

# **FIRST CORINTHIANS: NOTHING BUT CHRIST CRUCIFIED**

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# CHAPTER ONE: THE ULTIMATE TRUTH IS CROSS-CENTRED

The intellectual scoffers called the Apostle Paul a ‘babbler’ (Acts 17). The word they used literally meant a seed-picker, conjuring up the picture of some someone who goes around the rubbish bins scraping together a meal from everyone else’s leftovers. Their insinuation was that Paul plagiarised other people’s ideas and presented them as his own. In stark contrast to that put-down, Paul’s message borrowed nothing from the wisdom of this world’s elite.

It wasn’t the case that he wasn’t capable of the same eloquence as others, far from it; Jewish authorities and Roman governors acknowledged he’d advanced in knowledge and had great learning. But Paul had made a conscious decision before coming to Corinth that he wouldn’t employ the rhetoric of the day nor the kind of oratory that he was capable of. He would have been quite at home in the Greek world where those who became practised in the art of public debate were treated like demi-gods from the fifth century BC onwards. They were the movie-stars, as it were, of that time. Statues were erected in honour of these strolling sophists who performed to great applause. Although he probably had the ability to mix it with the best of them, Paul chose not to for the reason that the Christian message of a crucified Messiah was incompatible with a style of communicating which exalted human egos.

Religious history does tell of some early advocates of Christianity who were golden-tongued, and were regarded as ‘Christian sophists.’ The danger in this is palpable as we dip into the first Bible letter Paul wrote to the local Church of God at Corinth. For here, according to reports Paul has received, was a divided church. Paul writes:

“Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe’s people, that there are quarrels among you. Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, “I am of Paul,” and “I of Apollos,” and “I of Cephas,” and “I of Christ.” Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one would say you were baptized in my name. Now I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any other. For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void” (1 (Corinthians 1:10-17).

The spirit of the age, the prevailing culture, can so easily affect us as Christians. It seems clearly indicated here by these words which we’ve just read that sections of the church were aligning themselves with one or other Christian leader, very likely comparing them based on their speaking skills. After all, this was exactly what the world around them was doing in the wider society. To take one of the names mentioned, that of Apollos, he was from Alexandria – with its reputation for learning - and what we know of him was that he was personally a powerful speaker (Acts 18:24, 27). It’s not without significance surely that Paul makes repeated reference (1 Corinthians 3:4-6; 4:6) to Apollos. From the little we know of Apollos (Acts 18:26), he was a humble man, so it’s not likely that Apollos was intentionally trying to outshine Paul, or draw away a personal following, or trying to be competitive in any way.

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But in the cultural context of Corinthian Christianity, it was hard for those in the church not to make comparisons and express preferences.

Also, Paul's mention of the fact that he's baptized hardly anyone there, seems to invite the implication that some in the church were considering it a big deal if such-and-such a person had been the one to baptize them. Paul's so quick to disassociate himself from this wrong thinking that he initially forgets a few persons he had in fact baptized. Which is interesting as we reflect on the Bible, and so Paul's two letters to Corinth, as having been inspired or God-breathed (2 Timothy 3:16). This slip of the memory which Paul corrects a couple of verses later, is illuminating in that it's consistent with a divine superintendence of the human writer's own choice of the words he used, rather than suggesting anything more like a mechanical dictation process.

Paul then makes a strong statement that God had not sent him to baptize, but to preach the gospel. That's a very telling distinction – and one I'd like to draw your attention to. One of the most regular issues that crops up in correspondence is the claim that baptism, even Christian believers' baptism, is a necessary part of our salvation from the penalty of our sins. If I was dealing specifically with that issue here, there are many biblical texts I would want to comment on to make it quite clear that someone who repents of sin and truly believes on the Lord Jesus as his or her personal saviour is forgiven and heaven-bound regardless of whether or not they fulfil the Lord's further instruction to be baptized. That's not to down-play the importance of keeping any command of the Lord – far from it – it's just following the Bible's teaching in saying that the instruction for a believer to be baptized is not a command that leads to salvation from sin's penalty.

But just staying on message here with the first chapter of Corinthians, and the last verse we read, Paul says: "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” (1 Corinthians 1:17). This remarkably effective Gospel-preacher was not sent to baptize. The good news of how to be right with God, and to be sure of all our sins being forgiven, is deliberately spoken of here by Paul as separate from, and distinct from, a believer’s baptism by immersion in water – which God certainly does intend should take place later as a public sign that one is a follower of Christ – one who is already by then eternally saved from the penalty of his or her sins.

Now, there’s something else before we’re finished with that same verse, which is verse 17 of First Corinthians, chapter one. As we’ve seen, Paul’s been very concerned about the divided state of some, at least, of the believers in the local church at Corinth. There are reasonable grounds for understanding, as we’ve seen, that part of that division at least was the result of those in the church favouring one speaker’s communication style and delivery over that of others. Paul deliberately chose to speak in such a way that he was not in danger of encouraging this tendency. He affirms that God had sent him to preach the good news message of Christianity, albeit not in cleverness of speech.

If he should use cleverness of speech, there was a worse consequence than fuelling the divided state of the Corinthians; there was, for Paul, the unthinkable potential prospect of rendering the cross of Christ empty of power. Strictly speaking, the expression ‘in cleverness of speech’ is more literally ‘in wisdom of word’ or ‘in wisdom of discourse’ or ‘in wisdom of speaking style.’ The very next verse says: “For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18).

The expression ‘the word of the cross’ stands in stark contrast to the ‘wisdom of word.’ There is indeed a reasoning surrounding the cross – it’s the most meaningful event in history - but it’s not a worldly-wise kind of reasoning. That’s why it’s singularly not appropriate, according

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to Paul, to use clever speech, the kind which aims to outsmart others, if the topic under debate or for declaration is the cross of Christ. Paul was all too conscious, it seems, that some of the Corinthians viewed their Christianity as an ‘alternative wisdom’ – an alternative to that put on show by the strolling philosophers of the then Hellenistic world. Paul is at pains here to disabuse them of that idea, not only because it was dividing opinions within the church, but far more importantly, this was wholly foreign in character to the cross of Christ. In fact, we’ll see, when we come to the next chapter that Paul reasons that the cross of Christ is God’s foolishness, and that the highest revealed truth about God is cross-centred. It’s precisely in this way that God has destroyed the wisdom of this world. But let’s close this chapter by noting what Paul says at the beginning of the second chapter:

“And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God” (1 Corinthians 2:1-5).

This continues his point on his preferred style of gospel preaching, the gospel which he describes there as being the testimony of God. As for its content it’s the cross of Christ; and the way in which it should be preached is in the power of the Spirit. This is Paul’s trinitarian formulation of the message he lived to preach. And we conclude with the point that he was determined to know nothing among the Corinthians other than Christ crucified. Of course, as we’ll see, Paul spoke to them on many topics such as their sanctification, but there’s no contradiction, inasmuch as Paul had come to see everything through the cross of

Christ. He's the example to every preacher and teacher to keep things centred on the cross, the central point of history.

## STUDY QUESTIONS: 1 CORINTHIANS 1A

- a) Corinth had been visited by Paul, Apollos (Acts 18:24; 19:1) and possibly Peter (9:1); what might make you think (culturally) that their respective speaking styles were being competitively compared here (see also 3:5; 6,22; 4:6)?
- b) Does it seem as if the Corinthians viewed their Christianity as an alternative 'wisdom' (to that put-on show by the strolling philosophers of the then Hellenistic world)? How so (see v.17b)?
- c) What was an even bigger danger than their petty quarrelling among themselves (v.17c)?
- d) Interestingly, Paul seems to correct a memory slip in v.16 (cp. v14) and then adds a disclaimer (v.16b) – what does this suggest about the process of inspiration?
- e) Why does Paul raise the topic of baptism, what can we learn of its meaning here; does v.17a have any bearing on the view of some that it is essential for salvation?

## CHAPTER TWO: THE SCANDAL TO END ALL SCANDALS

Archimedes once said that if he had a lever long enough and a place to stand on, he could move the world. But it was left to the early gospel preachers to achieve this feat – at least inasmuch as they were accused of being those who had turned the world upside down (Acts 17). And that was a form of words in those days which had a special idiomatic meaning. To accuse someone of upsetting the world like that was to charge them with sedition. And it's little wonder that Christians should have been accused of that; after all, wasn't Christ condemned for claiming a kingship to rival Caesar's? And ever since his resurrection, loyal followers of Christ had chanted 'kurios Iesous' ('Jesus is Lord': see Romans 10:9; Philippians 2:11; 1 Corinthians 12:3) while the rest of society, who were loyal to the emperor, had 'kaisar kurios' (Caesar is lord) as their rallying cry.

In those bygone days, Christians were accused of atheism because they didn't revere all the pagan gods of Rome. So, that meant that atheism had a double meaning then. When Polycarp, the 86-year-old Bishop of Smyrna, who reputedly had been a personal acquaintance of the Apostle John at Ephesus, was sentenced to be thrown to the gladiators in the arena, the authorities realised this would be a poor spectacle, so they encouraged him just to say 'away with the atheists' and that would suffice for him to recant his faith. Polycarp assured them he'd be able to comply with that request, and then when the moment came he instead turned and pointed to the emperor and his entourage, and said 'away with the atheists!' In that way he kept his faith, and lost his life. There's more than a hint of sedition too in the description of the Christian message as Paul defines it: ...

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“For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, “I WILL DESTROY THE WISDOM OF THE WISE, AND THE CLEVERNESS OF THE CLEVER I WILL SET ASIDE.” Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.

For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Corinthians 1:18-25).

The Apostle Paul, guided by the Spirit, began there by quoting from the prophet Isaiah. It was back in the 29th chapter of Isaiah that God had forewarned that he was one day going to do something ‘wondrously marvellous’ which would utterly confound human wisdom. It’s made clear here that God fulfilled that promise in the most wonderful and marvellous way possible at the cross. Philosophers ever since have struggled to fit the cross into their ways of viewing the world; religious traditionalists don’t consider it to be at all the kind of sign they’d expect; and the professional debaters who were around in the first century doubtless found it a topic quite unsuited for their art.

Not much has changed since. Contemporary intellectuals dismiss what they view as the sadistic and horrific barbarism of the cross. They hold

in utter contempt any god who could conceive of such a deed as occurred at the cross. They do this in a similar vein to what's shown in an early piece of graffiti where Christians and their God were the butt of the joke. It displays a figure on a cross with a donkey's head, and under the man drawn beside it, the inscription reads, 'Alexander worships his god.'

This reflects the marginalised status of Christianity before Constantine, with a sweep of his sceptre, made Christianity the empire's official religion overnight. Suddenly Christianity had – for the first time – something to lose. It had gained official patronage, wealth and respect. All of which had been totally unknown before. At one point after that, the pope showed to Thomas Aquinas great wealth and proudly declared that 'the church' could no longer say 'silver and gold have I none' as it's recorded the disciple Peter had done. Aquinas replied that it was probably for that reason that it could also no longer say 'stand, take up your bed, and walk.' Such was then its powerless state. Christianity is generally better suited to being marginalised than patronised. It's more powerful when it has nothing to lose. I see it today in the powerful Christian lives of brothers and sisters in developing countries who have nothing or very little to lose.

Initially, the wider categories of human society: Roman as well as barbarian; Jew as well as Gentile; all were wrong-footed by God's action at the cross. No-one had anticipated a cross-centred revelation of who God is, and the only ones since who've ever been able to appreciate that are those who have been called by God. To everyone else, it's pure foolishness; which is why Paul wrote to the Corinthians about 'the foolishness of the message.'

Notice it's not the foolishness of the actual preaching, but the foolishness, as perceived, of the thing that's preached. We should always strive not to preach in a foolish way, but we always need to be prepared for

the reaction of listeners that the substance of what's being preached is to them mere foolishness. But those who view the message of the cross like that, tragically, are perishing. The only labels that have ultimate meaning at the cross are 'those who are perishing' and those 'who are being saved.' In verse 18, we read: "For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18).

We might have expected that verse to contrast wisdom with its earlier mention of foolishness, but the term 'power' is used instead. It's not merely that God's wisdom is greater in degree than human wisdom – that wouldn't be saying too much. But God's foolishness, the cross, is more powerful than human wisdom. The cross is the shocking way in which God did what he promised he was going to do long in advance: he destroyed human wisdom with all its pretensions and arrogance and self-congratulations. He's done this at one stroke by revealing that the truth about himself is cross-centred. Not only has this action of God through the cross upset the world, overturning all its values - in what must be the ultimate sedition - it's at the same time the scandal to end all scandals.

Modern political scandals, such as the so-called Watergate affair in the United States which took place during the Presidency of Richard Nixon, are probably among the most famous scandals of recent times. But they come nowhere close. The Apostle Paul says that Christ crucified was – and is – a stumbling-block to the Jews. The word translated 'stumbling-block' is the word we get our modern term 'scandal' from. For the Jew, 'Christ crucified' was an oxymoron – two words that never should belong together. If the cross defied sense to the Greek mind as we earlier thought; it also denied pride to the Jew who was looking to boast in a swashbuckling super-hero of a Messiah coming to liberate the Jewish people from their oppressors.

As well as defying sense and denying pride, I feel compelled to remind you that the cross defines pain for all time. Our word ‘excruciating’ - meaning ‘intensely’ painful – originates from crucifixion. It is the most horrific of all means of execution, being imported by the Romans from barbarians at the margin of the empire. They reserved it for aliens, slaves and the worst of criminals. So fearful was it, it was not a topic for discussion in polite company. Cicero warned against it. It was the ‘extreme and ultimate punishment of slaves,’ ‘the cruellest and most disgusting penalty.’ Josephus calls it ‘the most pitiable of deaths.’ Back to Cicero again, he said ‘the very mention of the cross should be far removed not only from a Roman citizen’s body, but from his mind, his eyes, his ears.’ And yet, flying in the face of all this, God has designed Christianity as ‘the message of the cross.’

