



St Helen's  
Bishopsgate

BIBLE STUDY RESOURCES

# 1 Corinthians



# 1 Corinthians 1:1-9

## AIM

To understand the plan of God for his people, especially

- i. its timetable
- ii. the purpose of the gifts he gives them.

## CONTEXT

Corinth lies on the narrow strip of land between mainland Greece and the Peloponnese. Founded as a Roman colony in 44 BC following its previous destruction by them in 146 BC, it had, by the middle of the first century, successfully exploited its position on the major east-west trade routes to become a young, brash, brassy cosmopolitan city. Full of Greeks, Syrians, Jews as well as resettled Roman veterans, its various religions impinged on all aspects of city life, and into many parts of the church's life as well (6:1-6, 12-17; 8:4ff).

By the time he wrote 1 Corinthians Paul has already had a number of contacts with the Corinthian Church:

- He spent 18 months there on his second missionary journey (Acts 18:11) and the church had become established as a result of his ministry (1:6, 3:6, 10, 4:15, 9:1c-2).
- Following his move to Ephesus (Acts 18:18) he wrote them a letter (which is now lost to us - cf 5:9) that was, at least in part, misunderstood (5:9-11).
- News then reached him of what had been going on in the three years since he had left (1:11, 16:15-17). This news, together with a letter (7:1ff) revealed that all was not well. So he put pen to paper once more in the hope that they would put their house in order before he visits them again (4:19).

It would be a mistake to see the letter merely as Paul's response to the questions that they raised with him (7:1, 7:25, 8:1, 12:1, 16:1) cobbled together with a few assorted thoughts of his own (11:2, 15:1). Profound theological confusion lay behind the practical issues dealt with, confusion that if not cleared up threatened the church itself (cf eg 10:11). They were in danger. They had to be warned (4:14). 1 Corinthians is Paul's impassioned response. It is 'theology in action'.

## STRUCTURE

- 1:1 From Paul ...  
1:2 To Corinth ...  
1:3 Greetings ...  
1:4-9 Thanksgiving

Paul takes the traditional opening of letters in the first century and thoroughly 'Christianises' it. As he does so he begins to address some of the main themes of his letter.

## IMMENSELY PRIVILEGED

- They are special:  
They have all been called by God (1:2). They have all been set apart by God (sanctified 1:2). Their status is determined by the God who has called them and set them apart for himself.
- They have been richly blessed:  
There were few, if any, churches more blessed and with a greater abundance of gifts than the Corinthians (1:5, 7). Although much is amiss in Corinth, not least in regard to their understanding and exercising of these gifts (something Paul will have much to say on later in the letter) that doesn't stop Paul being thankful to God for his grace towards them.

## BUT NO DIFFERENT

- They are no different: They are the same as anyone else who 'calls on the name of our Lord' (1:2). No one Christian is more special than any other.

The 'together' of 1:2 could be read as implying that Paul's letter is intended not only for the Corinthians but also as a general 'round robin' letter. However it is more likely that he is emphasising their similarity to 'all those *everywhere* who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ - *their* Lord and *ours*'. Although richly blessed in many ways (1:4f) they were at heart no different from any other church. Nor is any of them any different in status from each other.

This reading would seem to be confirmed by:

- their tendency to boast (cf 1:12-13, 31, 3:21, 4:6, 18 etc.)
- the divisions that had arisen amongst them (cf. eg. 1:12ff, 3:3), based, in part at least, on their tendency to take pride in one man over another (4:6; cf 1:12, 3:21).
- the very specific nature of the issues addressed that are so clearly linked to their particular situation he raises (1:10, 5:1, 6:1, 7:1, 25, 8:1 etc). (This is not to deny that the letter has much to teach us, but it is to say that we will have to work hard to determine the principles that lie behind Paul's response to the situation in Corinth in order to apply them correctly.)

Paul will go on to insist that everyone is important (ch 12-14). All have their part to play (3:5-8). Although some of their number may be more culpable than others (4:18) Paul doesn't just address these individuals (1:2). Everyone, not just the leaders, must take to heart what he has to say to them.

## PAUL'S THANKFULNESS FOR THEM

Although Paul is very far from happy about what is going on in Corinth (3:1, 4:18, 5:1-2 etc) he nevertheless remains thankful for all that God has done for them. As he develops this theme he places their present situation within the overall purposes of God.

In particular he highlights:

- How they have received all that they have: they have been brought to where they are now through the message about Jesus that Paul had brought to them (1:4, cf 1:18f)
- From whom they have received everything: they are rich through the grace and generosity of God, and have all that they have because it has been given to them (1:4, cf 4:7).
- The purpose for which they had received it: they have been given everything they need (1:7) to keep going as Christians until God's purposes are complete.
- The faithfulness of God in achieving all he has purposed (1:9).

Through the message Paul's had brought them God had called the Corinthians. His purpose for them is that they be brought into fellowship with His Son Jesus Christ. As they wait for His return they lack nothing they need to keep going. (It is noteworthy that the two gifts that get particular mention as a cause for thanks - speaking (*logos*) and knowledge (*gnosis*) - will be a particular cause for concern later on (ch 2&3, ch 8, ch 12)).

(The NIV translates both 'charisma' in 1:7 and 'pneumatikon' in 12:1 as 'spiritual gift' whereas elsewhere 'charisma' is translated simply as 'gift' (eg. cf 7:7). This inconsistency in the NIV is unhelpful, since in 1:7 Paul is thanking God for *all* the gifts that God has given his people to keep them going as Christians not just the more spectacular ones of ch12. But don't get distracted by the particular gifts because the emphasis here is not on the *gifts* themselves, but the *purpose* for which God has given them.)

## PAUL MINISTRY

Right at the start of the letter Paul reminds his readers that his status and role as an apostle (v1) and preacher of the gospel (v17) is God given (v1).

It will become apparent as we look at the letter that some of the Corinthians were beginning to question both his message and his ministry (cf 1:12, 4:3, 6, 18-20; 9:3; 10:29-30; 14:37, 15:12) and he is forced to spend time defending both.

## KEY IDEAS

- God's Purpose. God has called them into fellowship with Jesus.
- God's Timetable. They must wait for Him to be revealed
- God's Faithfulness: They have been given everything they need to keep them going until He returns

## FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION ...

1. Do I view myself as a member of a people who are caught up within the purposes of God? How might a clearer understanding of this effect the way I view things?

2. How should I view the gifts that God has given us as a congregation? How should the purpose for which they were given effect my view of others, and of myself?
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## 1 Corinthians 1:10-2:5

### AIM

To understand the threat of party spirit to the gospel and Paul's antidote to it .

### CONTEXT

Division and disunity within the church is the first issue Paul addresses in the main body of the letter (1:10ff). The matter has been alluded to already in:

- i. emphasising their common identity. He has addressed them corporately as 'the church' (or more literally as 'the gathered people of God' ) in Corinth.
- ii. emphasising their unity not only with one another but also with all other churches. They have a common calling, status and Lord (1:2).

### STRUCTURE

1:10-17	A call to unity
1:18-25	Understand the message of the cross
1:26-31	Understand the people of the cross
2:1-5	Have a right view of preacher of the cross

### A CALL FOR UNITY (1:10)

Paul appeals, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, to a congregation marked by quarelling and divisions to be united (1:10-12). This theme, introduced in 1:10-17, will continue for the first four chapters (and arguably for much longer - cf Carson "Showing the Spirit" *Paternoster Press* p17).

The unity called for is one of 'mind and thought'. It is worth noting that this is:

- i. not a call for uniformity (as ch 2&3 will soon make clear)
- ii. not an insistence everyone should have the same opinion about everything (16:12)
- iii. not a rallying call for structural or organisational unit

It is a call for a unity based on a common understanding of the gospel; for at the heart of the problems that were afflicting the church lay a confusion about the gospel itself. In the factionalism of 1:12 their first need was to be reminded that personalities were irrelevant; Christ and his gospel was all (1:13-17).

### THE UNDERLYING PROBLEM (1:11-17)

Many had lost sight of 'Christ crucified'. Confusion about God had led to muddled thinking about themselves. They were becoming arrogant and boasting in men (1:31, cf 3:21, 4:6-7, 4:18) and 'human wisdom' (1:17) rather than in God and the 'folly' of the cross (1:31).

The quarrelling and divisiveness (1:10) used various leaders as rallying points (1:10-12, 3:3-4, 3:21) but it is unlikely that allegiance to Paul, Peter and Apollos was the real issue. Paul himself admits that the examples he uses are a rhetorical device (cf 4:6), used to point out the ludicrous nature of the positions they were adopting (1:13f) (as well, possibly, as a way of avoiding shaming, and thus antagonising, the individuals and groups concerned). There was division and quarrelling amongst them and they were beginning to align themselves with various 'key' particularly gifted players. Paul insists that such factionalism stands opposed to the gospel.

It is possible that too much attention was being put on the individual and their style, and too little on the content of the message. They had begun to think too highly of 'human wisdom', 'eloquence' and rhetorical skills - things highly valued in the surrounding culture.

## **NECESSARY REMINDERS (1:18-2:6)**

Paul writes to correct their thinking (1:10-4:16). He begins by:

- i. reminding them of the message that he had brought them (1:18-25)
- ii. reminding them what God had done amongst them through it (1:26-31)
- iii. reminding them how Paul had brought the message to them (2:1-5)

### 1. HIS MESSAGE

Most Gentiles around them regarded the gospel's claims as utter folly (1:22-23): How could the crucifixion of one particular Jew amongst thousands be the defining point of history? And Most Jews around them dismissed it (1:22-23): "For how could the crucifixion of the long awaited Messiah be the means by which God establishes His kingdom in power?"

A. Paul reminds them:

- that the gospel will always be dismissed as utter folly by those who, in rebellion against God, cling to non-biblical world views (1:18, 20, 22);
- that a crucified Messiah will always be a stumbling block to Jews who are perishing.

When faced with such a response the temptation is to try and make it more acceptable by replacing what is offensive (a crucified saviour) with something more acceptable ('human wisdom'). However whatever results will be powerless to save (1:17).

B. Such responses should not surprise them because God, in His wisdom, has arranged this to be the case (1:21). He has made the 'wisdom' of the world foolish so that:

- the idolatrous pretensions of humankind might be brought to nought (1:19. cf. Isaiah 29:14ff), and
- the salvation of those whom God has called, both Jew & Gentile, might rest on God's power alone (1:18, 21).

The gospel is wiser than man's wisdom because unlike any other 'world view' it shows things as they really are (1:19, 25). It is stronger than human strength as it alone has the power to save (1:18, 21, 25). The gospel is not just a message about Christ crucified, but the power of salvation to all who believe (1:18, 22).

