of Christ coming from the clouds (1 Thessalonians 4:17). In any case, the idea is of a sharp, attention-getting sound.

and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

It is quite possible—in fact, Paul seems to imply it—that the "trumpet sound" will be the effective means by which the dead are raised. Note, too, that even though he is describing something that will occur "in the twinkling of an eye," Paul states the events in the same order he did in his first Thessalonian letter; that is, the dead will be raised first, then the living will join them.

"Imperishable" or "incorruptible" here means physically undecaying. With the late Alexander MacLaren, however, I believe it possible that "the ethical meaning may be in the background." We go to our graves morally corruptible; we will be raised to a state that cannot be either physically or morally corrupted. As v51 states, "...we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed." Every believer, whether still alive or dead for two thousand years, will be changed (made different). In vv53-54 the apostle, as it were, fleshes this out for us.

v53

For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality.

A Lampel paraphrase: *That which is "decayable" must be clothed in that which cannot decay, and that which is subject to death must be clothed in that which cannot die.*

Note: Be sure not to read that word "must" as any part of this world's natural order. It is wholly of divinely ordained necessity. This new "clothing" is all of God.

Pause for a moment to appreciate the epochal power of this moment—which Paul will celebrate with rapturous song in the following verses. Since the earliest scenes of man on earth, sin and death (decay) have been an integral part of every life; for thousands upon thousands of years this has been man's reality. For those in Christ, however, in this one blinding moment, all that will come to an end. No more sin; no more death.

v54

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."

Here, once again, Paul refers to another "now—not yet" prophecy, this time one from Isaiah and one from Hosea (v55)—both of which were initially fulfilled in the resurrection of Christ Jesus, but still await their ultimate fulfillment during the Eschaton.

Read Isaiah 25:8-9.

The astute among you may have noticed that the word “victory” is not found in the Isaiah passage; in fact the NASB shows this by not displaying the word in all CAPS. Is this another instance of Paul taking liberties with his OT quotations? Not really. I will not inflict upon you the tortuous explanation of the tenuous relationship in the Hebrew between “victory” and “forever” or “for all time.” But do note that the KJV uses “victory” in the Isaiah verse. Let it suffice that Paul is not taking liberties, but just reflecting that this use of “victory” has a relationship with the idea of something accomplished forever. Paul has already addressed this in Chapter Fifteen.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:25-26.

In the description of the new earth in Revelation 21, John writes, “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death,” which is an encouraging thought, but the NASB softens this by inserting the word “any.” The text is really stronger than that: “there will no longer be death.” It is not just that people will stop dying; death itself will be gone forever, as we see earlier in the Revelation.

Read Revelation 20:13-14.

Here death is personified and follows after Satan himself into the eternal lake of fire.

v55

“O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY? O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?”

Please turn to Hosea 13. Paul, quoting Hosea 13:14 primarily from the Septuagint, still shapes the quote for his purpose in his letter to the Corinthians. A survey of v14 across our collection of versions—addressed not just to the rebellious northern kingdom of Israel, which is sometimes referred to as “Ephraim,” but in this instance specifically to the tribe of Ephraim—reveals all sorts of words used to translate this verse.

Read Hosea 13:9-14.

Not just the words, but the context for the parenthetical v14 is quite different from how Paul employs it in Chapter Fifteen. We will not take the time to break down the Hosea passage but, nonetheless, it is another instance of “now-not yet” prophecy. Regardless its purpose by Hosea, in which Yahweh inflicts death’s suffering and pain upon Ephraim, Paul uses these lines in his letter to derisively taunt death. Here is how vv54-55 are paraphrased by Eugene Peterson in his *The Message*:

Then the saying will come true: Death swallowed by triumphant Life! Who got the last word, oh, Death? Oh, Death, who’s afraid of you now?

In our next session we will revisit this verse and finish our study of Chapter Fifteen.

Session 165: We Will All be Changed, part three

1 Corinthians 15:55-58

Preface

Sidebar: Before we get into these final verses of Chapter Fifteen let me take just a moment to address the small issue raised last week regarding a “new name” for believers on a “stone.” And for no extra charge I will include the warning that all of us (myself included) should be cautious about declaring any interpretation—or worse, assumption—as absolute—especially anything from the The Revelation, and especially found in its often bizarre prophecies.

The verse referred to is Revelation 2:17, in the letter to Pergamum.

'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.'

There is a rather long list of conjectures by biblical scholars on just what is represented by the “white stone”; and those same respected, biblical scholars are divided—pretty much down the middle—on whether the “new name” refers to a new name for the Christian individual, or the secret name for Christ; in Revelation 3:12 Christ refers to “My new name.”

Read 1 Corinthians 15:53-58.

v55

“O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY? O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?”

When he cites “death” in vv54b-55, the apostle Paul is not speaking of the grave, but of Christ’s ultimate victory over death and Satan.

Gordon Fee: This taunt is Paul’s way of looking forward to the triumph of the ages. Death’s victory has been overcome by Christ’s victory; and death’s deadly sting has been detoxicated—indeed the stinger itself has been plucked—through Christ’s resurrection. Death, therefore, is “powerless over the dead” (C. Holladay); God’s people will be raised and changed into the likeness of the risen and ever-living Christ Himself.

Note that even though Paul is referencing something yet future, the text is in the present tense. The wheels of the Eschaton are already in motion; it is one of the more fascinating aspects of the Last Things—the final act of the Eschaton—that events played out there invariably harken back to, and once and for all times fulfill, partial manifestations in history. As Holladay writes, “Death is also powerless over the living.” For the follower of Christ, that is true now. There will come a day when the power and “sting” of death will be removed for all time. Those not in Christ will share its abode in the lake of fire.

The word translated sting can mean a goad or, say, the non-lethal sting of a wasp, but here it refers to the lethal sting of death. Death’s sting used to be lethal; now, as of Christ’s resurrection, it is not. I like how David Garland puts it.

Garland: [Its stinger] enables death to exercise its dominion over the entire world, but its venom has been absorbed by Christ and drained of its potency so that the victory over death now belongs to God and to God’s people, who benefit from it.

That is an excellent word picture. Death aimed its lethal stinger at us, but Christ Jesus intervened and took the hit for us. This selfless act not only saved us, but rendered that stinger utterly impotent, no worse than the nibble of a tiny sweat bee.

v56

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law;

I confess that initially I was a bit mystified by this remark—especially the second part. One reason for my confusion even with both parts is that I can read each of these phrases in either direction.