Long ago, they considered Jeremiah a traitor when his God-given message of salvation to his people was to cease all resistance, and entrust themselves to the mercy of their would-be captors. That’s again what God asks of those who would become Christians: to be prepared to stop living for themselves in this world, yield to the claims of God in full surrender of the life to Christ. And so the note of sedition comes in again as Paul surveys the Corinthian church:

“For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God. But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, “LET HIM WHO

**BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD” (1 Corinthians 1:26-31).**

Often today, it's the poorest who are first to respond to the message of the cross. In the 21st century it continues to turn the world upside down. In doing so, of course, it's actually setting things right. For its human rebelliousness against God that's got the world topsy-turvy.

## STUDY QUESTIONS: 1 CORINTHIANS 1B

- a) Having set up the contrast in vv.17,18 between the ‘wisdom of word’ and the ‘word of the cross’, how does Paul proceed to show the case for Christianity is no mere art form, not simply a higher worldly kind of wisdom (see vv.19,23; 2:1-5)?
- b) Why does v.18 end with ‘power’ and not ‘wisdom’ as we might expect?
- c) The folly of humanity has always been to think it can outwit God, so comment on the promised ‘great reversal’ of Isaiah 29:14 being fulfilled at the cross, and describe how God has turned the tables on worldly wisdom.
- d) Paul affirms in vv.21,24 there is another wisdom (the cross), God’s wisdom (seemingly foolishness): how is it shown to be the complete opposite of human wisdom by the rest of the passage (vv.26-31)?
- e) Can we capture the full sense of ‘stumbling-block’ in v.23? How is it shown that the ultimate idolatry is to insist that God should do what makes sense to us?

## CHAPTER THREE: GOD'S DEEPEST SECRETS REVEALED

Previously, we've seen how the Apostle Paul by the Holy Spirit has spoken very candidly about the perceived foolishness of the message of the cross, the message of a crucified Christ. And yet he's gone to some length to present to us the mind of God, that is, God's thinking on the matter. Not surprisingly, it's radically different from the thoughts of fallen humanity (see Isaiah 55:7). The revealed truth about God, we've learned, is cross-centred. Provocatively put, the cross may be termed God's foolishness, but even so it's more powerful than human wisdom.

Now, in the second chapter of First Corinthians, Paul goes on to expand on how there's a divine wisdom surrounding the cross. For those to whom the call of the Christian Gospel comes, for those in whom it's effective, the cross of Christ – and the Christ of the cross – is both God's wisdom and power. He says:

“Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory; the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory; but just as it is written, “THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM.”

“For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words. But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one. For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, THAT HE WILL INSTRUCT HIM? But we have the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:6-16).

Here’s the key, the only key, to unlocking the meaning of the cross of Christ. It is to be possessed of, and educated by, God’s own Spirit. The mysteries of which the Bible speaks – and the cross is one of them – for the message of the cross has just been described as God’s wisdom in a mystery, Bible mysteries are not impenetrable mysteries being the type of conundrum which defies the human mind to solve it. Bible mysteries are in fact, ‘opened secrets.’ They are in fact easy to accept once the Holy Spirit enlightens us, using the biblical text.

Having considered, in the previous chapter, how the cross of Christ – this great oxymoron of a crucified Messiah – is total foolishness from the point of view of human wit and intellect, Paul now proceeds to say that his preaching of the cross is God’s wisdom – but only among those who are mature. His use of this term ‘mature’ has stirred some debate, because he is in the middle of writing a corrective letter to the

Corinthian believers, critiquing them for their worldliness and emotional immature behaviours among themselves. So then, does this singular reference to ‘the mature’ single out a very few of them who were not like the rest of the believers at Corinth?

That, however, is not the contrast Paul is making at this point. Those whom he is contrasting in terms of their conflicting views of the cross are ‘the perishing’ and ‘the called.’ The former see belief in the cross as crass stupidity on the part of Christians. They regard those who attend Christian church services as checking their brains in at the door of the building. They consider them to be dead from the neck up as they listen to the sermons there. They lampoon the weak-minded gullibility of the worship of a man who claimed to be God but died in abject shame in the manner the vilest of criminals were then disposed of. An early piece of anti-Christian religious graffiti portrays a figure on a cross with a donkey’s head. A man is staring at it, and the caption intones: ‘Alexander worships his god.’ The world spares nothing in its derision of the Christ of the cross. Tragically, it’s the laugh of the perishing, en route to a lost eternity away from all happiness and well-being in the conscious presence of God. But no true believer thinks that way about the cross, of course – including all the believers at that time who were in the Church of God at Corinth.

No matter how displeasing to God some of their behaviours were, they had each been called to faith in Christ, and had realized and fully accepted that he’d been crucified in God’s plan to save them. In this specialized sense, as restricted by the immediate context, the term ‘the mature’ can and does apply to them all – but only in the sense that they’d the correct, basic grasp of the cross.

The ‘rulers of this age,’ Paul says, just hadn’t got it. They’d no clue. If they’d understood what God was about, they would not have involved themselves in Christ’s death. Perhaps, ‘the rulers of this age’ is a little

more general than we tend to think. Of course, we think of Pontius Pilate and the chief priests of the Jews, together with the Herods of this world, but they were only acting out the kind of thinking which was the general rule then. Paul has already specified the philosophers, the religious traditionalists and the strolling public debaters. They were the movers and shakers of that period. They shaped and reflected the values and beliefs of the (Graeco-Roman) culture. It's possible that Paul has them again equally in his sights as the 'rulers of this age', somewhat like the celebrity icons and media moguls of today who champion and epitomise worldly thought.

Paul then talks of those who are 'spiritual.' Again, Paul will come to sharpen definitions of this word as the letter progresses and he's compelled later in the letter to deal with an altogether distorted view of spirituality which held sway among some of those on the church of God at Corinth. But here, in chapter two, I suggest – as with the case of the descriptor 'mature' – 'spiritual' simply serves to differentiate them from those who are referred to as natural which is all those who don't have the Spirit of God living in them - in other words, all non-believers. Let's come now to consider those words from this section which we often hear at Christian funerals. Paul says:

“But just as it is written, “THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM.” For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the

Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God” (1 Corinthians 2:9-12).

Often, we get the impression at least, that this is a future revelation when we see the Lord. But once again, we need to double-check the context. It plainly talks about us knowing the things God has freely given us – and that’s now – because God has already given us his Spirit who now lives in us for this very purpose. What’s more, this is a cross-centred revelation of God’s truth. What’s revealed now to us is something which the natural person cannot accept, but by contrast we who are spiritual, having God’s Spirit residing within us, have been apprised of these things. Who can appreciate what God has done at the cross? Precisely those who have God’s Spirit living in them to give them this knowledge.

We’re told that the Spirit searches the deep things which belong to God. It’s not that the Spirit has to search in order to inform himself, not at all; because this section in fact is one which shows that the Spirit is God. No, the Spirit searches the depths of God in order to reveal them to us. It’s for our benefit he searches, and the truth about God is fathomed at the cross.

The famous astronomer, Johannes Kepler, who was the first to formulate the three laws of planetary motion, said that through studying the heavens and deciphering these laws of motion of the celestial bodies, he was thinking God’s thoughts after him. In this statement, he paid tribute to the Creator, and evidenced a firm and devout belief that the universe we inhabit manifests clear signs of having been designed by God.

We, too, can think God’s thoughts after him, so to speak, and not only in terms of the general revelation of himself which God has given in the universe around us, but particularly in the special revelation of himself in his Word. It’s amazing to think that by reading the Bible we can read God’s mind – when we can’t even read another human being’s mind.

The difference is that God has given us his own Spirit to live inside each and every true Christian believer, and he is the one who inspired the Bible where we can read all that God wants us to know, and all we need to know.

In contrast to the view of the intellectual sceptic, it's the believer who knows more than they do in matters of faith - for this reason, which Paul states: because profanity can't understand holiness, but the godly can understand evil, and wisely avoid it.

## STUDY QUESTIONS: 1 CORINTHIANS 2

- a) Who are the 'mature' - all Christian believers or only those who are more knowledgeable or experienced?
- b) Who are 'the rulers of this age' - bad angels or political leaders or such as found in 1:20?
- c) What 3 things are we told about 'God's wisdom' (vv.7,10)?
- d) Verse 9 is often quoted at funerals as referring to the glories awaiting us after death, but does the context here suggest another meaning?
- e) Verse 15 states "he who is spiritual ... is appraised by no-one." What does this mean?
- f) How does this section show that the Holy Spirit is fully God?

## CHAPTER FOUR: WORKING COLLECTIVELY BUT INDIVIDUALLY ACCOUNTABLE

The spirit of the age, the prevailing culture, can so easily affect us as Christians. It seems to be indicated that some sections of the Church of God at Corinth were aligning themselves with one or another Christian leader, very likely comparing them based on their speaking skills. After all, this was exactly what the world around them was doing in the wider society. To take one of the names mentioned, that of Apollos, he was from Alexandria – with its reputation for learning - and what we know of him was that he was personally a powerful speaker (Acts 18:24,27). It's not without significance that Paul makes repeated reference (3:4-6; 4:6) to Apollos. From the little we know of Apollos (Acts 18:26), he was a humble man, so it's not likely that Apollos was intentionally trying to outshine Paul, or draw away a personal following, or trying to be competitive in any way. But in the cultural context of Corinthian Christianity, it was hard for those in the church not to make comparisons and express preferences. Shortly, we'll see how Paul returns to this issue, but first after reading the opening of chapter 3, we'll come to another link with what's gone before ...

“And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?” (1 Corinthians 3:1-3).

Previously, in his letter, in chapters 1 and 2, Paul has described the Corinthians as ‘mature’ and ‘spiritual.’ This might lead us to think of

them as spiritually mature believers on the Lord Jesus. But the third chapter shows us that they were not. They were 'spiritual' only in the sense of having received the Spirit but it was not intended that they should necessarily be characterised as spiritually-minded. After all, they were also said to be 'mature' - in that they were enlightened by the call of God concerning the cross as expressing God's wisdom - but their actions described in this chapter show them not to be emotionally mature, far less spiritually mature. Now Paul continues ...

“For when one says, “I am of Paul,” and another, “I am of Apollos,” are you not mere men? What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one. I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth. Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor” (1 Corinthians 3:4-8).

This seems to revisit the opening theme of the letter in which Paul has already criticised the Corinthian church for splitting into groups each saying either 'I am of Paul' or 'I am of Apollos' etc. With characteristic humility, Paul returns to the deep concern he had with this divisive tendency among the Corinthians. Taking himself and Apollos as specific examples, he proceeds to tell them that neither he nor Apollos should be considered as anything other than instruments the Lord had used in reaching and teaching them. He essentially describes Apollos and himself as nobodies. What's more, they were one, in that they were united in their work on behalf of the church there. Up till then, Paul has been using the horticultural metaphor of him planting and Apollos watering those in the Corinthian church as they were viewed in the same imagery as being God's cultivated land. But notice how Paul in the next verse changes the metaphor from horticulture to a building project ...

“For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, God’s building. According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work. If any man’s work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire” (1 Corinthians 3:9-15).

Perhaps Paul changes the scene because he wants to develop the idea of lots of persons making their contribution, and so he switches the picture away from one of assisting natural growth to a construction setting which focuses on the involvement of individuals.

Each Christian is a builder. In terms of the figure of speech Paul’s using here, we either build with incombustible materials or with combustible materials; that is, either with stuff that cannot burn or with stuff that can burn. The person building with stuff that burns is the backslider, being the Christian who’s not following God’s plan or not doing the things God wants him or her to do – or who maybe is doing things that seem fine, but the motivation behind them is all wrong. At that future meeting which we’ll each have with Christ, there’ll be a fiery testing of our works – it’ll be the flame test. If it burns, it wasn’t any good.

Imagine the worst then that could happen for a Christian. They watch all their life’s works go up in smoke. They lose, therefore, all their potential reward – there’s nothing left for which to be rewarded. Nothing has

withstood the fire. But what about the individual concerned? Did you catch Paul's reassuring words in this baseline case? "If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire" (1 Corinthians 3:15). Ah, thank God for that! So then, here's what we are seeing from our Bibles: there are rewards for faithful service which we may fail to gain as distinct from the gift of salvation itself. Salvation itself is not a reward. It cannot be lost. But we may in some sense 'suffer loss.' That means the loss of potential rewards we may have gained if we'd lived a pleasing life to God's glory. Now, let's continue with Paul from v.16 ...

"Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are" (1 Corinthians 3:16-17).

The Greek grammar of this verse is the very same as that of 1 Corinthians 12:27 where we take the meaning as being that a church of God is characteristically the Church the Body of Christ. So, logically, the same must apply here, i.e. that the church of God at Corinth (and so each church of God) is characteristically the Temple of God (with that Temple being defined as the aggregate of all the churches of God – which satisfies the overall biblical picture).

"Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age, he must become foolish, so that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God. For it is written, "He is THE ONE WHO CATCHES THE WISE IN THEIR CRAFTINESS"; and again, "THE LORD KNOWS THE REASONINGS of the wise, THAT THEY ARE USELESS." So then let no one boast in men. For all things belong to you, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things

present or things to come; all things belong to you, and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God” (1 Corinthians 3:16-23).