### 2. THEMSELVES

As a church they were tremendously gifted (1:5-7) with the result that they were tempted to boast in themselves (1:31, 3:18, 4:7, 4:18).

Paul reminds them of who they were when God called them in the gospel. In the world's eyes most of them they were an unimpressive bunch - neither powerful nor wise (1:26). But God had chosen them and brought them to belong to Christ (1:30). He had chosen the 'nobodies' to humble the 'somebodies' (1:27-28) so all boasting before God was excluded.

If salvation depended on wisdom - what hope for the foolish. If it depended on strength - what hope for the weak. But God chose the low, the weak, the despised so all might be humbled and no-one have cause to boast before Him (1:29). If anyone is going to boast let it be in God (1:31).

### 3. HIS METHOD

Paul's message to the Corinthians had been a message about God; about Christ and him crucified (2:1-2; 1:17-18). It might be dismissed by others as 'weak' and 'foolish' but it was in fact the power of God, and the Corinthians themselves were proof of this for it had established them as a church (2:4, cf 1:6).

Like the content of his message, his method was at odds with Corinthian expectations. It was unimpressive by the standards of the world (2:1, 4). He employed none of the skills of oratory and rhetoric with which they were so enamoured (2:1,4). The establishment of the Corinthian Church could thus be seen to be entirely dependent on God, and a demonstration of the Spirit's power. And this was crucial so that their faith might rest not on human skill or guile - but on God alone (2:5).

## FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION ...

1. What determines the groups I align myself with, both inside and outside the congregation? In making such decisions to what extent am I influenced by personality rather than by the gospel?
  2. What pressures does my culture exert on me to make Christianity more acceptable? How does this tend to move the cross from 'center stage'?
  3. What is the implication for me that God so often save 'nobodies'?
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# 1 Corinthians 2:6-16

## AIM

- To understand how we come to understand the gospel.
- To begin to see where the wisdom of God stands opposed to that of 21st century London.
- To begin to understand what it means to be a spiritual person and its implications for congregational relationships.

## CONTEXT

Paul has reminded the Corinthians that when God had called them into fellowship with Christ he had done so in a way that ran contrary to everyone's expectations. He used a preacher who rejected the methods of his age (2:1,4) to save those who for the most part were a pretty unimpressive lot (1:26-31) by teaching the absurd notion that it was through crucifying Jesus that His purposes were fulfilled (2:18-25).

It was no accident that such a way of working is dismissed as utter folly (1:18, 1:22-23). God has so ordained it (1:19, 21) so that no one would have cause to boast in anything other than the God who had saved them (1:28-31, 2:4).

The gospel of Jesus Christ is both the wisdom & power of God (1:24, 18) and yet dismissed as foolish and weak (1:18, 24) because:

## STRUCTURE

2:6-10a          There are two types of wisdom

2:10b-16        There are two types of people

## TWO TYPES OF WISDOM          (2:6-10a)

There are two fundamentally different ways of looking at the world: God's way and all others:

1. God's way : The wisdom of God.

- The wisdom of God concerns the crucifixion of the Lord of glory (2:8)
  - It is the means by which God's eternal purposes are fulfilled (2:9).
  - This was not an accident. God had always intended to achieve glory for his people in this way (2:7,9) .
  - Before the event no-one had understood it (2:7,9).
  - But now Paul does (2:6, 10) because God has revealed it to him (2:10)
2. All other ways: the wisdom of this age
- Is unable to understand what God is doing (2:8).
  - Leads to a rejection of Christ (2:8).
  - Is that of the powerful and influential in the world (2:8, together with the wider context of ch 1:10ff suggest it is these people rather than any demonic power that Paul has in view)
  - Like all the powerful and influential of this world, it is under judgment, and will ultimately come to nothing (2:6). Those to whom the wisdom of God has not been revealed will always dismiss the message of the cross as folly . Those to whom God has revealed His wisdom will understand it to be the wisdom and power of God (1:24).

This is not to say that all non-Christians understand nothing about anything, or (for example) that Christian chemists are more competent than non-Christian chemists. But it is to say that when it comes to understanding anything about the things of God all non-Christians *are* ignorant and stupid.

All alternative 'worldviews' are misguided because they are based on ignorance and are ultimately opposed to the message of Christ crucified. They will eventually be shown to be as hollow as they really are (2:6). Paul's wants the Corinthians take to this on board.

## **TWO TYPES OF PEOPLE (2:10-16)**

This may sound arrogant, but it isn't because it is not something that Paul and his fellow teachers have sat down and thought out, or shown empirically to be true (2:13). It is something that has been revealed to them (2:12, 13).

In all relationships it is only possible to know what someone is thinking if they tell you. What is true of relationships between people (2:11) is true of God's relationship with humankind. Only he knows his plans and purposes and only he can make them known. And he *has* made them known.

They are revealed in the gospel and can be seen to be the wisdom of God by those to whom the Spirit of God gives understanding. The Spirit of God knows the mind of God (2:10b, 11) and has made it known (2:12, 13).

- Paul's message and method will always be dismissed by non-Christians as stupid because they reject the things that come from the Spirit of God (2:14a). They do this because they don't understand them (2:14b). They don't understand them because they have not received the Spirit of God (2:12, 14c) who gives understanding (2:14). They are thus incapable of making sense of God's activity in the world (2:14d)
- In contrast the Christian can understand God's ways. The Spirit of God who 'searches all things' knows the deep things of God (2:10) and reveals it to those with the Spirit of God. The Christian thus understands what God is doing in the world (2:15-16) whilst such things remain a complete mystery to the non-Christian.

## **WHERE DO THE CORINTHIANS FIT IN?**

These words had particular bite to those who

- were enamoured by the prevailing wisdom - by rhetoric, oratory and the thinking of the age - and in danger of being seduced away from the gospel of the cross.
- considered themselves 'spiritual' and yet were becoming disenchanted with Paul's method and message.

They needed reminding that

- even though it was largely rejected the gospel of a crucified messiah was indeed God's wisdom. And although it might seem hard to believe, all else would come to nothing
- the divide between 'spiritual' people and 'non-spiritual' people is the great one between Christian and non-Christian. (And this is the only division that the gospel recognises)

- the spiritual person who has been given God's Spirit has a God given perspective on and understanding of the world - one determined by the message of Jesus Christ and him crucified.
- they had what they had entirely because God had been at work amongst them granting them understanding. There was therefore no room for arrogance or boasting.

(Paul will go on to develop these ideas further.)

Having laid the theological foundations to his argument Paul returns to his principal concern at this stage - the divisions and quarrels amongst them ((3:1ff).

## FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION ...

1. Where does the wisdom of our present age/ rulers of our age stand at odds with the wisdom of God?  
Can you identify one area in your own life/ in our church life where you/ we risk pursuing the wisdom of our present age rather than God's?
  2. Is it ever possible for the Christian gospel not to appear arrogant? How should we respond to that as a church?
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# 1 Corinthians 3:1-22

## AIM

- To understand the nature and purpose of Christian ministry within the plans and purposes of God.

## CONTEXT

There was division and disunity in the Corinthian church. Part of the problem lay in their attitude to their leaders. Too much attention was being given to individuals. Like the surrounding culture they were too bothered about individuals, with the result that their unity in the gospel was under threat (1:10-12).

In response Paul has argued that God was at work achieving his purposes through the proclamation of an unlikely message about a crucified king. That he choose to do so in such a way using the unimpressive leaders of a generally mediocre group of people will always be seen by outsiders as utter folly. However it was in fact the wisdom and the power of God. But it would only ever be acknowledged as such by those to whom God had given His Spirit.

## ARGUMENT

3:1-4 By boasting about individuals you are still thinking like the world thinks.

3:5 Individuals are only servants doing the job God has given them to do.

3:6-17 As each servants does their job God builds his church  
(but each person will nevertheless be accountable for how they work)

3:8-22 So wise up and grow up! Understand how God is at work achieving his purposes.

## GROW UP! (3:1-4)

Although undoubtedly extremely gifted (1:7) the Corinthians were far from mature. In fact by boasting about individuals and their ministries they revealed just how immature they were. They were still thinking in the way the world thinks, like



'mere men' (3:3-4). Paul has already shown that such a way of viewing things is in direct opposition to the wisdom of God (1:18-2:10).

As those now possessing the Spirit of God they should make judgments in line with the wisdom of God (2:15). Although there was a time when such childish thinking might have been understandable - when Paul first arrived in Corinth (3:1) - they should have grown up by now. But they hadn't (3:2).

## **THE UNDERLYING PROBLEM: WORLDLINESS (3:5)**

The problem was that they hadn't understood how God goes about doing things, and the place of church leaders within His plans and purposes (3:5).

Some of the leaders were being given a greater status within the congregation. Parties had formed around them and the church was becoming divided. They needed to be reminded about:

- The nature of Christian ministry

They were thinking like the world thinks, thinking that being the leader made you more important than anyone else. However Paul insists that ministry - and here specifically that of leadership in a congregation - has to do with the job you do, and is independent of status. The job that anyone had in the church was just that, a job. (And they only had it because God had given it to them (3:5).) The status that the leader had was an extremely important one (3:9), but no different from anyone else who exercises their God-given ministry for the building up of God's people (3:9, 16). What it was - the part that it played within God's economy - and what fruit it bore was up to Him (3:7).

Since then the nature of anyone's ministry is ultimately not down to them, but to God, it was ridiculous to boast in men. 'Let him who boasts boast in the Lord' (1:31).

- The status of Christian ministry

As Paul has argued a person's position before God is determined by the gospel. All Christians are indwelt by the Spirit of God (2:10-16) and they have in common the extraordinary status of being part of the 'temple of God' (3:10).

If those with a particular job - here specifically of leadership - were to regard themselves as any different to anyone else it should be the very opposite of what they were doing. They were 'congregational slaves', servants of God's people, the lowest status of all. They had been appointed by God, through grace (3:10), for the good of His people. He chose to work through them (3:6, 10), so 'let him who boasts boast in the Lord' (1:31).

- The purpose and privilege of ministry

God is ultimately the one who establishes his people (3:6,7). Nevertheless there are awesome responsibilities of leadership. Each person should be careful (3:10) for they will be held accountable for the work that they do (3:8, 13-15, 17).

On the last day work that genuinely builds up the people of God (that which results in 'gold, silver, costly stones') will be seen for what it is, and be rewarded (3:14). Such work will have been that which is faithful to the foundation Paul had already laid - namely the message of Christ and Him crucified (3:10). Any other work will have been in vain.