The sting of death is sin,

For example, the customary way to understand “The sting of death is sin” is that “sin is the deadly poison that has led to death” (Fee). Thus our justification in Christ removes the penalty of our sin and, by extension, our “death” because of it. The sting is rendered impotent. In v55, however, death is “personified,” as it is in Revelation 20:14, stating that sin is the poison (from “the sting”) coming from death itself. There is a circular, cyclical aspect to this. Death can be seen as both the agent by which we sin, and the entity that benefits by our sin. In this, death becomes effectively synonymous with Satan.

Paul has been alluding to and working up to this statement since the beginning of this chapter (v3). The thought is fully developed in his letter to the Romans—which post-dates this letter—but long before the Romans letter this was an essential part of Paul’s theology (see Galatians).

and the power of sin is the law;

Here it will help to read some of what Paul wrote to the Romans. And once again we detect a somewhat circular aspect.

Read Romans 5:12-13.

Since Adam, sin has always been present and active on this earth. Because sin was here, death was here, and because all men sinned, all men died. There was sin in the world before there was the Law, but sin was not then transgression, because there was no Law to transgress against.

Read Romans 7:7-13.

Garland: The Law, not only unable to arrest sin, spurs it on and pronounces death as its sentence... The Law brings awareness of sinfulness, provokes impulses to sin, which then become deliberate transgressions, with the result that death tightens its stranglehold. The Law cannot give life or impart righteousness, but brings only condemnation.

Fee: Paul’s point in this theological aside is that death is not simply the result of decay through normal human processes. Rather, it is the result of the deadly poison, sin itself, which became all the more energized in our lives through acquaintance with the Law.

The circular aspect is demonstrated in that the Law both defines and encourages sin: the Law tells us that we have sinned, and, having sinned, we run back to the Law—and the cycle begins again. We can’t help but see the similarity between this and Paul’s emotional lament in Romans 7.

For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good. (vv15-16)

For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. (v19)

Which leads to his conclusion and wailing lament, beginning in v21.

Read Romans 7:21-24.

His solution to this quandary?

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Which sounds very much like his solution in v57 of Chapter Fifteen.

v57

but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Here is the bookend to how Paul opened this chapter.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:3.

The KJVs interpret this statement as “first” in a temporal sense—i.e., “first of all,” first in time before anything else. All of our other versions render this as “first” because it is the most important. (Both can be true.) God has accomplished this for man through the sacrifice of His Son—or, perhaps better, Christ has accomplished this for man on behalf of Father God, to whom we give the thanks.

I think it can be particularly true, in those of us who came to Christ at an early age, and have heard this reinforced all our lives, that the truly mind-boggling wonder of this can have been blunted. Except for those alive when Christ returns, all people will experience the first death, just as they have experienced sin in their lives. A loving God sent His Son—effectively, the Father sent Himself—“to take the bullet” for our sin. As a result, the power of sin in our lives has been removed; it no longer holds dominion over us. And thus, no one in Christ will experience the second death, the lake of fire.

But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.
(Revelation 21:8; emphasis added)

Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years. (Revelation 20:6; emphasis added)

v58

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.

If v57 is the closing bookend to v3, then v58 is the closing bookend to vv1-2 of this chapter.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-2.

Here the apostle addresses the same people he has scolded and castigated for the previous fourteen chapters as “my beloved brothers [and sisters]”—that is, those from the same womb, from the same divine parent.

So what are you going to do with all this I have just told you, the apostle implicitly inquires of this church. How will this be worked out in your lives? Just as I said at the beginning of this section, you are to stand fast in Christ, and hold fast to His gospel. In addition, you are to super-abound in your service for His name, because all that I have said affirms that in His resurrection we have the assurance of our own resurrection from the dead, and thus our eternity with Him in glory.

Fee: Our present existence in Christ, and our present labors, are not in vain. Standing beneath them is the sure word of Christ’s own triumph over death, which guarantees that we shall likewise conquer. Victory in the present begins when one can, with Paul, sing the taunt of death even now, in light of Christ’s resurrection, knowing that death’s doom is “already/not yet.” Because “death could not hold its prey, Jesus our Savior,” neither will it be able to hold its further prey when the final eschatological trumpet is blown that summons the Christian dead unto the resurrection and immortality. What a hope is this.

Session 166: A Special Offering

1 Corinthians 16:1-4

Preface

The apostle Paul, in the longest chapter of his letter to the Corinth church, has just completed an extended treatise on resurrection—the certainty of Christ’s resurrection, which establishes the certainty of our bodily resurrection, and then detailing the nature of that body and the manner in which it will be raised. It is all about the believer’s resurrection that will take place, from Paul’s point in history, at least more than two thousand years in the future. It is all about the future.

Then, as the Corinthians hearing this letter are lost in their thoughts about the end times, like a splash of cold water Paul abruptly changes the subject with, “Now concerning the collection for the saints...” Suddenly the church, and we, are snapped back to the pragmatic issues of the here and now. Yet, as John MacArthur points out,

The life to come is far from unrelated to living here and now. Whenever God gives us a glimpse of the end times or of heaven it is always for the purpose of helping us to live more faithfully on earth.

In his second letter, Peter offers a grim picture of events leading to God’s final judgment of man. Then, in his description of the “new heavens and a new earth” he asks the question, “...what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness” (v3:11).

Read 2 Peter 3:14.

The command to remain “diligent” is not far afield from Paul’s command in Chapter Sixteen to “Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong” (v16:13). So Paul will now close this letter with a number of “housekeeping” instructions, words of encouragement and affection—but first, about giving to a special fund.

Read 1 Corinthians 16:1-4.

v1

Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also.

For the fifth time in this letter Paul signals to the Corinthians, and us, that he is about to respond to something the church requested in their letter to him. Each time he does this with *peri de* (“Now concerning”; NIV, “Now about”).

The likeliest situation is that Paul had earlier mentioned this “collection for the saints” to them, and they had followed up with specific questions regarding its implementation. That this is not something new to the Corinthians that he is just now raising is evidenced by the lack of details here; we can safely assume that it was not necessary because they were already aware of the plan. And since he nowhere else uses the word “collection” (*logias*) to describe this offering, it can be assumed that this is the word the Corinthians used in their inquiry to him. The meaning of the word leans toward the act of collecting, the “taking up” of the contributions, rather than the funds themselves or the purpose behind it. This explains why Paul now gives explicit instructions for the “taking up” of the funds.