At the end of this third chapter, we’ve just seen that the Apostle Paul returns once again to his earlier themes. Once again he draws a distinction between the world’s wisdom and God’s wisdom – and we remind ourselves that without an appreciation of the cross we can have no grasp of God’s wisdom, for what Paul has already taught us is that the fullest revelation of God’s truth is cross-centred.

Paul will boast in nothing other than Christ crucified. Again he talks of how he, Apollos and Peter are not to be distinguished. In a sense, they and all things: the world, life, death, things present and things to come all belong to the believer – whoever he or she is – because he or she belongs to Christ who belongs to God. God is the creator of all things and Christ is the inheritor of all things, and God has freely given us all things in Christ. Wow! That certainly puts things into perspective, doesn’t it?

## STUDY QUESTIONS: 1 CORINTHIANS 3

- a) Expand on the 3 descriptions of the Corinthians in v.9.
- b) Paul changes the picture from horticulture to construction (compare vv. 8 & 10) – any thoughts as to why?
- c) When will the quality of our work become evident (v.13)?
- d) What form will the loss suffered take (v.15)? What ultimate reassurance is given here?
- e) Which temple is capable of being destroyed (v.17)?
- f) Does v.18 imply that we need to “leave our brains at the door” when we become believers?

## CHAPTER FIVE: BIBLICAL CHURCH DISCIPLINE

As I sat chatting to the man before me who was earnestly applying for local church fellowship, I asked him what he felt was drawing him to request church fellowship. I confess I was a little surprised by his response. ‘Biblical church discipline,’ he said. Perhaps my expression signalled to him that this wasn’t the answer I was expecting, so he hastened to explain. He’d become quite disillusioned by the immorality which had been allowed to go unchecked in Christian circles he’d been previously associated with. He spoke of those who still retained their office even after their affairs became public knowledge, and had felt this did not sit right with Scripture. He was now sure of this after seeing biblical church discipline being practised.

Together we looked at the Apostle Paul’s instructions to the Corinthian Church of God in chapter 5 of the first biblical letter to them. Paul began: ‘It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father’s wife. You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst’ (1 Corinthians 5:1-2).

What a scandal this was, even in a place like Corinth, a port infamous for its loose morals. The ancient city of Corinth, the capital of the Roman province of Achaia, was not only located on the main east-west land route, but was also a major seaport of that day. It was a cosmopolitan community of Romans, Greeks, Jews, and others. The city was notorious for the wickedness and immorality that flourished there. Pagan religion centred in the worship of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love (known to the Romans as Venus). Those in the Christian community

here were not only influenced by their former backgrounds, but were daily challenged by the world in which they lived.

Corinth soon was regarded as the third most important city of the empire after Rome and Alexandria. The city of Corinth in the first century, with a population estimated to be as high as two hundred thousand, has been described as “a wide-open boomtown” (Murphy-O’Connor). It boasted two harbours and was strategically located, thus enhancing its reputation as one of the leading commercial centres of southern Greece. Sailors and merchants from every city and province, and therefore from every race and religion, passed through Corinth. It was truly cosmopolitan in nature.

Not unexpectedly, Corinth became notorious for luxurious and debauched living. Although virtually every pagan deity had a cult following in Corinth (archaeologists have discovered temples devoted to Neptune, Apollo, Venus, Octavia, Asclepius, Demeter, Core, and Poseidon, among others), its chief shrine was the temple of Aphrodite (the Greek goddess of love and life), where as many as a thousand temple prostitutes were reported to have conducted their business. Sexual perversion and immorality of every conceivable (and some inconceivable) sort were rampant. “Because of the luxury and vice of Corinth the word ‘corinthianize’ ... (i.e., to fornicate) was coined as an infamous sign of the wealth and immorality for which the city was renowned in the ancient world” (R. Martin).

It was, however, in just such a place that the grace of God appeared. For here Paul spent a year and a half preaching the gospel. We should say that Corinth’s reputation comes from what we know it to have been like prior to its devastation in 146 B.C. – which should make us careful “not to read the old city’s character into the new city ... [but, having said that] ... it is unlikely that new Corinth established a [vastly different] reputation” (Carson, Moo, Morris).

The church in Corinth was composed largely of Gentiles, the majority of whom were at the lower end of the social ladder. As Gordon Fee has noted, “although they were the Christian church in Corinth, an inordinate amount of Corinth was yet in them, emerging in a number of attitudes and behaviors that required radical surgery without killing the patient.” Even in this lax, cosmopolitan setting, it was unheard of to be sexually active with one’s step-mother, but as Paul opens this chapter, we discover this is exactly what was to be found in the church at Corinth – and what’s more it’s being tolerated. But Paul makes clear this is something not to be tolerated as he continues ...

“For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present. In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Corinthians 5:3-5).

The words seem chilling, to be delivered to Satan. But as Paul clarifies at the end of the chapter what he’s commanding them to implement is the removal of this seriously erring brother from the fellowship of the local church. The Bible informs us that ‘the whole world lies in the power of the evil one’ (1 John 5:19). As believers, we’ve been rescued from the domain of darkness prior to being transferred to the kingdom of God’s Son (Colossians 1:13). And so this language graphically depicts the dramatic action of once again being set outside the church community.

Although one of the purposes of biblical church discipline is to punish (see 2 Corinthians 2:6), there is a salvation mentioned beyond the destruction here. The destruction is of fleshly behaviours, and the envisaged restoration is in the present day of service for the Lord Jesus. This

emphasizes that another major goal of such disciplinary action by the local church is the recovery to Christian fellowship and service of the back-slider once he or she has found repentance. One further purpose of the biblical discipline of excommunication comes up next in Paul's words as he continues further:

“Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Corinthians 5:6-8).

This brings us to the testimony of the church. What reputation would it have if such serious sins were left unpunished? What deterrent effect would there be on others? The local church is a colony of heaven (see Philippians 3:21), and the lives of those who comprise it should reflect the values of the God of heaven. Our banner heading for this series of studies in Corinthians is ‘Nothing but Christ Crucified’ – it was Paul's intention that this would be his theme in all his preaching and teaching among them. And here, at this point, he brings them – and us – to the cross where Christ our Passover had been sacrificed for us.

Paul's recalling the first Jewish holy days in their annual calendar. Each year they were an anniversary remembrance of their national deliverance from the land of Egypt where they'd been slaves. In God's deliberate design, unblemished lambs had been sacrificed so that the judgement of God on Egypt passed over them, and they were set free as Egyptians in every home fell under God's righteous judgement for their pagan idolatry along with their harsh treatment of God's chosen ones. Much later in history, John the Baptist would declare Jesus as being ‘the Lamb of God’ (John 1:29). Christ died for our sins that we might be

no longer in dominion to sin (Romans 6:11,12). A holy lifestyle should follow our conversion just as the days of Unleavened Bread annually followed the Jewish Passover sacrifice. The Apostle spells out his take on the meaning for us of these rituals: once we endorse by faith Jesus' sacrifice as being for us, we should remove all malice and wickedness from our lives as conscientiously as the Jews were to remove all traces of leaven from their homes in those days.

“I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler - not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God judges. REMOVE THE WICKED MAN FROM AMONG YOURSELVES” (1 Corinthians 5:9-13).

In case there should be any misunderstanding, the Apostle Paul distinguishes the principles governing the extent of our association with sinners outside the church from those governing our association with those who were formerly part of the local church. We will meet among our neighbours and colleagues those who are as yet unsaved and unchurched and whose lifestyles are decidedly non-Christian as judged by the Bible's standards. We're not to shun such people, but love them for Christ's sake as we try to introduce them to God's saving grace. Although we cannot approve their behaviours, we can still accept them as people loved by God.

There's to be a different stance taken with those believers whose lifestyle choices while within the church community resulted in them being – rightly – placed once again outside of it. We're no longer to fraternise with them as before. For that would surely signal that what they did and what's happened because of it, is no big deal to us. It is a big deal – and we want them back – but not with the same thinking they had before. We should never be beyond a kind action towards them, and never treat them as an enemy for sure, but there has to be a change of stance which reflects the fact that they're under biblical discipline.

## STUDY QUESTIONS: 1 CORINTHIANS 5

- a) What is Paul's complaint against the church?
- b) What action is described by 'delivering such a one to Satan'?
- c) What was its object? What was the hoped for timescale for this?
- d) Rehearse the background to vv.6-8 as hinted at by 'leaven ... Passover ... feast'?
- e) What principles govern the extent of our association with unbelievers outside the church and those who were formerly part of the local church (vv.9-12)?

## CHAPTER SIX: GLORIFYING GOD WITH OUR BODY

Have you ever engaged in an exchange of correspondence with someone on a doctrinal matter? The Apostle Paul certainly appears to have had a lively exchange of letters with the Church of God at Corinth in which he wrote some 4 or 5 letters to them, of which two are contained within our Bibles. Paul may have been an apostle, but there were those at Corinth, in the church there, who seemed comfortable with challenging his authority. When they wrote to Paul, their letters contained provocative slogans which set out their thinking – slogans like: ‘All things are lawful for [us],’ and ‘food is for the stomach and the stomach is for food,’ perhaps with the implied footnote: ‘the body is for immorality.’

Here then is the Apostle Paul’s response – notice how he repeats back to them each of their slogans – before proceeding to give very firm rebuttals:

“All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything. Food is for the stomach and the stomach is for food, but God will do away with both of them. Yet the body is not for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body. Now God has not only raised the Lord, but will also raise us up through His power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? May it never be!” (1 Corinthians 6:12-15).

It would seem indicated that some, at least, in the church of God at Corinth, had a rather distorted view of spirituality – one in which

they seriously played down the error of unchecked physical appetites. It seems they thought that how they treated their bodies was immaterial; that it had no impact on their spiritual state – after all, the body to them was just some kind of shell. So, some of them, appeared to be living indulgently and promiscuously. Self-gratification, they thought, did not come at the expense of their spiritual condition.

In order to begin to show them just how wrong they were, the Apostle Paul takes up and repeats their provocative slogans back to them as he writes, for example: ‘all things are lawful,’ ‘food is for the stomach,’ and ‘the body is for immorality.’ In each case, Paul answers with a ‘but’ before proceeding to dismantle their utterly false ideas. To maintain, as some of them were, apparently, that ‘all things are lawful’ would seem to be a recipe for unbridled licence. Paul counters this by saying strongly: ‘but I will not be mastered by anything.’ This resolve at the end of verse 12 should motivate Christians to be against all forms of substance abuse, including the misuse of alcohol and the use of tobacco products.

As if these things were not enough, the Apostle has to further remonstrate at the end of verse 15 saying: ‘Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute?’ It’s hard for us to imagine what seems to have been happening back then, even in the infamous setting of Corinth. It’s implied in that verse which we’ve just repeated, is it not, that the then current practice of some married men in the church at Corinth was to frequent prostitutes (see also 1 Corinthians 7:1-5)?

Why would they want to try to justify this promiscuous behaviour to Paul? Strangely enough, it’s been suggested that perhaps their wives approved of this. How could that be? Well, what if, the suggestion goes, they – in their distorted thinking about spirituality – already viewed themselves as being ‘like angels in heaven’ – whom the Lord explained ‘neither marry nor are given in marriage’ (Matthew 22:30). Was this

why they refused to have sexual relations with their husbands? The same kind of wrong idea on spirituality may also have justified the husbands with respect to their actions in frequenting prostitutes.

It's true that there were prevailing notions about material things being evil, and also inferior, and of no consequence. People with these views might either distance themselves as much as possible from matter (by not touching or handling things, Colossians 2:21) or else they might go to the other extreme by reasoning that anything to do with their body – since it was only a material thing – could have no impact on their spiritual state. Was this how they justified their excursions to the prostitutes?

Perhaps. However it was, the Apostle Paul's come-back on their provocative inference that the body might as well be used for immorality, was totally uncompromising, as we would expect (since we are from a different culture to their pagan one). Paul says:

“Or do you not know that the one who joins himself to a prostitute is one body with her? For He says, “THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH.” But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him. Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body” (1 Corinthians 6:16-20).

For Paul, throughout his writings in the New Testament, Christianity is all about having and enjoying a relationship with the Lord – one that is so intimate. Everyone who, through personal faith in the Lord Jesus, is now ‘in Christ’ can reflect with wonder on the words of the adoring

hymn-writer: ‘Lord Jesus, are we one with Thee?’ Yes, by eternal union, one! How then could any believer justify uniting bodily with a prostitute?

Which brings us to verse 18 of First Corinthians, chapter 6. Its second sentence, coming after the appeal to ‘flee immorality’, has excited different and opposing interpretations. The sentence says: ‘Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body.’ In the English version which that quotation comes from, the second word, ‘other’, isn’t original – it’s been inserted, as a possible way of making sense of this difficult verse. In doing so, this interpretation places sexual sins in a special category all by themselves. However, some object and ask: ‘but is smoking and drug-taking a sin which is not against one’s own body?’ Surely, these habits abuse our bodies. This has led other interpreters to consider the reference to ‘body’ to be instead the mystical body of Christ, that is, the church composed of all born-again believers in this Church Age.

But that seems a sudden and unjustifiable leap when the context is very clearly about the use of our actual human bodies. There is at least one other option. Once again, it involves the possible practice of Paul repeating certain Corinthian slogans back to them, before decisively showing how utterly false they are. This way of looking at verse 18, sees – or hears – Paul echoing back their assertion: ‘Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body’ before he replies to them ‘but the immoral man sins against his own body.’ In other words, he says to them immorality is a sin against our own body. The Apostle Paul then concludes:

“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 6:19-20).