The warning here is for those who build in any way that undermines or ignores Paul's original message. Those who do so are at best wasting their time (3:15) and at worst - if that which they do has the effect of destroying the people of God - placing their own salvation in jeopardy (3:17).

## **SO WISE UP! (3:18-22)**

Paul wants the Corinthians to understand just how worldly their thinking has become. Some of them at least had become deceived by the world around them (3:18). They needed to understand that such thinking was both foolish and futile. It needed to be rejected. They needed to understand things from the perspective of God's wisdom (3:19-20). There must be no more boasting about men (3:21). 'Let him who boasts boast in the Lord' (1:31).

## **FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION ...**

1. How do I regard the leaders of our congregation? How do I view my own area of responsibility? Where are we as a

congregation in danger of following the pattern of this world in our attitudes to leadership?

2. How do I understand my status as a Christian? How do I view others? How can I prevent the development of unbiblical hierarchies within the church family?
  3. Where am I most in danger of 'boasting about men'. How can this best be avoided?
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## 1 Corinthians 4:1-21

### AIM

To understand how movement away from the gospel of Christ and Him crucified leads to erroneous views of

- ministers and their ministry
- the time scale of God's purposes
- what it means to be a Christian.

### CONTEXT

Paul has assured the Corinthians of his confidence in God to keep them secure in the gospel until the end (1:1-9). However since 1:10 he has been addressing a source of conflict that if left unchecked, would place at least some of them in severe danger (3:17).

Behind the factionalism in the church lay a cult of personality (1:11-12, 3:3-4, 21-22) that reflected an understanding of things that had more to do with the ways of the world than the gospel. Some at Corinth were beginning to disdain the message of the cross. They were (as we will see, 4:3) passing unfavourable judgments on Paul's message and ministry, seeing him as personally unimpressive (2:3) and lacking both 'wisdom' (1:17) and 'maturity' his teaching (3:1-2).

In response Paul has reminded the church of:

- how God works (through the 'message of the cross')
- why He works that way (so that no-one may boast before Him)
- how to view any individual's role within his purposes (as God's servant and co-worker).

He now moves to reassert his authority - and thus that of his gospel of a crucified Christ - whilst identifying the fundamental issue at the root of their problem.

### ARGUMENT

Moving from how *not* to view any particular servant of Christ (as a group Guru) to how they *are* to view them it becomes clear that:

- i. the real cause of division within the congregation isn't Paul, Appolos or Cephas but their own leaders (4:6-7)
- ii. the warring parties have misunderstood not only the nature of Christian leadership but of the gospel itself and what it means to be a Christian (4:8-13).

Paul's call to 'imitate him' (4:14-16) isn't to reignite earlier divisions (1:10-12) but to call everyone back to the gospel by which God had called them (1:2, 6; 2:2), and by which they had been saved (1:18).

### DONT JUDGE OTHERS ... (4:1-5)

As Paul brings together two ideas from ch 3 teachers / leaders as servants (3:5-9) and the context within which their work must be viewed (final judgment, 3:13-15) he reasserts his own authority by showing them two of their errors. They are making judgments • on the wrong basis and • within the wrong time scale.

Paul, Appollos and - now clearly, and more significantly - their leaders / teachers (4:6-7) should be judged by the following criteria:

- by their faithfulness to their task.  
As servants of Christ within the household of God they have been given a trust - the secret wisdom of God now made known (2:7, 10, 4:1), the gospel of Christ crucified. They will be judged according to their faithfulness to this gospel and not by any other standard that the world might from time to time regard as more appropriate - rhetorical skills, personality, popularity (size of congregation, conferences addressed, money raised, churches planted, or whatever happens to be in vogue at the time).
- by God  
As servants of Christ they are accountable ultimately to him (4:5). Until Christ returns any one else's judgment was of little importance (4:3), and suspect - even their own (4:4).
- at the right time  
When Christ returns all things will be seen for what they really are (4:5). Only then will everything will be brought to light. Each person will receive their praise from God.  
This would be a comfort for those seeking to remain faithful to a message and a method dismissed by those around them as utter foolishness. It also serves as a warning to those tempted to desert it for a more popular and palatable way.

## **LOOK TO YOURSELVES ... (4:6-7)**

To avoid fanning the flames of party spirit and publicly shaming those concerned Paul has, since 1:10, avoided naming any of the Corinthian leaders directly. Instead he has used himself and Appollos as examples of those to whom a misplaced loyalty could result in destructive division within the church (1:12; 3:4-5, 22). It now becomes clear that his real target is much nearer to home (4:6-7).

The Corinthian church were losing the plot (4:6). They were becoming arrogant, boasting in men rather than God (4:6, 10,18; cf 1:31, 2:21). They had forgotten that although they were immensely privileged (1:2a, 4-5, 7; 3:9, 16) they were ultimately no different from anyone else (1:2b) and, on one level, irrelevant (3:7). They needed to remember the gospel of grace - that if they had anything it was only because God had given it to them (4:7) - and get their thinking straight. In a section dripping with irony (4:8-10) Paul tells them to:

### **i) GET YOUR TIME SCALE IS ALL RIGHT. (4:8).**

Paul reminds them of the 'Now but not yet' of the gospel of the cross. True, 'all things' were theirs 'in Christ' now (3:22) but they must wait for Jesus to be revealed. They lack nothing that they need to enable them to keep waiting - but wait they must (1:7, 2:7b, 9). To claim to have received in present experience, before Christ's return, all that He has won for His people is to be self-deluded (4:8, 10), and to fail to ....

### **ii) UNDERSTAND WHAT IT MEANS TO BE CHRISTIAN. (4:9-13)**

Ridicule, shame, brutal treatment; being persecuted, slandered and dismissed by the world as foolish and weak; such is the lot of those called by God to be messengers of the gospel (4:8-11). And it is a life to which all those who would follow Jesus are called, for it is one that is in accord the gospel Paul has proclaimed (4:16-17), the gospel of a *crucified* Christ (1:17, 2:2).

The Corinthians had forgotten this. In distancing themselves from a gospel *of the cross* they had rejected any idea of costly self-sacrificial discipleship. They wanted to be kings now rather than to wait and follow Christ through suffering to glory; to pick up their crowns rather than their crosses and follow Him.

But this was impossible. Faithfulness to the gospel, like the gospel itself, will always seem weak, foolish and shameful in this world. It will always invite ridicule and persecution (4:17, cf 10-13). The appropriate response to this wasn't to avoid it, or seek in the now the promised future glory & honour that would one day be theirs (4:8); it was to endure.

## **TAKE HEED ... & TAKE ACTION (4:18-21)**

As the Corinthians had begun to disdain the message of the cross they had also begun to disdain the messengers. Paul, his lifestyle (4:9-13) and his methods (2:1-5), reflecting as it did the gospel that he preached (4:16-17), was becoming increasingly unpopular.

In reaffirming his original message he is also reasserting his authority and warning them that they will be held accountable for

their actions ((1:1, 4:14, 21). As their 'father' in the gospel (4:15, cf 1:6) he longs that they will repent and return to the message of the cross (4:16-17). When he returns to Corinth it will soon become clear where true wisdom and power lies (4:19-20, cf 1:18-2:16). He hopes they will have put their house in order before he arrives (4:21).

## FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION ...

1. How do we view our leaders? What judgments do we make concerning their ministry? To what extent are these determined by the values of the world; by the gospel?
  2. Are you proud of our church? Why? Should you be?
  3. Do you need to repent of any modern day worldliness that prevents you imitating Paul in his life and teaching?
- 

# 1 Corinthians 5

## AIM

- To see the dangers of unrepented sin and worldliness for the individual and congregational life, and why and how it must be dealt with.

## CONTEXT

From 1:10-4:18 Paul has been addressing the issue of division within the Corinthian church, and between the Corinthians and himself. At the root of these problems lies a confusion about of the nature of the gospel. In addressing them he has called them back to the gospel of 'Jesus Christ and him crucified' (2:2, 4:8-13).

Although some see a break in the argument at the beginning of ch5, issues of holiness within the congregation (of which factionalism has been only one) continue to be at the forefront of his concerns (cf 1:2). In addition a number of the themes of ch 1-4 continue, including:

- Corinthian arrogance 1:12, 3:3-4 3:21; 4:7, 18; 5:1, 6
- Corinthian immaturity/ worldliness 3:1, 18; 4:8ff; 5:1, 6,11
- Paul's authority 1:1; 4:14-21, 5:3
- judgment 2:15, 3:12-15, 4:1-5, 8ff;
- the congregation 1:2, 7, 10, 3:1, 16-17.

## STRUCTURE

- |        |                               |                           |        |
|--------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|--------|
| 5:1    | The presenting problem.       |                           |        |
| 5:2    | Their inappropriate response. |                           |        |
| 5:3-13 | The necessary response:       | What they must do         | 5:3-5a |
|        |                               | Why they must do it       | 5:5b-8 |
|        |                               | A mistake they must avoid | 5:9-13 |

## THE PRESENTING PROBLEM (5:1)

Paul continues to respond to the news he has heard from Corinth (1:11, 5:1) as he addresses one particular episode of sexual immorality within the congregation.

Although the precise nature of what was going on is unclear to us - was the man having a sexual relationship with his mother or his step-mother? Was his father still alive? It would have been clear to both the Corinthians (who were happy to tolerate such behaviour in their midst) and to the outside world (who were scandalised by it).

But what is more important even than the specific nature of the sin is:

- a) that the individual concerned is unrepentant. The tense of the Greek in 5b is 'present and continuing'. That it is known about so widely also argues for the continuous, open and unrepented nature of the offence.

- b) that the congregation tolerated it.

## THEIR INAPPROPRIATE RESPONSE (5:2)

What most shocks Paul is not the behaviour itself but their response to it. Instead of being filled with grief they are proud (5:2)! This could mean that

- i. they are proud of the activity itself. Proponents of this view see in the claim that 'everything is permissible for me' (6:12) their boast that now 'as spiritual' people they were free from the usual moral constraints placed on 'unspiritual' people

or

- ii that they remain a proud and arrogant church despite the fact that such behaviour is going on amongst them .

The second seems more likely (and closer to home).

## THE NECESSARY RESPONSE (5:3-5)

### What they must do 5:3-5a

The wickedness must be removed from amongst them (5:2 cf 5: 5, 7, 11, 13). The force of these verses is clear . When the congregation is together, judgment must be passed and the individual concerned excluded (5:3-5). Issues raised include:

- i. What does it mean when Paul says 'I am with you in spirit / Spirit' (5:3a, 4a) and 'the power of our Lord Jesus is present (5:4c)?  
Options include
- a) Paul has already explained how God's Spirit is to be found amongst the gathered congregation (3:16). As an apostle by the will of God (1:1) with authority amongst them (4:20) Paul's judgment is that this man must be excluded. This decision of the apostle is that of the Spirit of God, is that of Jesus himself.
- b) alternatively Paul could simply be emphasising the fact that as all the churches have the Spirit of God in common ( 2:12, cf 1:2b) no church is an island. Therefore they are all to some extent are accountable to one another since they are united within the body of Christ even when physically absent.
- ii. What does it mean to 'hand this man over to Satan' (5:5)?