We know from his letters to the Romans, to the Galatians, to the Thessalonians, and the second letter to the Corinthians (8:1 to 9:15) that this was to be a churches-wide collection for the poor in the Jerusalem church. That church—thought of as the “mother church” in Christendom—was impoverished (2 Corinthians 9:12) and suffering persecution (1 Thessalonians 2:14). So Paul had been organizing a collection for the Jerusalem church in a number of the churches he had started. And, in a refreshing contrast to so much of what we have learned about the Corinthians, on the whole they were not at all reluctant to give.

Read 2 Corinthians 8:10-11.

v2

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.

This verse contains, I believe, not just wise, practical counsel for the Corinthians, but for us as well. As we break this down into its component parts, we will look first at what Paul is instructing the Corinthians, and why; then make application for us today.

On the first day of every week...

If, as the text seems to state, the members are to set aside their accumulated offering privately, why does Paul specify that they do this “on the first day” (*sabbaton*) rather than the more general “every week”? The explanation lies in the fact that, for the early church, that phrase held special meaning. The word “Sunday,” which we use, has pagan roots. All four gospels mark the day of Christ’s resurrection with the phrase “the first day of the week,” and, accordingly, it was on the first day of every week that the church gathered to worship, and to remember the death and resurrection of the Lord in the eating together of the Lord’s Supper. Setting aside their offering, even a small amount, regularly each week made it easier to accumulate a substantial sum, and doing this on the special Lord’s Day could be seen as extra incentive to give sacrificially—and with the correct motive.

It is not our custom, at least in most evangelical denominations, to celebrate the Lord’s Supper every week. Likewise, for many of us—especially those in business—Monday is often seen as the “first day of the week.” That does not, however, prevent us from treating the day we do gather for worship as a special and holy day, dedicated to God and His Christ. We call it “the Lord’s Day,” but is it? Is it in our heart? Is it reflected in our thoughts and activities of the day?

each one of you...as he may prosper...

As we have seen, the Corinth church already suffered from its divisions, its factions—not least between the wealthy elite and the poor. Here Paul says that each person in the church, rich or poor, was to give, privately, according to their “prospering.” The phrase can rightly be translated (as the NIVs suggest) “out of your profits,” but considering the mixed membership of this church—some of whom would be too poor to have any profit at all—the idea is that if the Lord had prospered them in any way that week, they should set aside an amount in accordance to that blessing. The Christian view, based on God’s word, is that we are not just created by God, but created for His pleasure, and that whatever we have and are in this world has come from Him.

Read James 1:17.

Note: The NIVs offer a poor translation of this with “in keeping with his/your income.” This was not a regular tithe, but a special offering to be based on the work of a generous God in the individual’s life. The word translated “prosper” or “prospered” in the other translations has nothing to do with the regular salary one brings home from work.

Since all of that with which He entrusts us belongs to God, we are called to give with liberality, and with a heart not of generosity, as if we are generously giving to Him and His kingdom, but with a heart of gratitude, thanksgiving, and praise for the blessings He has graciously and generously poured out on us. This is what Paul is telling the Corinthians to do, every week, to contribute to the offering for the saints in Jerusalem.

put aside and save,

From this we get the picture of each member of the church regularly setting aside at home the monies for his offering for Jerusalem. The word *thesaurizon*, meaning to lay up, store up, save up, is directed toward “each one of you”—not the church as a whole. The phrase is *par’ heauto titheto thesaurizon*, that is, in the KJV, “lay by him in store,” and virtually all agree that this describes the individual saving the funds at home. What better habit could we teach the

young—not to mention ourselves—than to regularly, personally set aside monies to contribute to the offering plate. Even pennies can represent the gladness in our hearts for what the Lord has done for us each day.

...so that no collections be made when I come.

There does not seem to be an obvious reason why Paul requests this. The two possible reasons that I prefer are,

1. that Paul knows the chances for a larger sum (thus making the trip to Jerusalem worthwhile) are better if people give on a regular basis over a period of time, rather than all at the last minute (Fee); and
2. by handing the total amount accumulated to Paul when he comes, he has no idea who gave how much to the fund (Garland).

v3

When I arrive, whomever you may approve, I will send them with letters to carry your gift to Jerusalem;

How Paul sees this collection is apparent with his choice of the familiar word *charin* (*charis* = grace), translated “gift” in our versions (KJV, “liberality”). This was not a regimented tithe, nor a regular offering, but an act of grace from the churches to another church in need. But this verse also reinforces the fact that this “grace” is not being dictated or (we would say) micro-managed by the apostle. Each person on his or her own is to decide how much to give, and Paul leaves it to each autonomous church to decide who it would have carry the offering to Jerusalem.

We see in our different versions two ways the Greek can be interpreted:

ESV: And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem. (emphasis added)

NIV: Then, when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem. (emphasis added)

That is, does the individual church write the letters of introduction, or does Paul. It would make more sense for the apostle himself, who would have a more influential standing before the mother church, to supply the letters. In this our two primary commentators favor the latter (as seen in the NIVs), as does M. R. Vincent.

Vincent: The latter is preferable. The givers are to choose the bearers of the collection; Paul, as the originator and apostolic steward of the collection, will send the money.

The NASB and CSB, for once, leave it ambiguous.

v4

and if it is fitting for me to go also, they will go with me.

We learn from Paul’s letter to the Romans (15:26-27) that the Corinthians did collect funds that made it to Jerusalem. But we learn from his next letter to the Corinthians that it required a measure of cajoling, and two visits from Titus, to bring it to completion. Romans 15:25 informs us that Paul did go. Imagine the joy in the Jerusalem church as the emissaries from all these churches trooped in with their assistance!

Session 167: The Best-laid Plans

1 Corinthians 16:5-12

Preface

Reading v5 of our passage, where Paul states that “I will come to you...,” “I am going through Macedonia,” I can’t help but recall something Dwight Eisenhower said, as the Republican nominee for President, in a speech on October 24, 1952. Referring to his resolution to “forego the diversions of politics and to concentrate on the job of ending the Korean War—until that job is honorably done,” Ike said,

That job requires a personal trip to Korea. I shall make that trip. Only in that way could I learn how best to serve the American people in the cause of peace. I shall go to Korea.

Well, President Eisenhower kept that pledge. The apostle Paul did not—not as planned, anyway.

Tensions between Paul and the church in Corinth remained. It is lying beneath the surface of this text, revealed only when adding in accounts from The Acts of the Apostle and Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians. Though we will not take the time to dwell on the evidence, sadly, we cannot even make an easy, gracious exit from this lengthy letter without being reminded that the tension remained.