This is the ultimate argument in terms of condemning a Christian believer’s misuse of his or her body. Paul has elsewhere argued: “... you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him” (Romans 8:9).

In other words, if we belong to Christ, then we have God’s Spirit living in our mortal body. Individually, each believer’s body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. The believer on the Lord Jesus Christ cannot say ‘it’s my body and I’ll do as I please with it.’ By repenting of our sins and receiving Christ as our personal saviour by faith, believing in his name, we became redeemed or purchased by the Lord. A great price was paid for this redemption, namely the blood of God’s incarnate son on the cross. This consideration is the supreme motivation for us to glorify God in our body. The Apostle Paul’s personal ambition was to magnify or exalt Christ by life and by death (Philippians 1:20). Our ambition should be no less than this, making us even wary of disorderly eating.

## STUDY QUESTIONS: 1 CORINTHIANS 6

- a) Compare the first half of the first sentences in vv.12,13 and the first half of the second sentence in v.18. Is it possible Paul echoes first what the Corinthians are writing to him before answering them?
- b) How should the resolve at the end of v.12 motivate Christians to be against all forms of substance abuse?
- c) What does v.15 imply about the then current practice of some in the church at Corinth (compare 1 Corinthians 7:1-5)? What does v.17 mean?
- d) How, uniquely, does the immoral man sin against his own body (v.18)?
- e) How in practice may we glorify God with our bodies? Are eating disorders proscribed by this?

## CHAPTER SEVEN: THINGS ASSOCIATED WITH MARRIED LIFE

Recently, I found myself being challenged to clarify the Bible's stance on pre-marital sexual relations from the text of the New Testament. If the translation 'sexual immorality' is brought into question as to whether it specifically includes fornication or pre-marital sex, then I found myself turning to the early verses of First Corinthians chapter 7 for help.

“Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman. But because of immoralities, each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband” (1 Corinthians 7:1-2).

It's worth pausing there to check the meaning, I suggest. Some versions bring it out more clearly than the New American Standard at this point. 'To touch' here in verse one is a euphemism for intimate contact or relations which the Bible only legitimises between a couple who are married to each other – which leads us into the second verse. Each man having his own wife is tactful short-hand for having sexual relations with her, and vice versa. This interpretation is fully confirmed by the verses which follow, which we'll now read:

“The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt

you because of your lack of self-control. But this I say by way of concession, not of command” (1 Corinthians 7:3-6).

It would appear that some of the women in the Corinthian church were depriving their husbands. From some other clues we may pick from this letter later on, it may seem as if a seriously distorted view of spirituality was at the root of such attitudes. As Paul shows, depriving one another of sexual relations is not the Lord’s counsel for couples who are married to each other, and in fact, deprivations of that kind were leading some in the Church of God at Corinth into gross error by promoting the seeking of gratification outside of their marriages.

Paul did, however, concede there could be exceptions – and he instanced sexual fasting to permit more devoted prayer-times. This would seem, in principle, to permit sexual abstinence for other reasons too, including family planning reasons. Abstinence from even protected relations is not shown here as the norm within a biblical Christian marriage.

However, the Apostle Paul acknowledges that his instructions at this point are by way of concession. And he goes further in the verses that follow by expressing the wish that everyone was single like he found himself at that moment. This has no consequence for the status of these words as inspired Scripture, but it does have a consequence for their authority. They’re not normative like other scriptures – meaning they only apply if our circumstances are appropriate, and it must be acknowledged that not all are gifted for a life of singleness. Let’s now allow Paul to continue ...

“Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am. However, each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that. But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I. But if

they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn with passion” (1 Corinthians 7:7-9).

So now I finally get to the goal I was aiming at here from the beginning. Those in any state of singleness, who cannot control their sexual drive, have no liberty whatsoever to express it by intercourse. The Apostle Paul spells out the only options facing a single person as having self-control or getting married. Paul now turns from those in a single, possibly widowed state, to those who are married. He gives counsel for them in the next couple of verses, that’s ten and eleven. He says:

“But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband (but if she does leave, she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife” (1 Corinthians 7:10-11).

Notice the personal element again: ‘not I, but the Lord.’ But Paul’s inspired instruction here is in full agreement with the Lord’s teaching as found in the synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. Mark 10:6 and Luke 16:18 are unambiguous – as Paul is here – that there should be no divorce and there should certainly never be remarriage after a divorce of one of the prospective marriage partners. Paul says that if a wife or husband should leave, which effectively meant divorce then, they should both remain literally ‘without a wedding’ (agamos) in other words, without remarriage. This is its meaning here in verse 11, although agamos is also used to describe the widowed and single (see verses 8 and 32), but without that restriction. The historical evidence of the first five centuries of Christianity bear this out – with virtually all leading scholars teaching ‘no divorce, never remarriage of couples divorced’ – despite this being revolutionary teaching in its time.

So, by now Paul's dealt with those who've been widowed and also those who are in a marriage to another believer in the Christian church fellowship at Corinth. At verse 12, he moves on to tackle the situation of a believer married to someone who is unchurched. Specifically, he says:

“... if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her. And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy. Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace. For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife? Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk. And so I direct in all the churches” (1 Corinthians 7:12-17).

These verses clarify that in cases where someone has come to the Lord, but their partner hasn't, what they have is still a totally valid marriage. The unchurched partner is still set apart ('sanctified') to be to the believer what none other could be. What's more, the fact that one person in the marriage bond has come to Christ doesn't present a valid ground for divorce. Rather the believer should desire to let their person example of Christianity become persuasive under God for the other (see also 1 Peter 3). But if the unbeliever should refuse to continue in the marriage, then the abandoned partner shouldn't feel guilty, but rather leave the matter with the God of peace. Then, in one of the many comments throughout the New Testament which show the close inter-related nature of all the local church communities in the first century under apos-

toloc teaching, Paul says: this is the very same teaching he gives in every place. From verse 25, Paul deals with the case of people who were still single but were – or had been – anticipating a marriage at the end of a period of engagement:

“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 ... But if you marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned” (1 Corinthians 7:26,28).

Here again, Paul gives us his judgement, as one who had found grace from God. His personal recommendation would be to remain undistracted in serving the Lord, but he fully accepts the right of a couple to choose to marry. In fact, this is the normal expectation – not only in society but also in the Bible. Forbidding people from marrying is definitely not a teaching which comes from the Bible (see 1 Timothy 4:3).

Finally, for those whose marriage partner has predeceased him or her, Paul says: “A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 7:39). The marriage bond is not intended by God to be terminated by anything other than by the death of one partner (Matthew 19:6). But, of course, if someone’s marriage partner dies, then he or she is free to remarry (Romans 7:1-3). In that eventuality, as in all other cases, however, we are not free to fall in love with whomever we choose. The decision to marry someone, is to be influenced by honouring the Lord’s will as much as by natural affection. How sad when those who have differing understandings of what it means to follow the Lord go on to present confusing choices to their children which the Lord never intended should happen. A fair summary of the Bible’s teaching (as much by example as by decree) would be that the people of God are supposed to marry others belonging to the people of God.

## STUDY QUESTIONS: 1 CORINTHIANS 7

- a) How do vv.1-9 clarify the Bible's stance on pre-marital sexual relations?
- b) Does 'unmarried' (vv.8,11,34) mean different things in different contexts here?
- c) Draw boundaries at the end of vv. 7, 9, 11, 24, 38, 40. What life situation is addressed in each resulting section?
- d) What is the meaning of "... for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy" in v.14?
- e) Do you find v.39 sufficiently clear on marriage, and vv.10,11 on divorce/remarriage?

## CHAPTER EIGHT: CLEAR CONSCIENCE AND KIND CONSIDERATION

Do you think someone else's past experiences should cause you to modify your behaviour whenever you're spending time with them? What do I mean? Let me try to give an example. You may be a Christian who believes that you're entitled to drink alcohol in moderation, say a glass of wine with a meal. One day you're having a meal with a recovering alcoholic. Out of respect for him or her, and in consideration of the circumstances, you order a soft drink instead. One glass of wine means nothing to you, but it means a lot to him or her. So, you refuse to put their path to recovery at risk by advertising your own personal freedom. You save it for another occasion when there's no chance of causing anyone to stumble.

Wine at the meal-table would have been common-place in the middle-eastern setting of the biblical narrative. It was another issue which required similar careful handling by the earliest Christians. As the message of Christianity spread outwards from within its Jewish origins, soon people began to turn to Christianity from a pagan past. A pagan past which had routinely featured the eating of food that had previously been sacrificed to idols and in its preparation had undergone various rituals in honour of the pagan gods.

It appears such food-processing methods, if we may call them that, provided a ready source of cheap food. If you were someone in those days who had an eye for a bargain, and scoffed at the whole idea of the mumbo-jumbo of idols and so-called gods, then you'd probably found a cost-effective source of ready-meals! Nothing wrong with that ... until one day a Christian friend joins you for a meal. Before his conversion, he's been raised in a family setting which revered the dark and idola-

trous forces of the pagan spirit world. As a result, eating food sacrificed in honour of pagan deities had once been so meaningful for him. Now, since his exposure to Christianity, he'd made a decisive break with his past, turning from all of its pagan rituals. These were now things he passionately denounced.

So, we're back to our opening question. Do you let someone else's past experience shape your present action? Your usual cheap food is no big deal to you, but you rightly sense that it will be a big deal for him because of all its past associations. These memories still colour his view of the food now, and so you discreetly put it back in the kitchen and grab a safe take-away which you can both enjoy. This was a real issue, and doubtless what we've just imagined was a fairly typical scenario. The Apostle Paul had to grapple with this topic when writing to his Christian friends in the Church of God at Corinth. From the top of chapter eight, he says:

“Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge.” (1 Corinthians 8:1).

Why does Paul start off with a preamble on 'knowledge'? Actually, it's likely that it's the Corinthians who are saying 'all of us possess knowledge' (ESV). Paul is repeating their slogan before contradicting it. They think Christian conduct should be based on knowledge (this could be an early example of what became known as Gnosticism, after the Greek word for 'to know'). Paul rebuts this contention of theirs by comparing knowledge and love:

“Knowledge makes arrogant, **but love edifies**. If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know; **but if anyone loves God**, he is known by Him” (1 Corinthians 8:2,3).

Masterfully, Paul shows them that their knowledge is only partial (and what's more, it's not shared by all, see v.7). This means that their conduct is not loving. Paul has introduced the proper basis of Christian conduct – which is love. Love considers others, including their weaknesses. Paul then returns to the issue at hand:

“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” (1 Corinthians 8:4).

This verse contains two more propositions of theirs: ‘no such thing as an idol’ and ‘no God but one.’ This is the Corinthians’ knowledge-based case for eating what they like regardless of any offence given to others. They claim that they have a right to eat based on their superior knowledge of the fact there is no such thing as an idol or other so-called gods.

“For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords” (1 Corinthians 8:5).

At this point, Paul counters that some may hold the view that gods exist. This would be the view of the brother with a weak conscience, whom we have yet to meet in v.7, but for now Paul continues:

“Yet for us there is but one 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).

This is where Paul is – his personal creed is clear. But, he reminds the Corinthians:

**“However not all men have this knowledge;** but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled” (1 Corinthians 8:7).

The Greek gods were not real, but pagan worship involving idols certainly was. Some people’s belief in these gods was real! An idol, something that needs special help so that it doesn’t fall over is a hopeless substitute for the almighty creator of all things. From that point of view, this hand-crafted piece of wood or metal or stone is nothing. But in another place, Paul describes a real associated danger. There’s a power that’s real which deceives human minds and enslaves them in reverencing such objects which represent dark spiritual forces. In this way, the truth of the one true God is suppressed.

Paul was never in any doubt about the existence of opposing spirits of wickedness. Powers and principalities in the heavenly realms, as he called them elsewhere. But, equally, God’s Word teaches us that these are created spirit beings who have rebelled against the one who created them – against the one true God, the sole ultimate being.

Paul’s conclusion is that if our understanding of such matters is clear, we’ve got freedom to eat food even if it had previously had some involvement in a pagan ritual. However, if our thoughts are muddled in relation to the true status of idols then our conscience being weakened in that respect would mean it was wrong for us to eat the very same food. Paul then clarifies that it’s not the food itself that’s the issue, for as he says ...

“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. 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? 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" (1 Corinthians 8:8-13).

Paul has plainly stated that the problem in eating things sacrificed to idols lies only in the eating of them 'as if they were sacrificed to idols.' In other words, if the food just happened to be selected because it was cheap to buy and there was never any intention to place any significance on the previous use to which the food had been put, then Paul says the believer should go ahead and eat it without any troublesome conscience. It was an altogether different matter if this was a believer with a pagan background who still had some kind of lingering respect for the idol – or there still was a disturbing consciousness about the rituals which the food had undergone. The strength of association in the believer's mind was the issue.

Consistent with that, elsewhere we have the absolute statement conveying the decision of the Jerusalem conference in Acts 15 that believers must abstain from food sacrificed to idols; that is, it was forbidden to indulge in any deliberate or meaningful way with such things. In his second Bible letter to Corinth, Paul most likely returns to a topic mentioned here – which is of eating in an idol's temple. It's possible that he does this when he warns believers against being unequally yoked with unbelievers (see 2 Corinthians 6). What exactly did Paul mean by this? Often, the verse we've just mentioned has been used to counsel against Christians marrying non-Christians, but where in the context do we find anything about marriage there? It's hard to be conclusive, but some

of the vocabulary suggests that Paul may have returned in thought to this theme of eating food with some kind of idolatrous association.