In NT thought there are two realms : that over which Satan has temporary sway, the dominion of darkness, the realm of sin and death ; and that where God's rule is acknowledged, the realm of righteousness and life, the kingdom of his Son. Christians have been redeemed by Christ from one realm to another (cf. Col 1:13,).

Exclusion from a congregation of believers excludes an individual from God's temple (3:16) and returns them to the realm to which believers no longer belong (5:5a). Since his behaviour is inconsistent with living in God's kingdom he is to be excluded (5:5a, 7, 13) and denied the privileges of family membership (5:11). In other words they are to treat him as a non-Christian. (See below for further comments on 5:11).

### Why they must do it. 5:5b-8

1. *For the sake of the individual concerned.*  
Belief and lifestyle are inextricably linked (4:17). This man is not living in line with the message he claims to believe. He is living a flagrantly immoral life. He doesn't view such behaviour as unacceptable and is happy to continue as a member of God's people. He must be brought to his senses, and is to be excluded in the hope that he will turn in repentance and be saved (5:5b). (This is different from saying that he is battling with sin, failing, repenting and starting over again. That is normal Christian experience.)
2. *For the sake of the congregation (5:6-8)*  
The Feast of Unleavened Bread was a reminder of to Israel of how God had rescued them from Egypt (by means of the Passover) and brought them to the Land God had promised them (Ex. 12:17, 23:15). Now they must remember that Christ was their Passover (rescuing them from the realm of sin and death to the realm of righteousness and life (Rom 5:12ff)), and live in a way appropriate to what He has done (see on 5:5 above) and to what they had now become. The death of Christ makes them new; yet they must get rid of the old in order to be new, precisely because in Christ they are already new (5:7). The metaphors here are mixed (the church is alternatively a new batch of dough and celebrants at a feast) but the point is clear. They must remove the man for their own sake so that they may be what they truly are - the new people of God in Corinth.  
And not just the man - but their boasting as well (5:6). Paul has argued at length that it too was inconsistent with the gospel (1:31, 3:21).

### **Remember that Christians and non-Christians are different 5:9-13**

The first letter Paul wrote to the Corinthians is lost to us, but one of the issues addressed was that of sexual immorality (5:9). He had however been misunderstood (5:10). The principal that they must keep in mind is that Christians and non-Christians are different (they live in different realms) and are therefore to be treated differently.

- A gospel lifestyle is to be expected of gospel people.  
Those who profess belief in the gospel but refuse to repent of persisting with overt ungodliness are to be judged. They are to have the privileges of family membership withdrawn and to be treated as a non-believer, in the hope that they will be brought to repentance, and saved (5:5). (Within the context of ch 5 & exclusion from the assembly this would include at least the Lord's supper (cf 11:17-33), although not necessarily be limited to it. (But see later on eating with non-believers - 8:1-13, 10:14-33.)
- A gospel lifestyle is not to be expected of non-gospel people.  
It is ridiculous to expect the same standards from the outsider as the insider for they are all overtly ungodly (5:10). It is not the job of the church to pass judgment on them (5:13).

### **FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION ...**

1. How would it look if we were to apply the principles of this chapter to a) our congregational life and b) our relationship to non-Christians?

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## **1 Corinthians 6**

### **AIM**

- To understand more about the type of behaviour that befits those who are now betrothed to Christ and who will one day reign with Him.

### **CONTEXT**

The Corinthian church was proving itself too influenced by the surrounding culture and too little influenced by the gospel. This 'worldliness' has been seen:

- in their fascination with rhetoric, intellectual debate, power, prestige and success. Such an attitude showed that they were distancing themselves from a gospel of the crucified Christ. Paul has urged them to renounce the methods and attitudes of the world and to persist with the message of a crucified saviour and endure the ridicule, dishonour, and persecution that that would inevitably bring (4:8-13). Only in this way would they have been faithful to the gospel that had saved them, and indeed to Christ himself (4:16-17).
- in muddled thinking. They are condemning the immorality in the world (5:9-10), something that they shouldn't do (5:12-13), whilst at the same time failing to address the immorality in their midst (5:1-2).

Paul has more to say about judging the church and the world (6:1-11) before returning to issues of human sexuality (6:12-7:39). His concern throughout is that the Corinthians live in accordance to that which God has done and to whom they now belong (1:2, 5:7-8).

### **STRUCTURE**

Shun worldliness and make sure your behaviour is consistent with the gospel:

6:1-8 Take responsibility for the holiness of the church.

6:9-20 Take responsibility for your own holiness.

### **DON'T GO TO THE OUTSIDER TO BE JUDGED (6:1-11)**

Paul wants the church to see themselves as they really are - a people saved by God for a future with him - and for their lives to reflect that.

Members of the congregation were resorting to the secular courts to settle disputes between themselves. Paul shows how doing this

reveals that they don't fully appreciate

- i who they are
- ii the nature of judgment
- iii. the nature of the gospel

• **THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD ARE DIFFERENT**

God has set the Corinthians apart through the proclamation of the gospel (1:2, 7). As a result they understand that which remains hidden to non-Christians (2:12) and have a radically different world view. (eg What the outsider sees as foolish, weak and worthy of ridicule the Christian understands to be the wisdom and power of God.) Hence the ungodly can't possibly be expected to reach a godly conclusion when passing judgment. How could they be? They live in a completely different realm (5:5). So why on earth would two Christians seek redress in the secular courts (6:1, 6)?

• **IN THE FUTURE THE CHURCH WILL JUDGE THE WORLD: NOW IT MUST JUDGE ITSELF**

Ultimately Christians will judge the ungodly (6:2), and not only them but angels too (6:3). This affirms the teaching that when Christ returns God's people will share in his kingly rule. One aspect of this will be their passing judgment on the ungodly (cf Dan 7:22, Rev 20:4).

If this is the case with issues of eternity how much more should they be able to deal with the things of this life that are trivial in comparison (6:3). Asking non-Christians to pass judgment on Christians is to get things back to front as Internal disputes must be resolved internally (6:4).

• **LET YOURSELF BE WRONGED**

As Christians they should not be looking to the secular courts for vindication. It would better that they be wronged by a brother, cheated and misunderstood than have their day in court (6:7, cf 4:12-13). They should be willing to give up their rights rather. The fact that they were not prepared to do this - and cheat and wrong one another in the first place (6:7) - showed that they have completely lost sight of the gospel of a crucified Christ, who gave up all his rights for their sake .

## **FLEE SEXUAL IMMORALITY**

**(6:9-19)**

In returning to the subject of sexual immorality (cf 5:1-11) the overarching concern remains that they conduct themselves as is appropriate for those for whom Christ had died (5:7-8). He reminds them what they were, what they are now by virtue of His death and what they will become, so that his application (6:18, 20b) becomes self-evident.

### **WRONG THINKING AT CORINTH**

In their arrogance some of the 'spiritual' at Corinth had come to regard the freedom they had in Christ as absolute (6:12) and the physical body as of little value, as it was destined for destruction (6:13). They argued that

- Since
- everything is permitted
  - food is for the stomach and the stomach for food (and in the end God will destroy them both), and

since all bodily appetites are much the same that must means that

- the body is for sex and sex for the body, &
- all sex is OK because God will destroy them both in the end (6:12-13).

Paul's answer is that they are wrong on both counts:

- the body is not for sexual immorality but for the Lord;
- it is not destined for destruction but for resurrection.

The church's present betrothal and eventual marriage to Christ in heaven (cf 2 Cor 11:2-3, Eph 5:25-27, Rev 19:6-8) informs the whole of this passage, and as we don't often think about the gospel in these terms it can be difficult to get to grips with it.

Jesus, the groom, has purchased his bride out of slavery (6:19b-20a; 6:11) and sent his spirit into her - individually (6:19) and corporately (cf 3:16) - as a deposit guaranteeing that one day in the future they (the betrothed) will be brought into the fullness of the marriage relationship. United in spirit now (6:17) they will be united with his body when he returns. They will be resurrected and the marriage consummated as they are united with him (6:15).

The church / each individual, indwelt now by His Spirit, is betrothed to Him.

So ...

### **Remember what you were**

They had been greedy, drunkards, thieves, idolaters, slanderers and swindlers. They had been male and female prostitutes (6:11). As such they had reflected the world in which they lived (5:9-10). And as such they were excluded from the kingdom of God (6:9).

but ... they had been washed;  
... they had been sanctified;  
... they they had been justified in the name of the Lord Jesus (6:11).

### **Remember what you have become**

They have been bought at a price (6:20). As a result they were not their own but belonged to God (6:13d). They are part of Christ's body (6:15). United with him (6:17) in spirit now and ....

### **Remember what you will be**

... they will be raised with Christ and be married to him (6:14) in the future. They were His and He is theirs (6:13). How then could they go off and have sex with a prostitute (6:15)? To do so would be to unite themselves to them (6:16)! No they must flee!

## **TO BE CONTINUED ...**

This however begs the question as to where sex fits in. If all this is true wouldn't it better not to have sex with anyone ? Perhaps those who are single should remain so? And those who are married stop having sex? And surely if you are united with Christ like this it must be impossible to continue to be united in marriage to a non-believer? Shouldn't one rather be separated or divorced?

Some at Corinth thought so, and it is to these questions that Paul now turns (7:1ff).

## **FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION ...**

1. How do you deal with conflict with others in the congregation. What principles should guide us? What would this look like in practice?
2. Where are you most vulnerable to being tempted to sexual immorality? What does it mean in practice for you to 'flee'. How can we help one another in this area?

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# **1 Corinthians 7**

## **AIM**

- To understand what it means to be holy as married and single people

## **CONTEXT**

- Paul has dealt with issues around human sexuality before in both this letter (5:1-11, 6:12-20) and the previous one (5:9) . In ch 5 & 6 he has already begun to address some of their muddled thinking on the issue (6:12-18) and now speaks to all groups within the church - married, widowed, separated, single and betrothed - and puts sex in its right place.
- The issue of God's time scale and the perspective of eternity - a perspective whose implications the Corinthians seem to have completely misunderstood (3:12-15; 4:8ff; 6:2, 7) - is again one of Paul's reference points.
- His interest in human sexuality falls within his wider concern that the Corinthians should live appropriately as those for whom Christ died (5:7-8, 6:11). This is arguably one of the main concerns of the whole letter (1:2).
- In response to Corinthian licentiousness (6:12, 13) Paul has argued that the Christian's present unity with Christ (6:15, 17) and future bodily resurrection (6:14) makes sexual union with prostitutes abhorrent (6:14, 16-18) and sexual immorality something to be fled. Given this unity and that which sexual intercourse involves (Gen 2:24 cf 6:16) it might be argued that all sexual union should be avoided and that celibacy was to be preferred. Some of the Corinthians appear have been arguing for this (7:1a). Ch 7 is Paul's response.