Read 1 Corinthians 16:5-9.

vv5-7

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.

Paul wrote this letter from Ephesus; not only do we know that from v8, but in v19 he passes along greetings from Aquila and Prisca (or Priscilla), who were natives of Corinth, but are now in Ephesus (Acts 18:24-26). He is quite definite as to his plans; if we didn’t know better from other sources we would conclude this itinerary was “chiseled in granite”: “I will,” “I am going through Macedonia.” But we shouldn’t miss the contrasting words of less certainty: “perhaps I will stay,” “wherever I may go” (v6); “I hope to remain with you,” “if the Lord permits” (v7; emphasis added). As it turns out, the Lord did not permit.

In his second extant letter Paul expresses his disappointment that he was unable to do this—in fact, the evidence in that letter indicates that he pretty much followed the opposite route to subsequently visit them.

The term Paul uses when he writes “so that you may send me on my way wherever I may go” (v6), *propemsete*, includes the idea of outfitting someone for a journey. He did not permit them to support him while he lived in their city ministering to them (1 Corinthians 9:12); he now asks them to support his ministry trip to other churches with funds and/or necessary supplies. And “just in passing” (v7) does not mean waving to them from the highway as he passes the city, but making it a short visit, rather than the longer previous visit of eighteen months.

vv8-9

But I will remain in Ephesus until Pentecost; for a wide door for effective service has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.

In vv5-9 we have a profitable illustration for how the believer is to balance good intentions and planning with a recognition that we must always bow to the Lord’s sovereign will. Simply because God is God and we are not, the Christian is not to float through life, never planning ahead but just sitting back, waiting for the Lord to manually press him into service. It takes nothing away from our subservience to the Father and Christ Jesus to actively make plans for our service in Their name. Both can peacefully coexist.

Sidebar: Years ago I was commissioned to write a three-act musical for a church. I spent quite a long time writing and planning the production. But as the day approached to begin rehearsals, the music director, filled with apprehension and dread over my expected response, called me to report that the production had to be canceled because the two leads he had been planning for had just bowed out. The music director anticipated a sermon from me all about wasted time and work. My actual response surprised him. “His will be done.” And the following year, the production went ahead, with the music director and his wife taking the leads, and the author directing the drama rehearsals and the choir in performance. Clearly the Lord had His reasons for delaying the production a year.

The Lord may come for His church within the hour, before we dig into our Sunday pot roast—but we still make plans for evening dinner. Even if not stated outright, the Christian is always to make plans with the mental proviso, as Paul, “...if the Lord permits” (v7). Nonetheless he plows ahead making his plans, intending to remain “in Ephesus until Pentecost.” That reference probably points to a season (i.e., 50 days), rather than a specific date, with the practical application that he would be waiting for summer to arrive—a time more favorable to travel.

His thought closes in v9 with a statement assigning rather odd qualities to “a door.” Young’s Literal Translation makes it, “for a door to me hath been opened—great and effectual,” which the KJV translated, “For a great door and effectual is opened unto me.” Most of our more modern translations delegate those qualities to the opportunity, rather than the door itself by inserting either “service” or “work.”

...and there are many adversaries.

Recall what Paul wrote in the previous chapter.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:30-32.

It is clear that the gospel was being met with fierce opposition in Ephesus. In Chapter Fifteen Paul speaks metaphorically, referring to his struggle with the opposition as fighting “with wild beasts.” Here he refers to it with the word “adversaries” (*antikeimenoí*, to lie opposite, to be in opposition to); the verb is in the present tense and plural—the opposition was still going on as he wrote, and coming from multiple sources.

Read 1 Corinthians 16:10-12.

vv10-11: Timothy

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...

Our common translations are divided on whether *ean* should be translated “if” or “when.” It can be translated either way, but the consensus seems to be that since Paul earlier explicitly states that he has sent Timothy to them—“For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord...”—then it would follow that he probably refers here to when Timothy will arrive, rather than whether he will or not.

What follows that first phrase is extraordinary indeed. Opinions vary on why Paul makes the statement “see that he is with you without cause to be afraid.”

Sidebar: The ESV, following the RSV of 1946, softens this beyond recognition with “see that you put him at ease among you,” which sounds like they should cordially invite him to tea. This translation of v10 in the ESV (and RSV) stands in contrast to v11 in both, and the rest of our common versions, with “So let no one despise him.”

Timothy was with Paul when he was first in Corinth (Acts 18:5), so the younger man was no stranger to them. Why should Paul feel it necessary to issue these warnings? In this I side with Fee and MacArthur, who posit that this really had little to do with Timothy at all, but is

based on the tension and, in some cases, outright animosity coming from the Corinth church toward Paul. This would be in line with everything we have learned about the church during this study—along with what we read in his second extant letter to them. Some of this may have to do with his youth, but I don't think that alone would explain the strength of these warnings from the apostle (“be afraid,” “despise him,” i.e., treat with contempt).

Note: the NIV84 softens this way too much with “refuse to accept him.”

But send him on his way in peace, so that he may come to me; for I expect him with the brethren.

If certain quarters of the Corinth church could be contentious with the apostle himself, there would certainly be no holding back with his younger emissary. So Paul had to smooth the way for Timothy as much as he could by long distance. Earlier in this letter Paul explained why he was sending Timothy to the church.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:16-17.

Verse 16 may sound arrogant, but there are two reasons why it is not.

1. In vv9-13 of Chapter Four the apostle has just itemized what it is to live as an apostle of Christ, and that is mostly a list of hardships. He wants the Corinthians to learn to live that way.
2. Since Paul's model for living was Christ Jesus, the Corinthians wouldn't go wrong modeling their lives after the apostle.

Paul expects them to treat Timothy with respect, listen to what he has to say, and send him back to the apostle “in peace” with supplies for his needs for the journey.

v12: Apollos

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.

Verse 12 is a bit of a mystery. Why is Paul bringing up Apollos? Did the Corinthians ask about him in their letter to Paul? Was he expected to be traveling with Timothy? Who are “the brethren”? And where does he expect them to meet him? The answer is that we simply do not know, and there is no good reason to spend our time guessing. So we are left wondering how Timothy's visit went. Let's close this passage with some follow-up discussion by Gordon Fee.