The imagery of a temple is used, and it's therefore possible that what Paul was intending to prohibit was believers in the church at Corinth joining with their pagan neighbours in visiting an idol's temple. Why would they want to do that? Well, an idol's temple was the basic kind of restaurant in ancient times. Let's suppose a neighbour wanted to celebrate his daughter's 18th birthday - it would have been natural then for the pagan neighbour to host the event at an idol's temple. Food was plentiful there, and its use honoured the patron gods of that temple whom they probably respected.

But outside of these considerations, of a confused and troubled personal conscience and of an inappropriate public testimony, Paul was clear that there was nothing wrong with the food itself. If you treated it simply as food, all was well. Except for the possibility that someone with a weaker conscience than your own was likely to be stumbled if he or she saw you freely eating such food. Paul was very emphatic about giving no cause of stumbling. So in that case, once again, it would be wrong to eat the food. Although this is an issue which many of us may not face, it illustrates the kind of Christian consideration we should have for one another. As Paul says at the beginning of Romans chapter 14, we're to accept one another's different points of view in such matters without subjecting them to critical review and debate.

## STUDY QUESTIONS: 1 CORINTHIANS 8

- a) Why does Paul preface his instructions about idols with a comment about knowledge?
- b) How can Paul say ‘there is no such thing as an idol’?
- c) What is the argument of vv.5,6 saying?
- d) In what sense is the brother of v.11 “ruined”?
- d) What is the conclusion about whether or not they could eat things that had once been sacrificed to idols?

## CHAPTER NINE: INTEGRITY IN SERVING THE LORD

There are those today who claim to be apostles. In what sense they view themselves as apostles is not always clear. It may rest upon a persuasion that God has sent them to a particular place or to undertake a specific ministry. Nowhere, however, does the Bible encourage us to apply such a title to ourselves. What's even clearer is that there are no apostles today in the same sense as the first apostles of whom we read in the pages of the New Testament. This can be quickly established from the basic defining qualification for membership of that elite early grouping. This surfaces first of all at the end of Acts chapter 1 when a replacement for Judas was under consideration. We read:

“Therefore it is necessary that of the men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us - beginning with the baptism of John until the day that He was taken up from us - one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection” (Acts 1:21-22).

In First Corinthians chapter 9 which we arrive at now, the Apostle Paul was finding it sadly necessary to defend his authority as a genuine apostle to some, at least, in the Church of God at Corinth. Although Paul recognized on another occasion that his appointment had been irregular in its timing, the essence of the qualification is met based on his claim to have seen the Lord. While still known as Saul of Tarsus, he'd encountered Christ in the heavenly vision he saw on the highway to Damascus. Later, he explains there was a time when he had experienced the Lord's presence for a while and received direct revelations of truth. He'd therefore seen the risen Christ and could bear testimony as to his resurrection. Here are Paul's actual words:

“Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord? If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you, for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. This is my defense to those who would examine me. Do we not have the right to eat and drink? Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living?

Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk? Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the Law say the same? For it is written in the Law of Moses, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain.” Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Does he not certainly speak for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop” (1 Corinthians 9:1-10).

Verse 9, with its mention of the ban on muzzling the ox, is an interesting quotation from Deuteronomy 25:4. Perhaps this can help us to illustrate how to work out what any Bible verse means? A Bible verse can only have a meaning which is in agreement with what it meant in its first (or primary) setting. But when later Bible teaching is based on the same verse, we then have to consider this fuller (or plenary) context. In this example, Paul by the Spirit updates our appreciation of the significance of this verse as it relates to his being supported by the churches in his fulltime service for the Lord. He now continues to defend that same basic right:

“If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more? Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ. Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel” (1 Corinthians 9:11-14).

Let's count up the number of defences Paul makes of his right to be supported as he goes about his work of preaching. First of all, as we've seen, he substantiates his claim to be an apostle and with that status came the right to refrain from working for a living. Second, he cites the case of a soldier not having to serve at his own expense. Third, he appeals to the fact that any vineyard-owner would be expected to eat of the fruits of his own vineyard. Fourth, who would deny a shepherd the right to some of the milk coming from the flock? Fifth, as we saw, he quotes the Old Testament at Deuteronomy chapter 25 where it was forbidden to muzzle an ox while it was treading out the grain. Sixth, was 'the law of compensation' exchanging material benefit for spiritual goods supplied. Seventh, he finds a parallel in the fact that the Levitical priests received their food from God's altar. Eighth, and finally, Paul invoked the Lord's own authority when referring to how he'd taught that Gospel preachers should get their living by the Gospel.

Having established his right so exhaustively, Paul then quickly says: “But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing these things to secure any such provision. For I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of my ground for boasting” (1 Corinthians 9:15).

Then Paul says something that seems to take a little thought before we can unpack its meaning:

“For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship. What then is my reward? That in my preaching I may present the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel” (1 Corinthians 9:16-18).

Let’s try to summarize the argument Paul makes there in verses 16-18. He starts by saying that he’s got no reason to boast as a preacher because he’s someone who’s compelled to preach. He’d been entrusted by the Lord with a stewardship – and that stewardship was his remit to preach. He wasn’t preaching of his own will. If that had been true, he’d have been entitled to a reward. But, having reasoned in this way that no reward strictly applied to him, he then explains that he regards his voluntary restraint of his right to financial support as being all the ‘reward’ that he wants to have. He then continues:

“For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some” (1 Corinthians 9:19-22).

These words have become almost proverbial: this becoming all things to all men. Unfortunately, the modern way we tend to use this is quite different from the Apostle Paul's original meaning. Becoming all things to all men nowadays tends to convey the idea of doing whatever it takes to keep everyone happy. But there was never any hint of any loss of integrity with Paul. He legitimately behaved one way, or characterized himself in one way, with a certain type of person, while remaining consistent to his core principles; and he equally lived in a different style so as to draw near to a different people group. After all, this was the great Apostle to the Gentiles, who lived free from traditional Jewish customs while reaching out evangelically to Gentiles.

But when he went back to Jerusalem, the same Paul would put himself under a vow and participate in selected Jewish temple observances. Paul was a man equally at home in the Greek, Hebrew and Roman worlds. He was adaptable in style, flexible in approach, but immovable in his principles. Today, we do well to learn from this in sensitive approaches and adaptable styles varying across a range of different target audiences. Now Paul concludes:

“I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings. Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified” (1 Corinthians 9:23-27).

What did Paul mean by ‘being disqualified’ (v.27)? This verse has certainly been grossly misapplied when attached to any teaching that says a genuine believer on the Lord can later in life become disqualified for

eternal life after all. There's no hint of that in the context here. Paul, rather, is viewing himself exercising self-control in his Christian ministry, in the same way as an athlete must discipline himself or herself if they are to compete with a serious chance of carrying off the prize. This is Paul returning to his theme of the faithful preacher's reward - and this is quite independent of the secure gift of salvation. And with that happy reassurance, we've come to the end of the ninth chapter of Paul's first Bible letter to Corinth.

## STUDY QUESTIONS: 1 CORINTHIANS 9

- a) Are there apostles today (in the same sense as the first)?
- b) Consider Deuteronomy 25:4 & 1 Corinthians 9:9 – what can we learn from this example about how to work out what a Bible verse means? Comment on the principle of v.14.
- c) Can you summarize the argument Paul makes in vv.16-18?
- d) How, practically, can we invoke the spirit of vv.19-22?
- e) What did Paul mean by ‘being disqualified’ (v.27)?

# CHAPTER TEN: A SPECIAL TYPE OF WARNING

This chapter is going to involve us in saying something about ‘Typology.’ Typology, as serious Bible students will already know, means studying the ‘types.’ And that, in turn, begs the question as to ‘what is a type?’ A type can be a person, for example Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15); a place such as the Most Holy Place of the Tabernacle (Hebrews 9:3, 8,12); or it could be the office of High Priest (Psalm 110:4, Hebrews 9:6-7); or Israel’s holy festivals like the Day of Atonement (Hebrews 9:25-26); or an object like the bronze snake (John 3:14) or even an animal (Genesis 22).

Trying to put it simply, a type is a way of presenting biblical history such that some previous events can be regarded as anticipations of later events. Many Old Testament events were perhaps not recorded primarily for themselves, but for what they foreshadowed or represented. They were truly historical things, but the record of them is made to serve a further purpose. The study of these things, typological study, is a necessity if the full meaning of the New Testament is to be grasped and appreciated. We’re going to put that to the test in our current study as we come to the Apostle Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 10. Here, first of all is what Paul says:

“For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea ...” (1 Corinthians 10:1-2).

Perhaps we should press the pause button there, and ask: ‘Is there a particular significance in the mention of the cloud?’ I would like to suggest there is. In addition to that cloud being the indication of God’s guid-

ing presence with his people, something else is very likely implied here since the term ‘baptism’ is retrospectively applied to this historic Red Sea crossing. The picture which emerges here is of the Jewish people escaping from their old way of life in Egypt, and heading on to a new life full of promise, while passing between walls of water on either side – and, this being the point - with the cloud of water droplets above them. In effect, they were immersed, or buried, in water. No wonder this experience is described as their baptism for its mode is an exact parallel to the description of believer’s baptism we find Paul sharing in Romans chapter 6 ... but let’s continue:

“... 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. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness” (1 Corinthians 10:4-5).

Another moment’s reflection, if I may. Very shortly, the Apostle Paul will come to speaking with the Corinthians about New Testament spiritual eating and drinking with God – no less than at the ‘breaking of the bread’ which the Lord Jesus commanded we should do every week as a priority reason for gathering as churches of God. Now, if the Red Sea crossing and the spiritual drinking from the rock are understood to be anticipating the Christian ordinances being referred to here in Corinthians, namely baptism and the Breaking of the Bread, what’s the intended lesson? Let’s leave that question hanging, and come back to it after reading the next few verses:

“Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, ‘The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play’. We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thou-

sand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come” (1 Corinthians 10:6-11).

Twice in that short section we’ve just read, Paul has explained that these historic events befell Israel ‘as examples for us.’ That word ‘example’ is precisely the word we get our word ‘type’ from. Remember, we earlier described a type as a way of presenting biblical history such that some of its previous activities can be regarded as anticipations of later activities. Many events in the Old Testament were perhaps not recorded primarily for themselves but for what they foreshadowed. They were certainly historical, but the record of them is made to serve a further purpose.

The Old Testament writers were probably not even conscious that what they wrote had any future significance. Types would most probably not have been recognised by the original audience until they were pointed out by Christ and by the New Testament writers (Luke 24:27,44, 1 Corinthians 10:6-11). Types have a single point of comparison which serves to illustrate something about its sequel (or ‘antitype’) – and we must always be careful not to stretch the type too far!

Perhaps it’s not going too far to say that the outstanding case of typology in the whole biblical story is the one we’re dealing with in 1 Corinthians 10. It’s the story of the exodus of the Israelite people from Egypt and the accompanying events which befell them as they attempted to make their way to their Promised Land. As a classic example of divine deliverance, this Exodus event gave a form of language which was applied centuries later to the release of the exiles from Babylon

(see Hosea 9:3 etc.), and later still to the redemption accomplished by Christ (1 Corinthians 5:7).

Here in 1 Corinthians 10:1-11, where the Israelites' passing through the Red Sea and their feeding in the wilderness on bread from heaven and water from the Rock are anticipations of Christian baptism and the Lord's Supper, it does all seem to be designed to make it very plain to us that such sacred experiences will not protect Christians against divine judgment if they indulge in wrongdoing – no more than the Israelites were immune when they were disobedient during the wilderness wanderings. This warning is now made explicit in what follows from chapter 10:

“Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and

the table of demons. Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy?  
Are we stronger than he?" (1 Corinthians 10:12-22)

Back in chapter 8, we encountered the Lord's counsel to Corinthian believers against eating food which had undergone pagan rituals – some of which are repeated at the conclusion of chapter 10. But what we've now just read advances a further reason against eating food sacrificed to idols. Eating that food in a deliberate and meaningful way brings the person who is eating into communion with dark powers. This is an illegitimate and wholly counterfeit experience to the one which God desires the disciples of Christ to engage in.

At the Breaking of the Bread in a Church of God, disciples have their highest possible opportunity to have communion with their God. In a culture which prized hospitality, words like 'cup' and 'table' were powerful metaphors for fellowship. God's ancient people communed with God at his altar; now obedient Christians experience that in bread and wine. As everyone who is part of the gathered Church breaks off and eats a portion of the bread which is symbolic of their Lord's body, not only do they very preciously recall his once for all sacrifice for them on the cross, but they very tangibly and visibly express their unity, for they all share together in that one emblem.

## STUDY QUESTIONS: 1 CORINTHIANS 10

- a) The Exodus has been described as one of the greatest ‘types’ (see v. 11) – can we explain what’s meant by that?
- b) Is there a particular significance in the mention of the cloud (v.2)?
- c) If the Red Sea crossing and the spiritual drink from the rock are to be compared with the ordinances of Christian baptism and the Breaking of the Bread, what is the main lesson here?
- d) We are commanded to flee from idolatry in v.14 – how does this apply today?
- e) What further reason against eating food sacrificed to idols is given here (v.20,21)?

## CHAPTER ELEVEN: GIVING ALL THE GLORY TO GOD

It's claimed that in the Roman Empire, around the time of the New Testament, a dress code was developing. It became a case of 'you were what you wore.' It was a time when women were gaining more financial power and control over their lives, and some chose to go about bare-headed showing off elaborate hairdos (see 1 Timothy 2:9) and generally contesting convention. Married women of the higher social classes (see 1 Corinthians 1:26), who were tempted to conform to this image of the 'new woman', might well have been a contentious test case for the particular church practice Paul insists upon now in the text of First Corinthians chapter 11.