## **ARGUMENT**

7:1 You say no sex is best



7:1-16 To the those who are married I say, on the contrary ..

(Governing principle no 1. 7:17-24)

7:25 ff To the single/betrothed I say not being married is a good option with many advantages

(Governing principle no 2. 7:29-35)

## WHOSE IS SPEAKING IS IT IN 7:1a?

The two possible reading of 7:1a are reflected in the NIV's main text and footnote:

- Option 1  
Traditionally 7:1b has been seen as a positive statement by Paul on singleness. Paul is understood to be affirming the superiority of celibacy but, because of the prevailing sexual immorality, 'allows' marriage as a concession (7:6).
- Option 2  
Alternatively Paul is understood to be quoting from their letter to him in which they have concluded, wrongly, that celibacy is superior to marriage - a further example of the Corinthians tendency to have a negative attitude to the material body (6:13). Indeed his whole argument from 6:12-18 might be taken erroneously to support such a view, that somehow sexual abstinence was more 'spiritual' and thus to be preferred. What follows (7:2-40) is his corrective.

Although option 1 finds echoes the language of v8 and v26 the wider context argues for option 2 since:

- i. In 6:12-12, 8:1 and 8:4 Paul alludes to what they have said in their letter to him and then seeks to correct their understanding. 7:1a would suggest this is the case here too.
- ii. 7:2-6 reads most naturally as a rebuttal of any position that would seek to forbid sex within marriage where
  - 7:2 is not a command to all single people to get married but for those who are married to have active sex lives. (To 'have' someone in biblical language is to have sex with them. It is never used to refer to getting a spouse). The argument from mutual responsibility in 7:3-4 would seem to support this.
  - the concession in 7:6 most naturally refers to temporary abstinence within marriage (7:5) rather than to getting married in the first place.
- iii. In later letters Paul expressly condemns such asceticism (Col 2:20-23, 1 Tim 4:1-4).

## THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF MARRIAGE

### Don't deprive one another.

- Marriage doesn't help anyone avoid sexual immorality - an active sex life within marriage does (7:2, 5). Both husbands and wives belong to one another and 'owe' themselves to each other. Temporary abstinence is only allowable by mutual consent for a short period for a specific task. Paul's message, far from being ascetic is that 'married couples should have sex as frequently as a busy gospel schedule allows'. Not to do so is to be ungodly.

### If you are widowed, remain holy

- it is fine not to be married, and it is fine to get married again. Indeed, if you do not remain sexually abstinent (and this is the force of 7:9a, 'do not' rather than 'cannot') you should get married again. ('Widower' here is an equally valid rendering of the word translated 'unmarried' and better fits the context with Paul addressing all those who are married or have been married in 7:1-16.)

### Don't get divorced

- If you are both Christians you must stay together. The mutual responsibility - so much a feature of this chapter - is once again emphasised. If this proves impossible then so is remarriage ((7:10-11, 39a).
- If only one of the couple are Christian, and the non-Christian spouse is happy to remain in the relationship you must persevere with it (7:12-14). Given the clear differences between the Christian and the non-Christian (2:10-16), the identity of the congregation as the temple of God (6:16) and the importance of keeping it pure (5:1-11) it is easy to see how some came to think that such mixed marriages should not be maintained. Against such an idea Paul argues that the Christian must seek to maintain them. Rather than the Christian partner and the church becoming defiled by such a marriage the reverse happens and the spouse - and any children - are in some sense made acceptable (7:14). And the marriage might be the human means of their conversion (7:16).
- If the unbelieving spouse leaves let him or her do so. But what does it mean not to be 'bound' in such circumstances (7:15b). Many argue that it means that in such a case the deserted Christian partner is free to remarry. Others argue that the freedom referred to is not that of being able to remarry, but rather that of no longer being under any obligation to maintain the marriage. In support of this view they argue that:
  - i) the word in the Greek is not that usually associated with the binding character of marriage (7:39, cf Rom 7:2)
  - ii) in v11 even though there is a similar exception regarding divorce remarriage is explicitly disallowed
  - iii) Paul is addressing those who are seeking to dissolve a marriage and arguing that they it be maintained. The issue of remarriage is not really in view

iv) such a view misses the thrust of the chapter which has to do with not seeking a change in status (see below). Remarriage is not the issue being addressed in ch7 and we probably need to look elsewhere in the NT to develop a Christian view.

## **THE IRRELEVANCE OF MARRIAGE (17-24)**

Paul's response to those who would argue that abstinence and singleness is 'spiritually superior' to sex and marriage is that both are immaterial. Marital status, like ethnic group (7:18-19) and social standing (7:21-22) are irrelevant. What matters is relationship with Christ and living appropriately (7:22, 19 cf 5:7, 6:20) There is nothing to be gained by change and the general principle is to remain as you were when Christ called you (7:17, 20, 24 cf ).

The controlling theme of the whole chapter is 'Do not seek a change in status' (v 8, 10, 11, 12-26, 37, 40) because it is irrelevant. But precisely because it is irrelevant it is not wrong for the single to get married (v27, 28, 36, 38a, 39).

## **THE ADVANTAGES OF SINGLENESS (7:28-35)**

Remaining single is a valid option for Christians and indeed has many advantages:

- freedom from the troubles of married / family life (v28)
- freedom from the responsibility of caring for a spouse (v33)

Every Christian, married or single, should live in a right way, devoted to God. The single person is able to commit themselves utterly to this (v32b, 34, 35). The married person cannot since they have extra responsibilities that must not be ignored (v33). They are therefore more caught up with the affairs of this world (v33, 34). Although they too should sit light to the things of this life - understanding that this world is only temporary and passing away (v29-31) - the very nature of things will mean that they are more entangled with it than the single person need be.

Paul's message to those who are single is that they are not in an inferior position to those who are married. They have advantages that should be born in mind (v28b, 32) - and in many ways it is better (v38) - but these don't mean that marriage is not an option.

(The unusual term 'virgin' (v25, 36-38) most probably refers to those who are betrothed but yet to be married.)

## **FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION ...**

How does Paul's views here challenge our secular cultural norms?

How does Paul's views here challenge our Christian cultural norms?

How can we help one another (married or single) to 'live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord'? What distracts us and how can we deal with it?

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# **1 Corinthians 8**

## **AIM**

- To understand the nature of Christian maturity and the danger of being well-taught Christians.

## **CONTEXT**

- Many of the major themes of the previous chapters continue into this next section (ch 9-11): internal division and boasting (ch 8), Paul's authority (ch 9), judgment (ch 10:1-13), Christian freedom and behaviour (ch 8, 9 & 10).
- Paul now turns to the another of the issues that were troubling the Corinthians and about which they had sought clarification (cf 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1, 16:1). His method, as previously (cf 6:12 & 7:1) he takes one of their catch phrases as the starting point for the discussion (8:1).
- As a large, multicultural city Corinth was full of temples to pagan gods (8:5b) and awash with the meat from their sacrifices. It was almost certain that any meat available in Corinth had been involved in one of these sacrifices. This was as true for meat bought in the market place (10:25) as it was for that eaten during the temple ceremonies (8:10) or in one of the many temple 'restaurants'.

Some Christians in Corinth knew that meat was only meat and were certain that it was thus all right to eat it (even at the temples (8:10)). Others felt uneasy about it (8:7). The issue had become a cause of conflict. Who was right and how should they all respond (8:1)?

## STRUCTURE

Chapter eight forms the first part of Paul's answer to these questions, an answer that runs to 11:1. He addresses this issue within the context of individual freedom and responsibility, and the nature of Christian maturity (issues that will continue into ch 11-14)

8:1 Que. What should we do about meat sacrificed to pagan gods?

8:2-11:1	Ans.	Meat eaten in the pagan temples	8:1-10:22
		Meat eaten at home	10:23-26
		Meat eaten at dinner parties	10:27 -30
		Conclusion	10:31-11:1

Chapter 8 The dangers of Christian knowledge

8:1-3	Knowledge v love.
8:4-6	What those who are certain know. What the insecure think.
8:7	
8:8-12	How knowledge puffs up & destroys.
8:13	Freedom & responsibility.

## WHAT THOSE WHO ARE CERTAIN KNEW (4-6)

These Christians knew the fundamental realities about God:

- that He alone was God (4)
- that God the Father had created all things and Christians live for him (6)
- that Jesus is the one through whom God both created all things and redeemed his people (6).

They felt able to eat this meat - even in a pagan temple (10) - because they rightly understood that idols are nothing (4): there is only one true God and all claims to other 'gods' and 'lords'- of which there were many in Corinth (5) - were therefore bogus. Based on this clear understanding of the doctrine of God they argued that since the gods represented by these idols didn't in fact exist and that meat was only meat there couldn't be any harm in eating it.

Indeed it is likely that they went even further by arguing that those others who weren't happy to eat the meat - those with weak consciences (8:7) - should 'grow up' and start living in a way that was more consistent with what they also knew (8:1b, 4-6).

Under the slogan 'knowledge builds up' it is likely they argued that in exercising their freedom to eat such meat they were in some measure proclaiming the gospel to those who felt less happy with the practice. They saw themselves as mature - basing their actions on a clear understanding of the gospel - with a responsibility to teach those who hadn't yet understood the full implications of the gospel. In exercising their freedom these 'weaker' brothers and sisters would be built up in the truth as they came to realise their own freedom in the gospel be emboldened (literally the word is 'built up', v10) to eat meat too.

All in all there seemed good, clear, biblical, gospel reason not only why they could eat this meat but also how they should eat this meat for the good of the church.

## WHAT THOSE WHO ARE INSECURE THINK (7)

This second group also knew these truths about God (8:1b) but had yet to take it fully on board (7). These Christians - most likely those who had been converted out of a pagan background - had been so accustomed to pagan idolatry that they found it impossible to separate the meat from the idol to which it had been sacrificed. As a result it had become tainted in their own mind and to eat it would be to go against conscience (7).