Fee: One is left to wonder how this visit by Timothy turned out, since there is no further mention of it in Paul's letters. In any case, two things are certain. First, shortly after this letter Paul goes absolutely contrary to the plans here laid out and pays a sudden, unexpected visit to Corinth. Why he did so is purely a matter of conjecture, but that he should so radically alter his plans suggests that perhaps the return of Timothy gave him reason for even greater alarm with regard to this church. The fact that the visit turned out to be such a blowup, apparently under the leadership of one person in particular, and that the visit was so painful for Paul that he refused to return for the time being, seems to give this suggestion some merit.

(Fee's footnote: This is based on an understanding of 2 Corinthians 1-7 that sees the material from 1:8 to 2:14 and 7:2-16 as basically a chronological recounting of Paul's and their most recent exchanges. If so, then the man in 2:5-11 who needs their restoration is probably the same one in 7:12 who injured someone else. If the injured party is Paul, all of this makes a great deal of sense.)

Second, what Paul did do was to send Titus back to Corinth instead of either himself or Timothy (2 Cor. 2:13; 7:6-7). At some point in the near future, and for reasons not fully available to us, neither of them (Paul or Timothy) is a *persona grata* to the community; it also means that Titus must have been a person of extraordinary grace. This, at least, is one viable attempt to make some sense of these very fragmentary pieces of historical data.

Session 168: Parting Exhortations

1 Corinthians 16:13-18

Preface

Read 1 Corinthians 16:13-14.

v13-14

Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong.

Like bullets being fired from a Gatling gun, the apostle fires off a string of staccato imperatives to the church in Corinth. Each one is brief, but heavy with meaning for the members of that church, and every verb is a command to not just do this, but to make such behavior a regular way of life—i.e., don't just do this once; I want you to live this way.

Be on the alert,

This phrase is very often used in an eschatological context—e.g., Be watchful, stay awake, for the Lord could return at any time. Considering the situation in the church, however, and Paul's counsel in the first fifteen chapters of this letter, it is best to consider this from that overall context—as do the NIVs, with “Be on your guard”—as well as the phrase that follows: “stand firm in the faith.” That is, Be alert to those things that will do harm to your faith.

We know that a critical weakness of the church was its susceptibility to corrosive outside influence. Paul here reminds them, Watch out for that. Don't let it occur. much as he did when bidding goodbye to the Ephesians, as recorded in Acts 20. Here he goes into greater detail.

Read Acts 20:28-31. (The wolves are just outside the church door)

Aside: It seems to me, were I a parent I would want to read those verses to every child of mine heading off to be on their own in the world.

stand firm in the faith,

These two are opposite sides of the same coin. Part of remaining alert to threats to one's faith is standing firm on the truths of that faith; and we stand firm by remaining watchful for those threats. This is the tail end of a recurring theme in this letter. Here the word translated “stand firm [or fast]” is *stekete*, the root of which is *steke*, which is almost an onomatopoeia. What do we call it when a gymnast lands a routine without moving his or her feet? We say that they “stick” their landing. That's what *stecko* means: be stationary. Paul has been on this repeatedly in this letter. He raised it in his discussion on familial behavior in 7:37, and He encouraged them by praising what little “firmness” they did have in 11:2. Then Paul bookends the previous chapter (15) with calls for them to stand fast on the word he delivered to them.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-2, 56-58.

act like men, be strong.

The Greek *andrizethe* means “be manly.” I love the KJV: “quit you like men.” I suppose in this confused world we live in there are those who wouldn't even understand this—and if they do, are surely offended by such a statement. Well, tough. With these two imperatives Paul is telling the Corinthians of either sex (yes, there are only two) to act like a strong, determined man when it comes time to defend the gospel and your faith in it. This need not be a specific reference to the male of the species; it might also imply, Grow up! Stop being so wishy-washy. Take responsibility. Stand strong for that which you claim to believe. Hence the title of this study: *Standing Firm in a Slippery World*.

Let all that you do be done in love.

We can think back on all the dirty laundry we have been reading of in this letter and understand right off what Paul is saying with this. His wonderful sermon on agape in Chapter Thirteen is connected to his discussion of spiritual gifts in Chapter Twelve by its last verse: “But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And I show you a still more excellent way.” That “way” is

agape—not just one more gift among many, but the manner by which we administer our gifts. Love for his brothers and sisters in Christ is to be the Christian’s way of life. Here is one of the more applicable lessons from this letter: Collect up all the noxious goings-on in the Corinth church; “if they were to ‘do all things in love,’ then these other things would not be happening” (Fee).

Our love for each other in the body of Christ is to permeate everything we do, everything we say, and every purpose we pursue. It is to be the “way” we live. It is to be the motive behind our use of every Spirit-gift we have.

Read 1 Corinthians 16:15-18.

vv15-18

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),

By my lights this last paragraph of our passage is clumsily organized. One has the impression that as he neared the end of this long letter his mind was working out of sync with his mouth as he dictated to his amanuensis. Let’s first figure out who he is talking about.

Stephanas is the principal character. He is the head of a “household” (i.e., more than just a family of kin). Most commentators conclude that he is probably the one that brought the letter from Corinth to Paul—the letter he has been answering—and he is the one who has just delivered this letter from Paul to Corinth (i.e. our First Corinthians). So he and his fellows are there as the letter is being read.

Fortunatus (a common Latin name) and Achaicus (lit., “one who is from Achaia”) are the companions of Stephanas and members of his household. Most seem to think they were either slaves or freedmen; both, we can safely assume, were believers and fellow ministers with Stephanas, serving alongside with him.

We might think of Stephanas and his household as part of the founding members of the Corinth church, for Paul here says that the church knows that “they were the first fruits of Achaia”—that is, they were the first to be converted and baptized, since Paul states in v1:16, “Now I did baptize also the household of Stephanas.” Achaia was the Roman designation for most of their Grecian province, but Paul probably uses the term “Achaia” here to refer to the immediate area around Corinth, which was the capital of the province.

More than just being the “first,” Paul says they were the “first fruits,” which carries with it the expectation and promise (as with the resurrection of Christ) that there will be more to follow. The members of his household “have devoted themselves for ministry to the saints.”

Note: The KJV bizarrely translates v15, “...and that they have addicted themselves to the ministry of the saints.” I suppose we could give the translators the benefit of the doubt; perhaps they meant that, like someone addicted to strong drink, Stephanas and his household felt strongly called to minister in the church, that they had to do it. The phrase *etaxan heautous* means that they appointed themselves (in an orderly fashion). This shouldn’t be read as “self-centered forwardness” on their part, or arrogance, but that “they set themselves aside for service to other Christians” (Garland).

(v16) ...that you also be in subjection to such men and to everyone who helps in the work and labors.