As for any factors which may have been influencing male behaviour around the same time, sculptures exist which show men taking active part in pagan rituals with their head covered. The male pagan priests at Corinth were usually drawn from the social elite, and this raises the possibility that active brothers in the Corinthian church were stressing their nobility (1 Corinthians 1:26) by covering their heads. While these points are of interest in getting a feel for what may have raised the question at Corinth, we'll see that the all-encompassing nature of the apostle's answer shows local and cultural matters are quite beside the point. So what does the Apostle Paul say? He begins by talking to us about an order which encompasses even the Godhead itself, listen carefully to what he says:

“Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you. But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:2-3).

Some have wondered if Paul's use of the word 'head' here could mean 'source' - instead of meaning authority - but in no sense could God be described as the source of Christ. So, it's important to understand the order given here in terms of an authority structure – especially because it's going to shape the argument which Paul now proceeds to outline:

“Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying disgraces his head. But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying disgraces her head, for she is one and the same as the woman whose head is shaved. For if a woman does not cover her head, let her also have her hair cut off; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, let her cover her head” (1 Corinthians 11:4-6).

These two parallel statements require that a man uncovers his head while praying or prophesying; and conversely that a woman covers hers. Paul's Greek word means the woman's head is to be 'thoroughly covered' and generally in the Bible this refers to an actual covering of some kind (e.g. Genesis 38:15; Isaiah 6:2). On the other hand, the command against men having their head covered is more literally against them having 'something down from the head.' The very same wording as this is found in the Greek version of the Old Testament in Esther 6:12 when Haman covered his head in shame, almost certainly using part of his clothing to do so.

So, having clarified the actual practice which Paul's instruction was insisting on, we should again remind ourselves that the introductory reason stated for this happening is the hierarchical structuring of authority relationships in the order stated: God, Christ, man and woman. From that order – one which extends into the Godhead itself - Paul now turns to a second explanation for the practice concerning head cover-

ings in church, and this time he picks up on God's order in creation. This is what he says:

“For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake. Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as the woman originates from the man, so also the man has his birth through the woman; and all things originate from God” (1 Corinthians 11:7-12).

In these verses we've just read, Paul shares a major key for interpreting this whole passage. Its significance is all too readily overlooked – but it's this: if a man ought not to have his head covered because he's the image and glory of God, then clearly these instructions go way beyond any local or cultural boundary, and must apply in all biblical churches of God (1 Corinthians 11:16) at any time and in any place where they exist. And we should observe that this fundamental point of man being the image and glory of God is used to support the actual practice of head coverings - and not only the principle of male headship.

If the Corinthians had used the slogan that a woman ought to have authority on her head in order to lobby Paul that a woman should have the freedom to do as she wishes with her own head; Paul may now in fact be borrowing their slogan and giving it an ironic twist by telling them 'yes, she should have the man's authority on her head!' Whatever, the wording of verse 10 (in parallel to verse 7) has to mean that a woman should wear a head covering, for nothing else is a satisfactory punch-line to the argument Paul's been advancing.

So much for support for the practice coming from the order of creation; it's possible that Paul has slipped in a reference to a third kind of order in support of the Holy Spirit's insistence in the biblical text that we should observe these instructions regarding head coverings during church worship, prayers and ministry. I'm referring to where Paul says 'because of the angels (or messengers)'. It's by no means certain what that means, but it could realistically be a reference to angels, ordered in their respective rankings, and expecting to observe something similar when humans worship their God. But Paul's not yet finished. There's one more order he wishes to bring to bear on this:

“Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her hair is given to her for a covering. But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God. But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse” (1 Corinthians 11:13-17).

As we've heard, Paul's fourth mentioned order is the natural or social order. When Paul once again argues from 'nature' in his first chapter to the Romans (v.26), his basic point about what's natural is in terms of distinguishing and maintaining the proper roles of men and women – here in terms of a clear difference in the length of hair between the male and female genders. That now makes a total of four far-reaching arguments from the order of authority and the order of creation and the order of angels and the order of nature – all of which Paul sets out in this matter of the actual practice of head coverings – yet which is now largely overlooked.

But what was it that we're meant to conclude from all this? Was it not firstly, that a man wears no covering for he is God's glory: this means God's glory is uncovered, even as God is subject to no-one. Secondly, that a woman wears a covering for she is man's glory: this means man's glory is covered, even as man is subject to Christ - and so the glory again goes to God instead. And thirdly, that a woman wears a covering: which also means that her personal glory (her hair - a separate covering denoted by a different original word) is covered. So, women in church cover their heads (and men uncover theirs) in order that God gets the glory in each case in accordance with the hierarchy of authority with which the section began in v.3.

Finally, in addition to the four orders, Paul now adds a fifth argument, and with this he sweeps away any possible variations in practice. He says that the Church of God in Corinth must keep in step with the universal practice of men's heads being uncovered and women's heads being covered which then applied throughout the Churches of God. Far from this being a local custom specific to Corinth, it was the single, consistent practice throughout the entire first century fellowship of churches all around the Mediterranean. And the actual practice of head coverings is corroborated by the archaeological record. Second and third century pictures from the catacombs show Christian women praying with a cloth veil on their heads.

The teaching of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 is shown to belong to those occasions when the church comes together as a church (literally 'in church', verse 18). We can confirm this because Paul speaks of prophesying primarily in the context of edifying the whole church (1 Corinthians 14:4). Head coverings are after all described (1 Corinthians 11:16) as a church practice (and a 'practice' is only unmistakably a 'church' practice - as opposed to a personal habit - when it is viewed in the context of church gatherings). Then notice when, in verse 17, Paul refers to 'this instruction' experts judge he's 'Probably [referring to] the

preceding one about the head-dress of women' (Robertson) and the second half of the same verse ties it into times when the church comes together. Finally, since the succeeding verses of chapter 11 (1 Corinthians 11:17-34) are devoted to the breaking of bread ordinance which is definitely designed for the whole church (v.22), it would naturally seem that this preceding section also applies to those times when the church comes together (v.17b) as a church (v.18).

## STUDY QUESTIONS: 1 CORINTHIANS 11A

- a) Why were the Corinthians praised for holding to traditions (v.2), when the Pharisees were rebuked by Jesus for their traditions?
- b) What convinces you that the issue of head covering was neither merely cultural nor confined to that locality (vv.7,16)?
- c) What is the key principle which it is a marker of (v.3)? Does this ordering (v.3) help explain the different actions for male and female in vv.4,5?
- d) How is the role of women in churches of God shown to be valued?
- e) The implied answers in vv.13-15 are clear, but how do we understand how we should arrive at them?

## CHAPTER TWELVE: A SERIOUS EATING DISORDER

It seems that, by God's gracious over-ruling, Paul could find comfort even in the most heart-breaking situations. He was addressing a divided church at Corinth, as we've seen, one in which there were competing factions, but he says:

“For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part I believe it. For there must also be factions among you, so that those who are approved may become evident among you” (1 Corinthians 11:18-19).

We're about to find out another reason for the lack of unity that was on display in Corinth when the church gathered. Here's what Paul says next:

“Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you” (1 Corinthians 11:20-22).

The Lord's Supper had been instituted by the Lord in the context of John chapter 13 during, or after, a Passover Supper, and was now being celebrated in Corinth as an 'Agape Supper' or love-feast. The Apostle Jude, and probably Peter also, give us more information of what was going on. It would seem that early on in Christianity there was a practice – not only in Corinth – a practice whereby the church would gath-

er to share in their main meal together (the word ‘supper’ indicates a main meal, not necessarily in the evening). They must have brought their own food to eat it together because there was inequality in what they were doing – the food was not equally shared, but some had much more to eat and drink than others. After this meal, they would proceed to keep the Lord’s Supper. In that way there was something in common with the institution of the Lord’s Supper inasmuch as that too had followed on from a shared meal, even if that had been one of the Old Testament appointed ‘feasts.’

There was nothing wrong with this practice in itself, but it was being abused. It started out with some flaunting their excess provision over against others in the church who couldn’t provide adequately for themselves. That only served to emphasize a divide between ‘the haves’ and ‘the have-nots’ in the church. Soon, it appears, things deteriorated to an even worse state of affairs in places, with some false believers taking sensual advantage of the occasion as the wine freely flowed. How absolutely awful when we consider what the proper intention for gathering was: to remember with reverence the Lord’s sacrificial death on the cross for us. No wonder the Apostle Jude denounces their behaviour in the strongest terms:

“These are the men who are hidden reefs in your love feasts when they feast with you without fear, caring for themselves; clouds without water, carried along by winds; autumn trees without fruit, doubly dead, uprooted ...” (Jude v.12)

The text originally conveys the idea of sumptuous feasting, and is appropriate in view of the fact to which Peter as well as Jude alludes, that these sensual persons converted the love-feast into an occasion for revelling. As Paul said, one is hungry and another drunken. Something designed to display their unity had descended into the very opposite: a display of disunity (v.21).

They were obviously abusing the Lord's Supper, but Paul charges them with despising the Church of God (v.22). I'm reminded of how flawed the worship of God's people was at the close of the Old Testament. The LORD through the prophet Malachi says to his people then:

“You are presenting defiled food upon My altar. But you say, ‘How have we defiled You?’ In that you say, ‘The table of the LORD is to be despised.’ “But when you present the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? And when you present the lame and sick, is it not evil? Why not offer it to your governor? Would he be pleased with you? Or would he receive you kindly?” says the LORD of hosts. “But now will you not entreat God's favor, that He may be gracious to us? With such an offering on your part, will He receive any of you kindly?” says the LORD of hosts. “Oh that there were one among you who would shut the gates, that you might not uselessly kindle fire on My altar! I am not pleased with you,” says the LORD of hosts, “nor will I accept an offering from you” (Malachi 1:7-10).

Bringing defective animal sacrifices at that time was nothing short of despising the Lord's altar or table back then. And the abuses of the Corinthian believers while gathered ostensibly to worshipfully remember the Lord Jesus was nothing short of despising the Church of God. We should notice the very close relationship here between the Breaking of the Bread and the Church of God. The Breaking of the Bread belongs in that setting. It's never transported out of that corporate local church context in the New Testament. We read of it in Matthew 26 when the Lord, on the night he was betrayed, appointed this ordinance for his disciples to remember him by. Later, in the Acts of the Apostles, it's placed in its biblical and proper setting as a mandatory weekly (see Acts 20:7) function of the group of Christ's disciples who are constituted a church of God in their locality – the principal charac-

teristics of which are outlined in Acts 2:41,42 which tells us that the disciples who formed that first local church had received the word (of salvation); been baptized (by immersion in water); been added to the church fellowship in which they devoted themselves by breaking bread; and by maintaining the Apostles' teaching; while consistently meeting for church prayers.

The Corinthian letter underlines the strength of the identification of the ordinance of breaking bread with its biblical setting by stating that their failures in eating the Lord's supper meant they were actually despising the church of God to which it properly and exclusively belonged. Paul then rehearsed how the Lord had revealed to him what had happened on the night of his betrayal when in the upper room he had taken bread and wine ... but wait, let's hear it from Paul:

“For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, “This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me.” In the same way He took the cup also after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly.

For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world. So then, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, so that you will not come together for judgment. The remaining matters I will arrange when I come” (1 Corinthians 11:23-34).

When the Lord took the bread in that upper room and announced to the disciples ‘this is my body,’ we understand that he meant only that it represented his body. Just as we may say of a photograph ‘this is my daughter.’ It’s a photograph we carry to remind us of someone who is not physically present with us. But because the bread is an emblem of our Lord’s body, it has a precious significance, and those who eat it unworthily – and some were certainly doing that at Corinth because of the state they were in – those who eat it unworthily are held by the Lord to be just as guilty as the soldiers who physically abused the Lord’s actual body.

Not only were some doing that at Corinth, but they were being held guilty and paying the penalty. The Lord had struck some down with sickness, and for others it had proved fatal. This emphasizes how important the accurate observance of this ordinance is to the Lord who gave it to his followers to observe only hours before he headed out to the death of the cross.

It was important to Paul to whom the Lord had additionally and directly revealed it, for when he visited Christ’s disciples at Troas, he waited a full week with them so that he might have the privilege of breaking bread with the church there (Acts 20:6,7). The wording shows it was the main purpose for the gathering of disciples on the first day of every

week (literally 'the first day of the week of assembling' - the first day belongs to the assembling, see also 1 Corinthians 16:2). It's surely relevant for us to check that we, too, have prioritised the orderly week by week practice of this precious command of our Lord Jesus ... until he comes again.

## STUDY QUESTIONS: 1 CORINTHIANS 11B

- a) What comfort did Paul find in otherwise heart-breaking situations (v.19)?
- b) The Lord's Supper had been instituted at a Passover Supper, and was being celebrated in Corinth as an Agape Supper: do we practise the intended form?
- c) How was something designed to embody their unity descending rather into a display of disunity (v.21)?
- d) They were abusing the Lord's Supper but Paul charges them with despising the Church of God (v.22) – what can we conclude from that?
- e) What do vv.27 & 30 mean?

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN: THERE'S UNITY IN DIVERSITY

In this section we come to the twelfth chapter of First Corinthians. It's conventional to admire the breadth of diversity on display in this chapter: with its varieties of gifts; varieties of ministries; and varieties of effects. But as we read this – and come across exactly those terms – I want us to remember the starting-point of this whole letter was focused on addressing division at Corinth. With that in mind once again, let's now turn to chapter 12:

“Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware. You know that when you were pagans, you were led astray to the mute idols, however you were led. Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus is accursed”; and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit. Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons. But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:1-7).