## KNOWLEDGE PUFFS UP - & DESTROYS (1-3; 8-12)

In his reply Paul shows that although the doctrine of 'the certain' cannot be faulted they are nevertheless in serious trouble

- Their understanding had made them arrogant (8c).

If they knew something (and they did, 8:1) they needed to remember

- i. that whatever they knew they didn't know it all (2)
- ii. they only knew it because God first knew them (3, cf 2:10-16, 4:7). Who knew them was much more important than what they knew

- What they knew could be contradicted if they insisted on it (8).  
Verse 8 is written not to the 'weak' to get them to embolden them to eat what they felt was wrong. (That would undermine Paul's whole argument that to encourage them to do so was wrong (10-13)). Rather it is addressed to the 'certain' who, in insisting on their rights to exercise their freedom were at risk of saying that what you eat matters, the very thing they were keen to deny.
- What they knew could destroy their brothers and sisters.  
This is no small thing. Their eternal destiny is in view here - a Christian life is at stake. The 'certain' thought that by encouraging their weaker brethren to be free from their current bondage to false notions about idols they were building them up. However the reverse was in fact true (11). For the weak to eat 'food sacrificed to idols' would for them to be to engage in idolatry (8:7) and thus risk rejecting Christ.
- Thus by insisting on their rights the certain were sinning against both their fellow believers and Christ Himself(12).

So what had started with sound, biblical understanding about the nature of God and Christ ended up with sinning against other believers and against Christ, and placed a believer's salvation at risk.

## LOVE BUILDS UP

Where had these believers gone wrong? In ch 10 Paul will go on to say that although they are right in saying an idol is nothing and that what food we eat is an irrelevance there are compelling theological reasons why Christians should not take part in temple feasts (10:18ff). That however is not his point in ch 8.

The point here is that the controlling principle/ ethic is 'love' rather than 'freedom'. They shouldn't be concerned with exercising their rights / freedoms so much as exercising love towards fellow believers.

They had confused knowledge and Christian maturity. The mark of the mature Christian is not depth of understanding but the giving up of privileges and freedoms for the sake of others (13). This is the love that builds up (8:1).

## TO BE CONTINUED ....

But hang on Paul. Isn't this just opting out? Doesn't it mean that you become enslaved by the oversensitive consciences of weaker brethren? And doesn't it mean that you become pragmatic and completely unprincipled in your dealing with people?

## FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION ...

How does this passage challenge our view of Christian maturity?

Try to think of an area of Christian understanding in which your view has changed in the last few years. How do you usually respond to those who have strongly opposing views? How would you respond if you had to move to a church where this opposing view held sway? How should you?

# 1 Corinthians 9

## AIM

- To begin to understand the principle that guides Paul's actions and the relevance of it for us today

## CONTEXT

- Much of the chapter is taken up with a defence by Paul of his ministry and his rights to be supported by them in it (3-14). This picks up a themes from the earlier chapters where Paul has on occasion been seen defending his ministry to those who, in moving away from the message of the cross, are beginning to reject its messenger (2:1-4, 4:6-22). Undoubtedly Paul is here defending himself and his ministry to those who were doubting it (3) (perhaps within the context of those who saw inconsistencies in his attitude to the law (19-24).

- However the immediate context is a discussion about whether or not Christians in Corinth are free to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols (8:1). Paul has argued that the determining principle in whether to eat is the avoidance of wounding another's weaker conscience (8:12). He will return to the specific issue of idol meat again (10:14ff) but first spends one and a half chapters enlarging on the issue of Christian freedom and wider principles that should determine how they are to be exercised

## STRUCTURE

Paul's freedom & rights	9:1-14
Abandoned rights	9:15- 18
Abandoned freedom	9:19-23
What this means in practice	9:24-27

## PAUL'S AUTHORITY (1-2)

Paul's starts a defence of his ministry (3) with a string of rhetorical questions whose vehemence is further evidence to suggest that his authority is a live issue in Corinth. His meeting of Christ on the Damascus road and the fruit of his ministry (9:1. cf 1:6, 4:15) should all establish his position (2) and silence his critics.

## HE HAS RIGHTS (4-14)

Paul argues that:

- It is an accepted principle in the world at large that the worker gets paid for their work (7-8, 13). Neither the soldier, the farmer, the shepherd or those who work in the temple (whether in Jerusalem or the pagan temples doesn't really matter for the point is the same) do their work without reward. They have a right to it, and receive it.
- The Law of Moses says the same. The same principle that provides for the ox to be fed as it works is applied to the apostle, the implication being that the minister of the gospel should receive material support from those amongst whom he serves (8-11). [Paul's use of the text from Deut. 25:4 reflects Paul's view of scripture that it exists ultimately for the sake of those living in the 'last days' (10. cf 10:11).]
- By supporting other teachers (12) they were acknowledging this general principle. He was after all no different from other apostles (4-6).
- Jesus Himself commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel (cf Luke 10:7, Matt 10:10).

Paul marshals argument after argument to establish one simple principle - that he has the right of material support from the Corinthians. He does all this to show that:

## HE HAS ABANDONED HIS RIGHTS (15)

Paul has given up all rights to payment for his ministry. Why?

1. Because and this is the climax of the argument from 9:1) not to do so would hinder the gospel. (9-12b)  
Although he has the right of support from them he has given it up (15). For Paul being supported by the church would risk hindering the gospel of grace. He would do anything to avoid that - even give up his rights for the good of the gospel.  
He doesn't say explicitly how being paid would frustrate the spread of the gospel but it is likely (especially in the light of ch 1-2) not being paid sets him and his message apart from the many travelling orators of the time whose status would have been determined by the size of the fee they could command.  
And he doesn't mention it here not so that they would start paying him (15)!. He would rather die than have anyone deprive him of the boast that he offers the gospel free of charge. (Although in fact he cannot boast because he really has no choice about it. He has received his commission from Christ (16. cf 9:1) and so is compelled to preach.) He does so to establish a controlling principle in his life and ministry : that he will give up things - good and proper things, things that are right, things for which there are good unequivocal biblical support - if there is a risk that clinging to them would frustrate the spread of the gospel.
2. Because the controlling principle in his life isn't his own rights and freedoms but the salvation of others . (19-23)  
Paul's actions in any and every situation is governed by the gospel need of those around him. He wants to win everyone to Christ (19, 20(x2), 21, 22). He longs that people might be saved (22). The controlling principle in everyone's case is: 'What is least likely to

be a hindrance to the gospel (12b)? How can I become like them in order to win them to Christ?' If anything is likely to get in the way he will change it.

- If eating like a Gentile would be a problem to those he was with Paul will be Kosher (20a). He will strictly observe the stipulations of the law. He will become like one under the law (20a) for their sake. To all the world it would look as if he had become Jewish. He wouldn't have done (20b) but he would have given up right and proper Christian freedom for their sake, so that nothing would hinder the gospel.
- If living like a Jew would be a problem to those he was with he would live as like a Gentile as far as obedience to Christ's law would allow, to win them (21). He has become all things to all men to win them to Christ.

## **WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE (19-23)**

Unprincipled. To the casual observer this would look at best inconsistent and at worst as though he were denying the gospel he proclaimed. But it wasn't inconsistent, and he wasn't denying the gospel. It was simply that the overriding principle was 'to do all things for the sake of the gospel' that others might come to share in its blessings, even if that meant giving up rights and freedoms won for him by the gospel; even if it meant being misunderstood and misrepresented as a result.

That is not to say that Paul would do anything for the gospel. There were limits (21b). He wouldn't become something he was not (20b) but he would become as *like anyone* as he could to win them for Christ.

## **WHAT IT REQUIRES (24-27)**

To live like this was not an easy task. It required hard work and self-discipline (24, 25, 27) and a constant remembering that the rewards for such priorities and effort were not going to be seen this side of heaven. The perspective of eternity (25) and the dangers of ignoring it (27, seen further in 10:1-13) are constantly in view.

## **FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION ...**

Who do I know who has given up their rights to reach others for Christ? How might I help them persevere in the task?

How can we help one another to do the hard work required to cross our cultural barriers with the gospel? How can we help one another to persevere in this task?

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# **1 Corinthians 9:24-10:14**

## **AIM**

- To understand the dangers of idolatry in all its forms
- To identify those areas where we are most prone to idolatry and to work out what it will mean for us to flee them.

## **CONTEXT**

- From the outset Paul's overriding concern has been for the holiness of the Corinthians (1:2). At least some of them were living in a way that was inconsistent with their status as the people of God. This has been evidenced in their
  - divisions and disunity
  - distancing themselves from the message of the cross.
  - impatience for the blessings of eternity
  - immorality and tolerance of immorality
  - arrogance
  - lack of love for one another

This concern for their holiness continues into ch 10 as he warns them all - and especially those who saw themselves as secure in the gospel (12) - of the consequences of idolatry.

- Paul has defended himself against his detractors (9:1-23). Everything that he does is motivated by the hope of saving others. However this is not his only motivation. Paul acts as he does to ensure that *he too* will share in the blessings of the gospel. He will not presume on God's mercy - and nor must they.
- The issue of idol meat is still in view. Although Paul has insisted that meat is only ever meat (whether it has been sacrificed to idols or not - 8:8) he will go on to say that to eat it in the context of pagan temples worship is idolatrous (10:20). Before reaching this conclusion Paul first warns the Corinthians of the terrifying consequences of idolatry, lest in their arrogance, and boasting in their knowledge and freedom, they end up presuming on the mercy of God.

## STRUCTURE

9:24-27	The example of Paul ...
10:1-10	The experience of Israel ...
10:10-13	The warnings for the Corinthians ...
10:14	Applied

## THE EXAMPLE OF PAUL (9:24-27)

These verses serve two purposes:

- They conclude the argument of ch 9.  
Paul has limited his freedoms and abandoned his rights for the sake of others salvation. He is motivated by the eternal perspective of the gospel and the concern that he share it too. He longs that the Corinthians follow his example (11:1).
- They anticipate the warning 10:1-22.  
The imperative of 24b lie at the heart of these verses. Paul fears for the Corinthians. (Note the 'For' in 10:1). He doesn't want them to be disqualified for heaven.

Using athletic metaphors to describe the Christian life Paul argues that

- the prize (the blessings of the gospel) are primarily future (24)
- it is worth having (for it lasts for eternity) (25)
- it is possible to start the race and end up without a prize (24, 27)
- there is therefore good reason for exercising the necessary self-discipline to attain it (24, 25, 27).

Sharing in the final blessings of the gospel isn't guaranteed, either for Paul or the Corinthians. To gain them they must persevere to the end. Despite his confidence in the sovereign work of God (1:4-9) Paul isn't complacent (26-27, 23b). He does however have genuine concern for the Corinthians. Their eating in pagan temples is placing them in real jeopardy. They need to wake up.