Located after the parenthetical interruption, this statement completes the thought that began in v15 with “Now I urge you, brethren...” Verse 16 makes it clear that Stephanas and the men in his household were more than just solid members of the congregation performing good deeds, but were spiritual leaders, almost certainly having a responsibility for teaching and perhaps preaching the word. Because of this they were due honor and respect for the work they were doing in and for the church. That respect would include their submission—“submission in the sense of voluntary yielding in love” (BDAG).

(v17) *I rejoice over the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus, because they have supplied what was lacking on your part.*

There are, essentially, two ways to interpret this remark, which means, literally, “to fill up your lack”:

1. A few commentators read this as Paul being critical of the church, that they had in some regard been deficient in their response to, or support of, Paul. Considering the tension and repeated conflicts between the church and Paul, this is a possible interpretation.
2. The more common interpretation, however, is best represented by the ESV and TLV (even though it borders on commentary): “because they have made up for your absence.” That is, it was impossible for the entire church to come visit Paul in person, so the apostle sees these three men as filling the role that the church, realistically, could not.

The word translated “coming” is *parousia*, meaning presence or being near, and is the familiar word to describe the physical return of Christ—i.e., He will now be present. So one can acknowledge the poetic symmetry of the ESV: the church was “absent” from Paul, but the three men were “present.”

Note: If Paul had meant “absence,” however, the normal word for him to use would have been *apousia*; instead he used *hysterema*, which means a lack or deficit. This suggests that his being away from the church had left a gap in his life. He may have been feeling a bit down, perhaps even depressed of late. Why was Paul “rejoicing” over their presence?

(v18) *For they have refreshed my spirit and yours. Therefore acknowledge such men.*

Being away from the Corinthians, not being there in person to fellowship with them had taken away something good and encouraging in Paul’s life. His spirit needed reviving, and the arrival of and fellowship with Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus brought the refreshment he so needed.

The word used in all of our versions is “refreshed,” which is not inaccurate, but is actually the *result* of what the Greek word *anapausan* means, which might be better translated, in the noun form, as a “respite,” for the word means to cause to cease, to give rest, an intermission from labor. I think one reason Paul was refreshed by their visit is that it afforded him a brief vacation from his work. These were faithful friends from Corinth, and fellowship with them—along with learning from them how things were going in Corinth—was like a cold drink of lemonade in the shade on a hot day. And when these men returned to Corinth, they would do the same for the church. And because of this, Paul expected the church to recognize, to commend them for this vital work of being the faithful umbilical between them and the apostle.

Session 169: Goodbye—with a Warning and with Love

1 Corinthians 16:19-24

Preface

Nearing the end of our study of Chapter Fifteen of this letter, with all its talk of the resurrection of believers when Christ returns for His church, I mentioned that I regretted that we must deal with Chapter Sixteen. How much better, I thought, to go directly from Fifteen into our next study of the Last Things.

As usual, however, Paul and the Spirit of God were holding up their collective sleeves (assuming the Holy Spirit has sleeves) a suitable segue in v22—just about at the very end of this letter.

Read 1 Corinthians 16:19-24.

vv19-20

The churches of Asia greet you.

It is Paul's custom to close his letters with greetings to the church from others. Here he offers a threefold version, and the first is unique to this letter: he sends the Corinthians greetings from all the churches in Asia. He is writing from Ephesus, which is the "economic and administrative hub" of the Roman province located in the western part of Asia Minor (Garland).

In subtle ways Paul has been urging the Corinthians throughout this letter to embrace the reality that their church is not an island unto itself—that they are part of a greater whole. He slipped this in even at the beginning of his greeting:

Read 1:2, 4:17, 14:33, (then he gets his back up in) 14:36.

The first paragraph in this final chapter deals with the "collection for the saints," that is, all the churches chipping in for the impoverished and persecuted "mother" church in Jerusalem.

In the first century the gospel was spreading throughout the known world wrapped around the Mediterranean. Today the gospel and subsequent assemblies of believers literally wrap around the entire globe. It is no small thing that believers are part of both a local church, as well as the church universal.

Aquila and Prisca greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house.

In our study of Hebrews I revealed my passionate fascination with the mysterious Melchizedek, the priest-king of Salem (later, Jerusalem). I am almost as fascinated with the extraordinary Prisca (or Priscilla) and Aquila. What an extraordinary couple they were.

We know more about this pair than most of Paul's associates; even so, the details about them must be filled in with educated guesses. They were fellow tent makers and Jews, who he met for the first time in Corinth after he had left Athens. God's word records that this husband and wife were more mobile than most—not always by choice, having left Rome by order of emperor Claudius (Acts 18:2). After Corinth, they left with Paul for Ephesus, where they led the charismatic but ill-informed Apollos to Christ. Later we find them back in Rome (Romans 16:3-5), and still later back in Ephesus (2 Timothy 4:19). Everywhere they lived it seems they had a church in their home, which suggests that their tent-making business had made them rather wealthy. They were both strong followers of Christ, and Paul never characterizes Prisca (Luke prefers the diminutive, Priscilla) as Aquila's wife, ignores the issue of her sex, and, except for here, prefers to list her first—which was not the custom in that time and place. The evidence would suggest that they were both strong personalities and leaders, with equally strong faith and knowledge of the gospel. These were two remarkable people from whose lives and witness we can learn much.

All the brethren greet you.

Then Paul includes a greeting from his co-workers and traveling companions. The NIV 2011 and CSB gratuitously add “and sisters,” but the noun *adelphoi* is plural and masculine.

Greet one another with a holy kiss.

David Garland: This kiss is more than an extension of social custom, since it is identified as “holy.” It was a distinctive practice that served as a sign of mutual fellowship among persons of mixed social background, nationality, race, and gender who are joined together as a new family in Christ. For those who came from differing ethnic and national backgrounds it was means to express their unity... Ambrosiaster regards the kiss as a sign of peace that does away with discord, which would be particularly important here in light of the evidence of fractured relationships in Corinth.

v21

The greeting is in my own hand—Paul.

As he has and will do again, Paul—who preferred to dictate his letters (in this case, probably to Sosthenes [1:1])—authenticates the content of this letter with a statement and signature in his own hand. The text from here to the end was probably in Paul’s over-sized, print handwriting (Galatians 6:11).

v22

If anyone does not love the Lord, he is to be accursed. Maranatha.

Love for the Lord is basic; without that there is no individual relationship with Christ, and hence, no church, no body of believers. Love for the Lord was basic to the Jews under the Law, as represented in the *shema*, “Hear, O Israel!”