In continuing his written ministry to the sadly divided local Church of God at Corinth, the Apostle Paul is not so much emphasizing the varieties he describes there, but the unity behind that diversity ... the same Spirit, the same Lord, and the same God. Each member of the God-head being mentioned, even as the gifts are allocated to each Christian believer (v.7).

Also, the point at which we paused our reading, at the end of v.7, is again important to note – since it makes it very plain that the purpose

behind God giving the spiritual gifts which Paul will shortly expand on, is that their operation should be for the common good. We would suggest then, on the strength of this biblical text, that if any gift is treated as being mainly for the personal growth of the individual Christian, then that's a distortion of God's stated design here.

“For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills” (1 Corinthians 12:8-11).

We've just had nine gifts listed which were for the common good (in verses 8-10). The word used to introduce and define all these spiritual gifts ('charisma', v.4) shows that they're all a result of God's grace - being the visible effects of the grace of God. This matter of giftedness is not so much our God-given spiritual capacity, far less our performances, but this giftedness is focused on God's use of his gifts to bless others spiritually through us.

If we're going to understand this chapter correctly, we're going to have to distinguish between two uses of the same word for 'church' which we come across in the New Testament. We often hear people talking about 'the early church' without defining what they mean. Judging by the context, we understand they're most likely referring to 'the first Christians.'

You may say I'm splitting hairs, but it has to be said that they're using the word 'church' in a way that's not defined in the New Testament. Sloppiness on terminology which the Holy Spirit has used with precise accuracy has led to confused thinking over the centuries – which is why it's vital to strive for accurate biblical use of the word translated as 'church.' So, what are the two biblical uses of this word church or 'ekklesia'? It's either used of a well-defined group of Christian disciples in a given locality under the care of elders and deacons and commissioned to carry out the functions of worship, prayer and witness; or it's used of all who have ever truly professed saving faith in Christ, beginning from the time of the first Spirit-filled preaching recorded in Acts chapter 2 until the future time referred to in 1 Thessalonians 4 when Christ will return to the air to receive to himself – and so take away from the earth - all Christians, whether dead or alive.

Although the Apostle Paul is writing to the local Church of God at Corinth, in this particular chapter, the twelfth, he's largely taken up with teaching about the universal church – if I may call it that - so long as we understand by that expression the body of all believers as we defined it biblically a moment ago.

“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, or in] 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” (1 Corinthians 12:12-13).

Most famously, we read in John's Gospel chapter 3, verse 16, that God so loved the world. But as that verse clarifies, God's love there in the sense of that verse is not confined to those who belong to the 'whosoever' who escape perishing eternally. But now let's consider another great Bible verse, Ephesians 5:25, which says that Christ loved the Church

and gave himself up for it/her. There's a clear difference in the extent of these two loves: the one for the world, the other for the Church (this time in the sense of all born-again believers of this present Church Age). However, the most important distinction is in the intent of these two loves. The intent of the love in John 3:16 is not to save eternally from punishment all who are its objects; whereas, by contrast, the love of Ephesians 5:25 has as its clear intention the salvation of all who are members of the universal church.

Perhaps, at this point, it would be good to comment on two metaphors which the Bible uses to bring clarity to our thinking about Christ's (universal) Church. To explain himself in this regard, God gives us the picture of human marriage, and the other picture is that of our human body. It's primarily Ephesians chapter 5 that takes up the picture of marriage between a husband and a wife as portraying the eternal relationship between the Lord Jesus Christ and all believers. It's amazing to consider the intimacy – the eternal intimacy – that God wants with us! The husband's love for his wife and the wife's submissive respect for her husband in a lifelong union was God's intention in giving us the institution of marriage – in order to depict the respective roles of Christ and his Church.

More widely, and certainly here in 1 Corinthians 12, we come across the other metaphor which invites us to understand something of Christ's Church by analogy with the functioning of our own human body. Let's return to our reading at verse 14:

“For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot says, “Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body,” it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. And if the ear says, “Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body,” it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hear-

ing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. If they were all one member, where would the body be? But now there are many members, but one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; or again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."

On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; and those members of the body which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our less presentable members become much more presentable, whereas our more presentable members have no need of it. But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked, so that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it" (1 Corinthians 12:14-26).

That entire section which we've just read is dealing primarily with the human body. But the analogy is clearly drawn in verse 27, so that all the preceding points have their application: "Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it."

Returning to our distinction between the two major uses of the word church in the New Testament, we should not be confused when Paul says to the believers at Corinth, that is, to the local gathered disciples in the Church of God at Corinth who were following, albeit imperfectly, the teaching of the Lord's apostles – when he says to them: 'you are Christ's body.' Obviously, those to whom this letter was addressed were not the whole universal Church. They were only a small subset, even at

that time, of the body of all believers. The sense here must then be that what the entire Church is in its character was to be true of this - and every other - local church.

Not only should each and every Church of God in any given locality be typical in its expressed character to that of the universal Church, but the emphasis on unity in the early part of this chapter requires that all local churches which are on the biblical pattern should be harmoniously inter-dependent. It's evident that independent local churches practising different beliefs and practices fall shamefully short of expressing the spiritual reality of the flawless union of all Christian believers in the universal Body of Christ. Each local church, holy in character, and all these churches together functioning in a co-ordinated way, would seem to be the only adequate and biblical way of fulfilling this grand body metaphor of the universal Church.

## **STUDY QUESTIONS: 1 CORINTHIANS 12**

- a) Recalling the early identification of the problem at Corinth, is the emphasis in this chapter on diversity or unity?
- b) Nine gifts for the common good are listed in vv.7-10 ... were they all designed to be foundational and temporary?
- c) What is meant by “being made to drink of one Spirit” in v.13?
- d) Are vv.22-26 all dealing primarily with the human body?
- e) In what sense are some gifts more important than others, and in what way can we desire those ones (vv.28-31)?

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN: THE MORE EXCELLENT WAY

A speaker will sometimes say ‘but I digress ...’ before trying to return to the main theme of his message. Chapter 13 of Paul’s first Bible letter to Corinth is one of the most sublime digressions in any letter in any language. It was a deviation from the central theme of gifts and their use – a topic which Paul began in chapter 12 and doesn’t conclude until chapter 14.

We remind ourselves again that this was a church plagued by divisions. Perhaps the most serious of all the divisions that existed there was the division between some of their number and the apostle Paul himself. Others among them appear to have been competitive, having a false sense of ‘spirituality’. When they used the gift of tongues which was operational then, it seems they believed they were speaking with the tongues of angels, and if some of these former pagans in the Church at Corinth now considered themselves to have a spiritual status like the angels, then it would help explain why some of them had written to Paul expressing their low view of marriage and especially of physical relations within it.

For they presumably began to aspire to be like the angels in the sense also in which they neither marry nor are given in marriage (Luke 20:35). And this is probably why Paul had to deal with these topics in the way he did in chapters 6 and 7. Maybe they were also denying the likelihood of one day being raised with another physical body (unlike angels, hence chapter 15). Like some of those known as the Gnostics, they probably considered things to do with the body as being immaterial as far as their spirituality was concerned (so they could even be very liberal about immorality and idolatry). I suggest from the hints in the letter it’s at least possible that this was the kind of pagan spirituality that may

well have governed the mentality of some at least in the local Corinthian church - which is very interesting because the idea of what constitutes a person as 'spiritual' is again a huge area of debate today, and which throws up about as many unbiblical notions now as were once found around the waterfront at Corinth.

But all that as background - background to our subject of 'the more excellent way' - hoping only that it throws fresh light on why this corrective on love is now applied by Paul - for chapter 13 certainly comes in by way of being a corrective. It's a corrective against the abuse of tongues-speaking in Corinth for sure, but more than that, it's a corrective against this claim of superior spirituality. No wonder Paul challenges them in 14:37 with 'if anyone thinks himself to be ... spiritual ...!' In this section, chapters 12-14, Paul outlines a truly biblical view of spirituality. Paul sees it to do with cultivating relationships with other members of the Body of believers, and as leading to the common good in church services - all for the building up of each other. That, he says, is an expression of genuine Christian love; and so love now becomes his theme.

In contrast to their competitive spirituality, the way of love is the way of building each other up, the way of seeking first the good of others. In chapter 14, Paul will demonstrate the supremacy of prophecy over tongues-speaking. Why is prophecy better? Because it passes the test of being able to edify the whole church. The beginning of chapter 14 connects with the end of chapter 12 and so chapter 13 with 'its wonderful words of love' comes in by way of being a very relevant digression - showing it's love that edifies. Let's look at it now in three parts: the necessity of love in verses 1-3; the character of love in verses 4-7; and the permanence of love in verses 8-13. Chapter 13 begins:

"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 cym-

bal. If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

This deals with the necessity of love. Paul begins here to describe the way that’s beyond all comparison. Is true spirituality measured by tongues-speaking or the gift of the miraculous, or faith, or knowledge? None of the above, says Paul; spirituality is about walking by the Spirit of God and the main ethic involved is to love one another - to be toward others in the same way as God in Christ has been toward us. The signs mentioned are not the proof of the Spirit, but Christian love is. Moving on ...

“Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

Here we find the character of love. In verses 4 to 8, love is characterized by no less than 15 verbs: both what love is and what it’s not. Love is both patient and kind: both passive and active as seen in God’s own forbearance and intervention. It seems from the 12 preceding chapters that the negative things listed in this section are precisely what the Corinthian believers had been guilty of.

Envious they certainly were: as we reflect on the background of their strife and rivalry (3:3). Love doesn’t brag and isn’t arrogant, but what about their divisions as a result of boasting in different personalities?

Self-promotion and love are incompatible, but they had a preference for the showy gifts. They were puffed up, and they'd been arrogant in the face of gross sin. They were rudely unbecoming in behaviour in that the 'haves' were shaming the 'have-nots' at their love-feasts. They were self-seeking as shown by their eating regardless of stumbling others. Love is not easily angered, but there they were taking each other to court. They should rather have suffered the wrong without reckoning the evil to another's account. Concluding now ...

“Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known. But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:8-13).

This deals with the permanence of love. Love should define how the spiritual gifts are employed in the present. The Corinthian emphasis on tongues being evidence of their false spirituality was wrong - it came from people who weren't exhibiting the one truly essential mark of the Spirit, namely Christian love - the love which God is by nature and which he has for the world and which the Spirit produces in the heart of the yielded saint. Faith and hope by definition are not for the future, but love will outlast all. It is the greatest thing because of its ability to edify others, to truly seek their good. This is the way of love. It's beyond all comparison. This is the essence and mark of spirituality.

Some have suggested that this 'hymn to love' of chapter 13 was composed by Paul on a previous occasion (under the Spirit's inspiration, of course) and inserted in the letter at this point (under the Spirit's direction) because of its telling appropriateness.

As Paul explained it, the gifts were temporary blessings in an imperfect age. One day they would give way to perfection, toward which all the gifts pointed. What Paul meant when he referred to the coming of perfection is the subject of considerable debate. Paul elsewhere described the purpose of gifts by an illustration employing the imagery of growth and maturity. According to Ephesians 4:11-16, the gifts were to be used to bring the earthly expression of the Church which is Christ's Body from a state of infancy to adulthood.

The word translated 'mature' in that passage (Ephesians 4:13) is the word translated 'perfection' in 1 Corinthians 13:10. In the Ephesians passage, corporate maturity is defined as 'all attaining to the unity of the Faith ... to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.' Such a state will obviously not exist before believers are caught up to meet the Lord in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:17).

It would appear that the same perspective is developed in this passage to the Corinthians. Paul applied the illustration to himself (cf. verses 1-3). The threefold talking, thinking, and reasoning were probably meant to balance the thrice-mentioned gifts of prophecy, tongues and knowledge (v.8). With the coming of adulthood, such gifts become rather obsolete. Paul's use of the past tense belonged to the personal illustration he was using, and doesn't indicate that he personally, or Christ's Church expressed at Corinth, had yet arrived at that point. It wouldn't, on the other hand, necessarily rule out a gradual obsolescence of certain gifts as progress toward corporate maturity was made.

A city like Corinth, famous for its bronze mirrors, would have appreciated Paul's final illustration. The perfection and imperfection mentioned in verse 10 were deftly likened to the contrasting images obtained by the indirect reflection of one's face viewed in a bronze mirror and the same face when viewed directly. Such, Paul said, was the contrast between the imperfect time in which he then wrote and the perfect time which awaited him and the Church when the partial reflection of the present would give way to the splendour of perfect vision. Then Paul would see God (cf. 15:28; 1 John 3:2) as God now saw Paul. Then partial knowledge (cf. 1 Corinthians 8:1-3) would be displaced by the perfect knowledge of God.

## STUDY QUESTIONS: 1 CORINTHIANS 13

- a) Why this digression on love? What's the connection with spiritual gifts?
- b) In vv.1-3 how does Paul stress the necessity of love?
- c) How does the character of love in vv.4-7 address the issues at Corinth?
- d) The permanence of love (vv.8-13) is contrasted with the gift of tongues which is said to end with the coming of perfection. What do you think this perfection is?
- e) Why is love greater than faith or hope (v.13)?

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN: WHEN TO SPEAK AND WHEN BE SILENT

After the delightful digression on the theme of love in chapter 13, the Apostle Paul now returns to his continuing topic of spiritual gifts and their correct use within the local church at Corinth. In order to see the connection, let's rewind briefly to the last section of chapter 12 where he says:

“And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues. All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not workers of miracles, are they? All do not have gifts of healings, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they? But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And I show you a still more excellent way” (1 Corinthians 12:28-31).