## THE EXPERIENCE OF ISRAEL

10:1-10 are full of allusions to Israel's time in the wilderness when God had rescued his people from Egypt to bring them to the promised land.

### WHAT HAD HAPPENED (10:1-5)

Some of the details - 'baptism into Moses' (2), 'that rock that accompanied them' (4) - whilst intriguing are secondary to Paul's main point, which is to draw a parallel between Israel's situation in the wilderness the Corinthians' own position.

Like the Corinthians, Israel

- had been rescued from a slavery (1-2)
- were sustained by God as they awaited the fulfilment of His promises (3-4)
- had been sustained by Christ himself (4)  
BUT
- nearly all of them never received that which had been promised (5)

### WHAT CAUSED IT TO HAPPEN (10:6-10)

The Israelites who, like the Corinthians, might have assumed on the basis of previous experience that they stood to receive all that God had promised failed to do so because they 'set their hearts on evil' (6). Paul illustrates his point by alluding to Israel's time in the wilderness:

v7 God had brought his people from Egypt to Mt Sinai to worship Him. Almost immediately they desert him to worship idols they have made (cf. Ex 32:6).

v8 Now out of sight of the promised land Israel indulge in sexual immorality and are drawn after the pagan Gods of those around them (cf. Nu 25:1-2).

v9 The Israelites become impatient for what God had promised them and complain against God and Moses. All this was in fact symptomatic of the fact that they had ceased to trust in the promises of God (cf. Nu 21:4-6).

v10 As they are poised to enter the promised land Israel complain against their leaders (Moses and Aaron) and doubt the goodness, power and faithfulness of God (cf. Nu 14).

Each episode of rebellion is followed by a terrifying judgment, alluded to in v7 (Ex 32:27-28, 35) and explicit in v8, 9 & 10.

## **WARNINGS FOR THE CORINTHIANS (10:6, 11-12)**

### **WHY DID IT HAPPEN - WITH WHAT PURPOSE?**

Those who say that God will never act in such a way again, or that they themselves at least are safe, completely miss the point (6. 11a). Paul's extraordinary claim (crucial to any reading of the OT) is that they happened *precisely* to teach the Corinthians - and all those who live between Christ's first and second coming (11b) - that God will again act in judgment on any who do as they did and presume on the mercy of God irrespective of ongoing commitment too and trust in Him.

Some of the Corinthians were in danger of repeating the errors of the past. As we have seen they were flirting with pagan worship (ch 8 - cf 10:14 ff) and sexual immorality (ch 5, 6 & 7), were impatient with God's timetable (ch 4) and dissatisfied with their leaders (ch 4, 9). They were arrogant (4:7, 18; 8:1-2) and confident in their standing before Him (8:4-6). Paul warns those people in particular: the majority of those rescued from Egypt fell in the desert before they arrived in the promised land. Be careful you too don't fall (12)!

### **NO EXCUSES**

V13 is both a great comfort and a serious warning. No-one in Corinth (or any Christian ever since) could say that they had no choice when it comes to sin. Or that their temptation to sin was any greater for them than for anyone else. Everyone faces the same temptations (13a) and there is always a way out .

### **NO FEAR**

However God is not capricious. He doesn't set his people up to fall. He has and will provide for his people. The way to avoid setting one's heart on evil is i) to flee ii) exercise the single mindedness and self discipline of 9:24-27.

## **FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION ...**

Do I think I am standing firm? Do I really think that God will act this way in judgment again?

Where am I most prone to idolatry? What will it mean for me to use the ways out that God has provided?

What is it that most tempts us to doubt the purposes and promises of God? What tempts us to lack of contentment? How can we help one another to resist such thinking?

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# **1 Corinthians 10:14-11:1**

## **AIM**

- To understand the radical nature of Christian freedom.
- To understand how to exercise this freedom within the context of a multicultural society.

## **CONTEXT**

1. Since 8:1 Paul has been using disagreement over the presenting issue - whether or not Christians should eat meat that has previously been involved in pagan worship - to address many broader issues about which the Corinthians were muddled:
  - the nature of a Christian's rights and freedoms, and how they should be exercised
  - how that for the Christian the determining motivation in all things should be the salvation of others



- the arrogance of certain Corinthians that could place their own and others salvation at risk.

He has challenged them not to presume on the mercy of God (9:24-10:14), or boast of the rights and freedoms that they have in the gospel but to endure the hardship and self-sacrifice involved in doing everything possible for the salvation of others (9:20-23).

2. So far he has only addressed the issue of eating idol meat in one scenario, as part of pagan worship (8:10). He has made it clear that those who rightly understand that idols are meaningless (because there is only one God - 8:4) and that meat is only ever meat (whether it has been involve in pagan worship or not - 8:8) were nevertheless wrong to eat it if, in so doing, they risked encouraging fellow believers to eat against their conscience. To do so would be to encourage them to be idolatrous and place them at risk of apostasy. Instead they should give their rights and freedoms for the other persons sake.

There are other reasons why they are wrong to eat the meat in this context and other contexts where there would be opportunity to eat it and Paul now goes on to consider them (10:15ff).

3. Throughout ch 8-10 (and beyond - cf 11:2ff) Paul can be seen to simultaneously addressing two groups within the Corinthian church. One groups - the 'libertarians' - understand the freedom that they have in the gospel but are applying it incorrectly. The other - the 'legalists' - want to formalise how all Christians should behave in all circumstances and were therefore illegitimately limiting the freedom of others (and most probably condemning Paul for his apparent inconsistencies of 9:3, 22). Neither group are completely wrong. But nor are they completely right.

To address these issues Paul takes them back to first principles so they will understand how to respond in a godly way to those around them, neither compromising the gospel with legalism on one hand or syncretism and licentiousness on the other.

## STRUCTURE

10:14-22	Eating at a pagan temple
10:23-26	Eating at home
10:27-29a	Eating in someone else's home

Summary of 8:1-10:29:

10:29b-30	Christian freedom
10:31-11:1	Christian responsibility

## YOU MUST NOT EAT IT (10:14-22)

Paul invites the Corinthians to reflect on what they know about other meals eaten within the context of corporate worship - the Lord's Supper and the cultic meals of ancient Israel - in order that they understand what those who were eating meat in the pagan temples (8:10) were actually doing:

- i. The Lord's Supper : Whatever else it involved (and Paul will have more to say about the Lord's supper later in the letter cf. 11:17- 34) the Corinthians knew that in the Christian family meal they participated with / had fellowship with Christ and his people (16, 17). By eating it they were affirming that through Christ's death they are members together of the redeemed people of God (17).
- ii. The OT sacrifices: When the people of Israel sacrificed at the altar and ate part of the sacrifice they participated in worship either of God (eg Deut 12:17-18) or of idols (10:7). Idolatry brought judgment and the forfeiting of the promised blessings of God (10:5). Paul agrees with the 'libertarians' - those who were happy to eat in pagan temples in ch 8 - that idols are nothing and that meat is only ever meat (10:19-20a). However he doesn't agree with them that it is therefore all right for Christians to eat it within the context of pagan worship. He argues that to do so would be to have fellowship with the demonic, and to align oneself with those who are against God (10:21). It is impossible to have a foot in both camps (10:21 cf ch 2). To engage in such idolatry it is sheer folly (10:22) for others had done so in the past with terrifying consequences (10:1-10). They must have nothing to do with it (10:14). Did they think they could stand in the face of the judgment of God (10:22)?

## YOU ARE FREE TO EAT IT (10:23-27, 29b-30)

Given the horror and danger of taking part in a pagan festival it is easy to see why some might respond by prohibiting the eating of any of the sacrificial meat in any circumstances. (This would effectively force the Corinthian to be vegetarians as most, if not all, of the supplies at the local butcher would have come by way of one temple or another.)

Paul rejects such legalism. If someone's conscience didn't permit them to eat it then that was fine. They need not eat it. (In fact they mustn't eat it (8:7, 10-11)). But an individual's freedom in Christ was not to be judged by someone else's conscience (10:29b). They should not be denounced for eating with thankfulness that what God has provided. If one felt free to eat such meat at home that was fine. (10:25, 30).

## YOU MUST NOT EAT IT (10:28-29a)

This freedom to eat extends to eating with non-believers. The origin of the food is an irrelevance and can be ignored (10:28). Unless it is an issue for someone present. If a fellow guest is troubled by its origins then you shouldn't eat it, for to do so would cause offence and risk hindering the clear communication for the gospel.

## FOR THE SAKE OF THE GOSPEL (10:29b)

Since 8:1 Paul has said that on some occasions it is fine to eat the meat, and on others that it isn't. Such apparent contradictions in his own practice had led to confusion. He was being condemned as inconsistent and unprincipled (9:3, 19-23, 10:29b). Was such condemnation justified?

No. Paul may look inconsistent, but he wasn't. It is just that the determining principle - that everything be done for the salvation of others (10:23-24, 33) - demands that he behave differently in differing circumstances (10:33). The meat itself is an irrelevance. The motivation for all that he does is for the glory of God to be seen in salvation of others (10:31, 33).

Paul is not driven by a desire to exercise his rights or indulge the freedoms that are his in the gospel. He is not self seeking (10:33). Like Christ he is willing to give everything up so as not to cause anyone to stumble (10:32) that they might be saved. And he longs that the Corinthians share his passion, and do likewise (11:1).

## FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION ...

Are you by nature more of a 'legalist' or 'libertarian'. What are the dangers for you from chapters 8-10?

How can we help one another to work out what it will mean in practice for us to do things 'not for our own good but for the good of many, so that they may be saved'?

To what extent does the difficulty we have had applying ch 8-10 in last few weeks reflect the fact that most of our relationships are within the Christian subculture rather than our wider multicultural society? How can we help one another to work out what this will mean for us to cross these barriers, and then to cross them, so that others may be saved?

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# 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

## AIM

- To understand the need to maintain gender distinctives in church meetings and to begin to work out what this might mean for us in practice.

## CONTEXT

- Having prohibited the Corinthians from involving themselves in pagan worship Paul goes on to address a number of issues to do with their own corporate assemblies: inappropriate behaviour when praying and prophesying (11:2-16), at communion (11:17-34) and when speaking in tongues (12-14).

- Paul has been seen at various times to be addressing two groups:

(i) On the one hand there were those who were rejoicing in the freedom they now had in the gospel but were at risk of licentiousness (6:12-20) and idolatry (10:14-22).

(ii) On the other hand there were those who felt unnecessarily constrained (7:1-14, 10:25-30), not yet fully appreciating the liberating nature of the gospel.