Read Deuteronomy 6:4-7.

When asked by a lawyer which was the great commandment in the Law, Jesus answered in Matthew 22:37, quoting this passage from Deuteronomy,

And He said to him, " 'YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.'

The verb Jesus used for “love” was *agapao*, a demonstration of the highest, even sacrificial form of love. In our passage Paul reduces this requirement to *phileo*, an affectionate, brotherly form of love. Even so, if one cannot muster even this nominal form of love for Christ, Paul, declares, one is “to be accursed,” *anathema*.

Tradition, even in the church, and secular media like to portray portions of Chapter Thirteen of this letter in the context of a sappy, squishy, romantic sort of love—which is not at all what Paul means.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:1-3.

The apostle’s point is that no matter what you do as a Christian, no matter with which spectacular gifts you have been endowed, love remains basic. Without it, everything else is utterly worthless, devoid of value. And we cannot help but think back to the painful episodes in the Corinth church that required Paul’s instruction—even condemnation. Forget brotherly love for your fellow man; if one calls himself a Christian, a follower of Christ, and does not possess at least this nominal affection for Him—for who He is, and what He did for you—then you are no better than a worthless idol that is to be thrown onto the fire.

God’s word speaks of love as something far more tangible than how it is perceived by society. I can say I love my wife, but if that is not something more active and tangible than a simple emotion, then our marriage could not have lasted fifty years. The concept was drummed into me by my mother whenever I, as a boy, failed to do what she asked: “Don’t tell me you love me. Show me you love me.” That is, if you really love me, she was saying, then obey me. Just as Jesus said,

“If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.” (John 14:15)

If this is true regarding our relationship with the Lord, then it applies as well to our relationship with His people: Our faith is just an empty, meaningless shell, something carved out of balsam wood, and worth only being tossed onto the ash heap, if it is not grounded in love.

Maranatha

Opinions vary on why Paul appended to this the expression *Maran-atha*, which is “the Greek spelling for two Aramaic words” meaning either, “Our Lord, come” (*Marana tha*), “Our Lord has come” (*Maran atha*), or “Our Lord will come.” My position agrees with Garland and Fee, that Paul adds this as, essentially, a warning. Any Corinthians who do not love the Lord should be advised that He is surely coming (at His *parousia*), and that the Lord’s return will bring blessings for some—and condemnation for others. To paraphrase this in our own vernacular, God requires that we love Him, and if you don’t you will be cursed when He comes to judge—and believe me, He’s coming.

vv23-24

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you.

Verse 23 is Paul’s standard grace-benediction with which he concludes his letters. As he signs off each of his extant letters he extends a wish for “grace” (*charis*). If love is foundational to our relationship with God and with His people, His grace is as well. Our relationship with God is possible only through the grace of His gospel: the sacrificial grace of His Son. Let’s read Paul’s glorious declaration of that in his letter to Ephesus.

Read Ephesians 2:4-10.

My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen.

This closing line to the letter reaffirms my respect for Paul—not just as an evangelist, but one with a pastor’s—even father’s—heart. Recollect what he said in Chapter Four:

I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. (1 Corinthians 4:14-15)

Only here—to the cantankerous, obstinate Corinthians—does Paul extend this personal sentiment. Only here does he say “my love”—not God’s love or Christ’s love, but Paul’s own personal love. His is a genuine love (agape), expressed not just in hugs and kisses, but in sharp reprimands, as he has demonstrated throughout this letter. He ends this letter as he began it: with a benediction of grace and love—indeed, his love for the Corinthians is expressed on every page of this letter.

Session 170: A Handbook for Christians

1 Corinthians

Preface

It is fair to say that the first letter to the Corinthians would make a pretty good handbook for living as a follower of Christ. It is filled with solid, practical counsel on such matters as family life, morality, church-family life, decorum in the worship service, the use of Spirit-gifts, the supremacy of love in all things, and much more. It has taken us a little more than four years to digest this letter—not because I am a slow-poke, but that there is so much here for us to learn and add to our lives. There is so much meat to this letter that we haven't the time to reprise every bit of that Spirit-led counsel, but I have gleaned what I consider the most important for us to take away from this profound letter.

This letter to the Corinthians is where our love for Christ meets our love for each other. The two are inexorably entwined. We can't be too sure about the Corinthian's love for Christ: Paul refers to them as "saints" (v1:2), but he also closes the letter by stating, "if anyone does not love the lord, he is to be accursed." But we *are* given plenty of evidence that they struggled in their relationships with each other. Paul makes it clear that the two must flow together: our *horizontal* life reflects the quality of our relationship with the Lord, and that *vertical* relationship reflects how well we live with others.

[Please turn to Chapter One.](#)

Wisdom

Compared to the first century, it is unquestionably more critical today that we be discerning about the source of our knowledge and wisdom, for since the time of Paul, the options have expanded exponentially. So what was true for them is even more true for us.

Early on we learned that the Corinthians had a bad habit of listening to the "wisdom" of the wrong people. That Greco-Roman society prided itself on its deep, philosophical insight; the problem for the Corinth church was that, from a Christian worldview, that insight was all wrong. Why? v25: "Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men." This world's wisdom—no matter how high and profound—cannot hold a candle to *God's* wisdom.

v21: 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?

The Christian has a source for wisdom that this world does not possess, or even understand. It may have *access* to our primary source—the written word of God—but it lacks the key to unlock that eternal book: the Holy Spirit.

[Read 1 Corinthians 2:12-14.](#)

Takeaway: *Given our exalted, holy source-set for wisdom, why do we waste so much time and resources listening to the false prophets of this fallen world, even as we neglect God's word?*

The Spirit and His Gifts

The Holy Spirit plays an important role in this letter. As Chapter Two flows into Three, Paul laments that he is forced to consider them and address them—believers though they are—as "men of flesh."

[Read 1 Corinthians 3:1-3.](#)

That is, they were not growing, maturing in the things of God and His Christ because they were too focused on the things of this world. They were spiritually stunted, even as they vaunted their "wisdom" and sophistication. Yet, back in the opening of this letter, he affirmed that they were "not lacking in any gift"—that is, Spirit-gifts. Why, then, the problem? *Where* is

the problem? Why does the apostle commit *three chapters* of this letter (12-14) to Spirit-gifts and their use? Because, as we saw in virtually every part of their lives, the Corinthians had the tools at hand, but were using them badly.