As we've seen, the more excellent way was for love to direct the use of the gifts. The question is asked: 'Were some of these gifts designed to be foundational and temporary?' It's beyond dispute there are no apostles today in the New Testament sense. What's more, Hebrews 2:3,4 informs us that the purpose of the sign gifts mentioned here was to endorse the witness of the Apostles, a purpose which can no longer exist. The overall biblical pattern is that each phase of God's working opens with a burst of miracles which marks its beginning, and lasts about two generations.

From the point of view of building up the church, Paul explains that some gifts are more important than others. He wants the Corinthians

to desire to give those particular gifts greater prominence - over the more 'showy' ones. Now in chapter 14, Paul gives more guidance:

“Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy. For one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God; for no one understands, but in his spirit he speaks mysteries. But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation. One who speaks in a tongue edifies himself; but one who prophesies edifies the church. Now I wish that you all spoke in tongues, but even more that you would prophesy; and greater is one who prophesies than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may receive edifying...” (1 Corinthians 14:1-5).

“So also you, since you are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek to abound for the edification of the church ... 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” (1 Corinthians 14:12,19)

“Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be infants, but in your thinking be mature. In the Law it is written, “BY MEN OF STRANGE TONGUES AND BY THE LIPS OF STRANGERS I WILL SPEAK TO THIS PEOPLE, AND EVEN SO THEY WILL NOT LISTEN TO ME,” says the Lord. So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophecy is for a sign, not to unbelievers but to those who believe.

“Therefore if the whole church assembles together and all speak in tongues, and ungifted men or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad? But if all prophesy, and an

unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all; the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you” (1 Corinthians 14:20-25).

The fact that Paul saw the gift of tongues at Corinth to be a secondary fulfilment of the Isaiah prophecy (whose first use had been to predict the threat posed by Assyrian invasion and Judah’s ultimate capture by the Babylonians) is striking, and it would helpfully clarify for us that the significance of these sign gifts was focused on God speaking to, or convincing, Jews (who are described as ‘this people’). When we trace the few and isolated occurrences of the gift of tongues in the Book of Acts, we find confirmation of this in terms of the proselytes gathered in Acts 2; Peter’s Jewish preaching companions in Acts 10 (who required to be convinced that God was now accepting Gentiles); and John the Baptist’s disciples in Acts 19. Tongues-speaking marked out each of these historic, never-to-be-repeated events in the history of a developing Christian faith.

“What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. If anyone speaks in a tongue, it should be by two or at the most three, and each in turn, and one must interpret; but if there is no interpreter, he must keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God. Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment. But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, the first one must keep silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted; and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets; for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.

“The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says. If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church. Was it from you that the word of God first went forth? Or has it come to you only? If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord’s commandment. But if anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized. Therefore, my brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak in tongues. But all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner” (1 Corinthians 14:26-40).

Again, opinions have differed on the intended meaning of this further section of 1 Corinthians 14. The Bible states in verse 34 that women are not permitted to speak when the church gathers together as a church, plainly seeming to say that it’s not given to women to take the lead in any church service in any audible, authoritative way. This agrees with what we find in 1 Timothy 2:11,12 – “a woman must quietly receive instruction ... I do not allow a woman to teach”.

Perhaps the first comment we should make is that this text appears in all known manuscripts, so it’s hard to minimize the force of these verses. There again, it surely has to be accepted that the statement that they are not allowed to speak takes the form of an absolute rule.

So, what about the application of this text? Is it limited to the evaluation of prophecies only – that is, is Paul saying that women may not participate in the oral weighing up of such prophecies as he’s been dealing with in the immediate preceding context. Suppose we accept that view for a moment, how then can this view - which usually also understands Paul to permit women to audibly prophesy in a church gather-

ing – how can it at the same time propose that he now forbids them the seemingly lesser task of weighing up prophecies?

The clearer point is that these women were in learning mode ('they desire to learn,' v.35), and not performing a critical or editorial function with regard to freshly-delivered prophecies. For Paul is at pains to ensure that the restriction which he is making does not mean that the women cannot learn. This implies that it was a learning activity in which they were engaged, not the activity of publicly weighing up prophecies. Paul's summing up actually begins at verse 26 ('what is the outcome then') when he goes on to give practical guidelines for the ordering of both the gifts of tongues and prophesying when the early New Testament churches assembled together. Various in-church speaking roles are then listed in terms of exclusively masculine pronouns until Paul begins to address the womenfolk in verse 34, and then it is in order to explicitly confirm that they are not permitted to speak.

But – you may well ask - does this prohibition on women speaking not contradict 1 Corinthians 11:5? In what sense is the woman there said to be praying or prophesying? The only possible reconciliation with the praying and prophesying women of 1 Corinthians 11:5 is to understand these women as being part of the overall church company which was engaged in praying and prophesying, but which they specifically and personally were not permitted to lead audibly. After all, the Bible describes women present at the Breaking of the Bread to be collectively worshipping (although silent), being equally part of the holy priesthood.

The suggestion that this whole comment merely addressed some Corinthian women who had a tendency to be noisy cannot be taken seriously, for we must surely ask why, in that case, does Paul ban all women from talking – and were there no noisy men? Since Paul's rule operates 'in all the churches' (vv.33b-34), it would be necessary to as-

sume that all first-century Christian women were noisy in a way which disturbed church services then - which is obviously nonsensical.

Some think Paul was advocating a practice unique to Corinth, which means we can legitimately ignore it. Nothing could be further from the truth, Corinth was being asked to come into line with what all the other New Testament churches were already doing. He says: Are you the only people the word of God has reached? (v.36b). Paul asks if they're not troubled by the fact that all the other churches have put the same instruction into a different ecclesiastical practice.

A further argument against this being a statement that speaks to that local culture only is the observation that they are not allowed to speak as the law says. By this, Paul is probably referring to the creation order in Genesis 2:20b-24, for it's to there that Paul explicitly turns on two other occasions when he discusses female roles in a way which agrees with what we find here (1 Corinthians 11:8, 9; 1 Timothy 2:13). The verse in Genesis does not mention silence, but it does indicate that because man was made first, and woman was made for man, consequently a pattern has been laid down regarding the roles which the two play.

## STUDY QUESTIONS: 1 CORINTHIANS 14

- a) Are some gifts more important than others? If so, why?
- b) What insight about tongues can we gain from the Isaiah quote in v.21?
- c) Is v.34 limited in application to the context of v.29?
- d) How can this prohibition be viewed as consistent with 1 Corinthians 11:5?
- e) How would you defend against someone who said it was only the women at Corinth who were told to be quiet because they happened to be noisy?

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN: THE ULTIMATE TEST OF CHRISTIANITY

We now come to our final look at Paul's first Bible letter which he addressed to the Corinthians, that is, to the Christian believers in the Church of God at Corinth. We're grateful to Paul for the following brief but powerful summary of the essential content of the Christian Gospel, that is the Good News which Christianity offers. It's focused precisely on what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, his son, and that chiefly through the cross. It's this:

“Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep ...” (1 Corinthians 15:1-6).

Here the Apostle Paul informs them that they'll be saved by the message of Christianity which he'd preached to them. The sense of the condition he mentions is not to doubt that they were maintaining a basic belief in Christianity, but Paul does allow himself here to explore whether such a faith commitment on their part might ultimately prove to be ineffective because the actual doctrine of Christ's resurrection was in fact false. Was that possible? Paul now explores that very possibility

in his next words to them which form a tightly reasoned defence of the factual truth of the Gospel which he's so concisely outlined in his opening words of chapter 15:

“Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we testified against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised.

“For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied” (1 Corinthians 15:12-19).

What Paul states here is that the entire case for Christianity rests on the claim that Christ has been bodily resurrected. There are those today who profess to represent a Christian perspective while denying this. This could be a perfect description of Jim Rigby who pastors St. Andrews Presbyterian Church in Austin, Texas. Two days before Christmas, Rigby celebrated the holiday by saying, “I don't literally believe the cadaver of Jesus got up again, but I do believe the resurrection actually happened when the disciples began to see 'Christ' in each other, and in everyone else as well.” You have to wonder if they've ever read this part of the Bible. If they have, they have tragically missed the point and committed a colossal blunder.

The whole of Christianity is pointless if Christ is still dead and buried. The hope offered through the Christian message depends one hundred percent on the objective, historical fact of the literal resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead with the new body in which he presented himself to all the witnesses referred to earlier in defence of the reality of Christ's resurrection. Most, Paul says, were still alive, inviting doubters to interrogate them so as to be convinced. Paul even supplies some names of chief witnesses, including himself. His own dramatic case was perhaps the most powerful of all, since it's inconceivable that anything other than indisputable evidence for the risen Christ could ever have totally turned Paul's life around. What Paul doesn't add here is that even Christ's enemies had conceded the fact that his tomb was empty, something they could not account for other than to spread a deliberate lie (Matthew 28:13) – one which they themselves didn't even continue to promote (Acts 4:10).

As Lord Darling, a former Lord Chief Justice of England (from 1914-18), is once reported to have said 'there exists such overwhelming evidence, positive and negative, factual and circumstantial, that no intelligent jury in the world could fail to bring in the verdict that the resurrection story is true.' Having established, and so strongly undergirded the Christian Faith at this unique critical point, Paul now shows what follows from such a well-founded belief in Christ's resurrection:

“But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep. For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at His coming, then comes the end, when He hands over the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power.

For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet.

“The last enemy that will be abolished is death. For HE HAS PUT ALL THINGS IN SUBJECTION UNDER HIS FEET. But when He says, “All things are put in subjection,” it is evident that He is excepted who put all things in subjection to Him. When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all” (1 Corinthians 15:20-28).

This is a brilliantly concise summary of future events which Paul expands on elsewhere throughout his writings. The thing Christian believers can expect to happen next based on the evidence found in such texts of the Bible is the soon return of Jesus Christ, although we don't know when, but are simply to live in the expectation that it can be at any time. At that time of their Lord's return to the air, there will be a resurrection of all believers of this present age who have died in faith in Christ.

The text here in 1 Corinthians 15 omits any reference to the period of at least 7 years which follows on from that - of which the Lord himself spoke in Matthew's Gospel chapters 24 and 25. But verse 24 of this chapter, the fifteenth of Corinthians, immediately next mentions our Lord's return to the earth when (for example from Romans 11:26) he will liberate Jerusalem and reward faithful Jews with access into his one-thousand-year kingdom. He will reign, but only after that glorious time on the present earth will death itself, the final enemy, be abolished. This we can read about in Revelation chapter 20, which describes the ultimate judgement of God when seated on a great white throne. Then death is thrown into the lake of fire, the final and eternal destiny of all

who wilfully reject Christ as saviour. But this talk of being raised for judgement, begged the question ...

“How are the dead raised? And with what kind of body do they come?” You fool! That which you sow does not come to life unless it dies; and that which you sow, you do not sow the body which is to be, but a bare grain, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body just as He wished, and to each of the seeds a body of its own. All flesh is not the same flesh, but there is one flesh of men, and another flesh of beasts, and another flesh of birds, and another of fish.

“There are also heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one, and the glory of the earthly is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory. So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. So also it is written, “The first MAN, Adam, BECAME A LIVING SOUL.”

“The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual. The first man is from the earth, earthy; the second man is from heaven. As is the earthy, so also are those who are earthy; and as is the heavenly, so also are those who are heavenly. Just as we have borne the image of the earthy, we will also bear the image of the heavenly. Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor

does the perishable inherit the imperishable” (1 Corinthians 15:35-50).

These verses are wonderfully suited to a Christian burial service. There’s so much that could be said, but little time left for us to say it in, so we must limit ourselves to a couple of points only. First, this is a basis for Christian burial as opposed to cremation as a way of disposing of the body. The expressive language used here is of sowing the body into the ground, for it’s this act that expresses hope in a resurrection ‘harvest.’ Also, there’s a real indication here that our wonderfully transformed body will permit us to recognize one another. After all, Paul says that you reap what you sow, and then strengthens the case by talking of the stars differing from each other in glory.

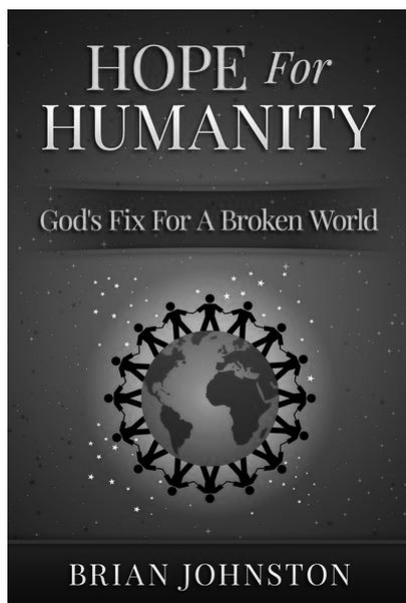
It’s a wonderful conclusion to think of those with such Christian insight as defined in this chapter shining brightly for ever like the stars in the expanse of heaven (Daniel 12:3).

## STUDY QUESTIONS: 1 CORINTHIANS 15

- a) What is being questioned in v.2 (their security, genuineness or the validity of the Gospel itself)?
- b) What 4 results follow if Christ hasn't been raised and so the Gospel is invalid (v.14,17-19)?
- c) Paul also focuses on Christ's resurrection because some of them were in denial about believers' bodily resurrection. What arguments for the latter are to be found in vv.13,29 & 32?
- d) Comment on the order & scope of resurrection in vv.20-28.
- e) What lessons are we to learn from the analogy of sowing (vv.35-49)?
- f) Comment on the Lord's return for his Church (vv.51-54). Are we to distinguish between 'this perishable' & 'this mortal'?



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## **About the Author**

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