Just as God made the point to Samuel about His selection of King David (1 Samuel 16:7), He doesn't care what we look like, how much knowledge we have, how much money we have; God cares about the condition of our heart, and that it be aligned with His. This was the Corinthian's Achilles heel: they may have *had* the Spirit, but they were not listening to Him, much less permitting His counsel to dominate their lives. Consequently they were of little use as a witness to the world around them—indeed, the evidence shows that in that regard they were of more use to the enemy, than to the gospel of Christ.

Please turn to Chapter Twelve.

Without the Holy Spirit, the “Christian” is not a Christian, and without the gift(s) that He brings to the believer, the Christian would be impotent in his calling (v12:3). The church is populated by believers with an unbounded variety of gifts (v12:5). God believes in hierarchy; he uses it in the administration of the church and in the family. According to Paul, however, God does not believe in a hierarchy—a “pecking order”—regarding the apportioning of Spirit-gifts.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:14-17.

No one gift is any more important than the others; *all* are useful in the body of Christ. And even if there were a hierarchy of gifts, it would say nothing of the holder of that gift, for all have been assigned by God: “But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired” (v12:18).

Takeaway: *It is an earthy, flesh-bound affectation that says the one who cleans the toilets or repairs the lighting is less important than the elder or pastor. The gift itself is not God's measure, but obedience to one's calling.*

Love

Regarding Spirit-gifts, their use in Christ's body, the church, is to be energized by, inspired by, colored by, and enveloped in *love*. This is so important to the apostle that he interrupts his treatise on Spirit-gifts to emphasize this in the whole of Chapter Thirteen (concluding in v14:1). But he had earlier made the same point in his lengthy discussion “concerning things sacrificed to idols.”

Read 1 Corinthians 8:1.

And he exemplifies this by his statement that closes the chapter: “Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble.” That is how love (*agape*) is to be worked out in the body of Christ—on a sacrificial level.

Takeaway: *We dare not claim a “right” when the exercise of that right will harm a brother or sister in Christ. It is a beautiful picture of true agape to forego a right to the benefit of someone else. “Let all that you do be done in love” (v16:14).*

Family Life in the Church

Love comes into play as well, although not by that word, when Paul takes the Corinthians to task over their behavior at the Lord's Supper and the associate communal meal.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:20-22.

Most everyone who has grown up in, or regularly attends an evangelical church, is familiar with the commonly recited litany from Chapter Eleven. But it is surely a small subset of that group that realizes the context from which those verses are lifted. It would seem that some in the Corinth church—from all accounts the wealthy elite—had turned what is to be a holy and reverent remembrance into a drunken Bacchanal! Combined with the communal meal common in that culture, the Lord's Supper had become something of a riotous banquet, in which those of lower stations were receiving only the leftover crumbs.

In the midst of his criticism of their shabby behavior Paul inserts, like a beam of sunlight piercing through dark storm clouds, a recitation of how the Lord intended His supper to be conducted in vv23-26. In a few churches the verses that follow will be read, those instructing those in attendance to “examine” themselves.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:27-29.

Traditionally these verses have been used to encourage an evaluation of the individual's conscience and behavior (“any unconfessed sins”) before taking the bread and the wine. While that is certainly a worthwhile and righteous prelude to the Supper, my understanding of this passage *within the context of Chapter Eleven* is that it pertains more to an evaluation of our behavior in and around the body of Christ, examining the health of our relationship with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Are we treating them as we should? Are we treating them with the respect and consideration due? Do we love them as we should? This is where, it is clear from Chapter Eleven and elsewhere, some in the Corinth church were failing.

Takeaway: *Christ Jesus said that we are to approach and participate in the Lord's Supper—Communion—“in remembrance of” Him; we are to remember the sacrifice He made on our behalf on the cross, to remember with reverent thanksgiving everything else He has and is doing for us. We are also to think of it as a time to reestablish and affirm our family ties with each other as we gather around the communal table.*

Worship

Related to what he says about our responsibilities in the Lord's Supper, also in Chapter Eleven (vv2-16) Paul speaks of our responsibilities to each other in corporate worship—of which the Supper is a part. It is easy to get lost in the details of the God-ordained hierarchical structure of the sexes, the details of “head coverings” for men and women, the restrictions for men and women regarding their hair—all combined with the commands from Chapter Fourteen about the use of prophecy and tongues in the assembly, including the command that “women are to keep silent in the churches” (14:34). But wrap it all up, stand back from it and squint, and we see that it all falls under the heading of believers' comportment in corporate worship.

How we present and adorn ourselves for worship, what we say or do not say in worship, how we behave during worship and the Lord's Supper—all are connected directly, simultaneously in two directions: upward to God, and outward to our brothers and sisters in Christ. That is, how we think and feel about our God, and how we think and feel about our church family. It is clear throughout this letter that the apostle Paul believes that *both* are critically important.

Is there anything about our appearance that could distract another from their worship of our God? Are we saying or doing anything that draws attention away from Him and onto us? Are we showing due honor and respect to our corporate Head, Christ Jesus, as well as our familial head? Are our mind and heart focused on things above, or on the things of this world?

I would suggest that this may be our most important takeaway from this letter. The Corinth church was permitting too much of the secular, fallen culture to permeate the local body of Christ. The habits and philosophies of non-believers were corrupting almost every aspect of believers' lives, and the name of Christ was being sullied as a result—not to mention the growth, maturing, and witness of the church.

No other letter in the canon so clearly speaks to us today; no other letter so definitively reflects our situation today. So we are left with one final challenge:

Takeaway: *Are we, both as a church and as individuals, willing to stand on God's word, resolute and firm, when faced against the fierce winds and slippery standards of a fallen culture? Will we unashamedly stand for the name of Jesus the Christ, when this world demands our compromise? It is my prayer that, by God's grace, our answer will be, "Yes, we will."*

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Biography

We are David and Linda Lampel, and we live in a large country house in the rural area outside Winterset, Iowa, in the middle of the United States. Our home is surrounded by fields of corn and soybeans, and by dense woods that are home to deer, raccoons, possums, wild turkeys, woodchucks, coyotes, and myriad birds of all shapes and colors.

The tranquility and beauty of this place contribute to what we do. In fact, we believe that the Lord brought us to this home because He knew that here we would best be equipped to serve Him and His people.

Both of us work at home—Dave with his writing, and Linda (now retired) with her baking, needlework, and crocheting projects that are given to charities. Now that she has been unshackled from the business world, Linda has expanded our gardens, and has returned to baking all our bread—and spending more time with our family of four cats.

The Lord has given us a good life, and we are most grateful to Him—especially for our 51 years together as husband and wife.