Both groups are still in view as Paul goes on to address how men and women should conduct themselves in church assemblies.

## ARGUMENT

Paul argues both from the nature of relationships within the created order (3) and from the order of creation itself (7-14) for the need to maintain gender distinctive within congregational life:

Maintain it!	The argument from 'headship'	11:3-6, 10
	The argument from 'origin'	11:7-12
	Summary	11:13-14
But don't overdo it!		11:15

It is worth noting at the outset that these verses are not concerned with *what* men and women can and cannot do in congregational life

(for clearly both groups are involved in praying and prophesying (4, 5 etc)) but *how* they conduct themselves whilst doing it. They deal with how to maintain distinctives whilst doing the *same* thing. That is not to say that differences in what each can do may not exist, but simply that these verses don't address that issue.

## WHAT WAS THE ISSUE : HAIR OR HATS ?

Understanding the issue at hand to be one of head covering with hats or veils (the traditional reading of these verses) has a number of difficulties:

- i. veil (hat) isn't mentioned in the text until v15 where the force is that women have long hair *instead* of a veil ('as' is universally acknowledged to have the force of 'instead of').
- ii. in v4 the word translated in the main text as 'covered' has the force of something (hair?) being 'down over his head'.
- iii. Hair length and the way it was worn (rather than the wearing or not of hats) was of great significance in the ancient world. Greek, Roman and Jewish women grew their hair long and wore it put up in various styles. In all three cultures loose, dishevelled hair, or a shaven head, was a sign that its wearer was set apart from the community.
  - In Nu 5:18 loosed hair is a sign of a woman who has come under suspicion of having become 'unclean' by committing adultery and thus repudiating her relationship to her husband.
  - In NT times the Jews were not permitted to execute an adulteress (as was commanded in the Mosaic law). Instead the woman had her head shaved and was expelled from the synagogue. Short / shorn hair was thus seen as a mark of public disgrace with overtones of immorality.

It is therefore more likely, as the NIV footnote suggests, that the issue at hand is not primarily the issue of weather to wear hats or not (but see v15), but hairstyles of men and women.

## WHY WAS IT AN ISSUE?

- Because gender distinctives had become an issue. Some were arguing that maintaining gender distinctives (particularly in terms here of hair style) was no longer necessary (v4, 5) now that they were Christian. The equal status men and women had in Christ - coupled perhaps with an understanding that in heaven there will be no giving and taking in marriage - had led some people (the 'libertarians' of ch 8 & 9?) to blur gender distinctive within the congregation, regarding such activity as a part of their new found freedom in Christ. Others (the 'weak' of ch 8 & 9?) were insisting that the differences not only be maintained but emphasised by making women wear a veil (v15).

(As 'man' and 'woman' can equally be translated 'husband' and 'wife' opinions vary as to whether Paul is primarily concerned about all male / female relationships or specifically that between husband and wife. The decision you come to will effect the breadth of the application.)

## HOW PAUL ADDRESSES IT

Paul demonstrates that both groups have got it wrong, arguing:

### FROM TRADITION (2,16)

- What he has to say is nothing new. Not only was it what he had taught them when he was with them previously (v5) but it was also in line with what both he and the other apostles taught in all the churches (cf 4:17).

### FROM CREATION 1: HEADSHIP (3-6)

- Reading these verses is confusing as sometimes the word 'head' is sometimes used to refer to the anatomical structure (4,5,7,10), sometimes it is used metaphorically (3) and sometimes it could mean either (4,5).
- Some argue that the head metaphor refers to 'source' - implying 'origin', as in 'the head of the river' - rather than 'head over' - with the attendant idea of 'authority over'. Although the word 'kephale' is used in both ways in the NT the latter is much more likely since:
  - i. wherever it is used (as here) within the context of the married relationship it carries with it the idea of 'authority' (cf Eph 1:22-23, 5:23). Only when used in other contexts within the NT does it carry the idea of source (cf Col 2:19, Eph 4:15).
  - ii. whenever Paul uses an argument from origin (as in 11:8) terms other than 'kephale' are used
  - iii. the parallelism of 11:3 falls down with 'source'. It is clear that the Son is under the Father's authority: He was obedient to the Father who sent Him, even unto death. But in what sense is God the 'source' of Christ? To suggest such is to deny the divinity of the preexistent Word.  
Intrinsic to any 'head over' is a hierarchy of authority: God to Christ, Christ to man, man to women and women to angels (cf 11:10).
- The argument is simple (if a perhaps a little foreign to our way of thinking). He argues that there is an intrinsic hierarchy within the nature of God (in the relationships within the Godhead between God and Christ) and also a hierarchy inherent to the way He made the world (in the relationships between Himself and his creation as well as within the creation itself). When men and women are gathered together to pray and prophesy the relationship hierarchy should not be blurred.

The view that men / husbands have authority over women / wives is often objected to on the basis that to maintain such a hierarchy of authority is.

i) to deny the equality men and women have in Christ (Gal 3:28-29). Paul clearly does not think so, for Christ is no less God for all His submission to the Father's authority; and to submit to a policeman's authority says nothing about his and your relative value. In different circumstances - for example when you referee a football match in which the policeman is playing - individual worth has not changed despite a change in the authority relationship.

ii) to ignore the fact that men are often incompetent in their job. But a relatively incompetent policeman nevertheless remains a policeman, even though he might benefit from help in doing his job

iii) to ignore how frequently that authority is abused. But the cure for a corrupt police force is getting rid of the corrupt policeman (or the corruption within the policeman), not abolition of the police.

## **FROM CREATION 2: IMAGE & GLORY (7-12)**

Mankind bears God's image as ruler over that which God has made. Man (as man and woman) both bears that image and share in that rule ( cf. 11:10; Gen 1:26, 28). And all believers are being renewed according to God's image (Col 3:10-11). So how are we to understand the inequality in Paul's word in 11:7?

- Paul's concern here is not to make a general statement of the relationship of mankind to creation, but of relationships between the sexes; men and women / husband and wife. Neither are autonomous (11-12). Man, in his authority relationship to his wife (as in 11:3), images the rule of God over creation and Christ over his church. (How is he to do that? see Eph 1:20-22, 5:22-23). Women is not called to image God or Christ in how she relates to her husband. Rather she is to image the response of the church to Christ. (How is she to do that? see Eph 5:22-23).
- 'Glory' here is that which points to the true reality of something. When in proper relationship to one another husband and wife reveal something about the relationship of God to his creation and man's place within it.
- This disparity between the sexes is seen to originate in the way God set things up in the first place (11:8-9), and as such transcends culture.

## **BECAUSE OF THE ANGELS**

Next in line in the hierarchy of God, Christ, man, women (11:3) is the rest of creation of which angels are the highest part. Long hair is a sign of woman's humanity and thus of her authority over the angels (cf 6:2a, 3).

## **THINK ABOUT IT!**

In the light of everything he has said can it be right that men appear (wear their hair) as women. No. Even when doing the same thing in the congregation - especially when doing the same thing - gender distinctive must be maintained (14-15a). But don't overdo it. A woman's hair is her covering / her glory. She needs no other (see above).

## **FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION ...**

What was the Corinthian problem being addressed in ch 11:2-16? What distinctives had to be maintained and why? To what extent is Paul's argument cultural?

How should we apply this teaching in St Helen's? What do we do that is at risk of blurring the distinctions that Paul says must be maintained?

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# **1 Corinthians 11:17-34**

## **AIM**

- To understand the importance of members of a congregation being in a right relationship with each other at the Lord's Supper.
- To see the possibility of and dangers in empty ritual.

## **CONTEXT**

- The Corinthian church was marked by division and disunity. There was party spirit (1:10-12; 3:3-5, 21; 4:18; 6:1-6) stemming from a misunderstanding of the nature of the gospel and Christian ministry; and disagreements over Paul and his authority based in large part on a misunderstanding of the nature of Christian freedom and what was and was not acceptable Christian behaviour (ch 8- 11:1, 11:2-16)). As Paul has addressed each issue in turn one of his chief concerns is to promote the unity that was theirs in the gospel (1:10, 9:16-17).

- When they gathered together they were maintaining gender distinctives when they prayed and prophesied. Paul has commended them for their visible expression of a biblical / creational order. However there were other - non biblical - ways they were seeking to maintain differences between themselves within the body of Christ, and Paul now goes on to condemn these in some of the strongest language of the whole letter (11:17ff).

Paul now goes on to address another manifestation of their disunity - how they went about taking the Lord's Supper.

## STRUCTURE

11:17-22	What they were doing: manifesting division /denying Christ's death
11:23-26	What they should be doing: expressing unity/ proclaiming Christ's death
11:27-32	The result of what they were doing : sin and judgment
11:28,33-34	The solution : Acknowledging by their actions the true nature of the assembly of God's people.

## WHAT THEY WERE DOING

Paul continues to address issues to do with what they should and should not be doing when they gather together as a body of believers (17, 18, 20, 33, 34).

They were coming together to eat the Lord's Supper to 'proclaim the Lord's death until he comes' (26). They thought that was what they were doing, but they weren't. For the way they went about things denied the actions themselves (20). Indeed since the meetings did more harm than good (17) it would have been better if they had not met in the first place!

Where were they going wrong?

- They were divided and hierarchical (18,21). In an echo of 1:12, 3:3ff etc and 4:18 some were considering themselves superior to others. With biting irony Paul condemns all such thought of superiority within the body of Christ (19).
- One group weren't waiting for others to eat. They put themselves first, binged on the food and wine, got drunk deprived others of food and drink (11:21-22).

The principal issue here is not the drunkenness and gluttony in itself (although these too should also be avoided, v22, 34) but what these actions revealed about their attitude to their fellow believers (22b). They did not consider themselves all equal before God. Some thought themselves worthy of greater honour (19) and were not concerned that fellow believers were being humiliated.

## THE RESULTS OF WHAT THEY WERE DOING

As a consequence of their actions they were:

- humiliating fellow believers - those who had nothing (22b)
- despising the people of God (22b)
- sinning against Christ by profaning His death and resurrection (27) and
- bringing judgment down upon themselves (such that some had become ill and others died, v29-30).

What was going on was the antithesis of the Lord's Supper. A corporate sharing of the food and wine, in manifesting their unity, should have proclaimed Christ's death (26, cf. 10:17) upon which all rely equally for membership of his body. The fact that they didn't all share in the meal proclaimed their disunity and contempt for Christ's death.

## THE SOLUTION

The Corinthians needed to:

1. understand that in sharing in the bread and the cup of the new covenant in the Lord's Supper they were both remembering Christ's death (24-25) and proclaiming His death on their behalf (26). They thus were acknowledging dependency on Christ and fellowship with Him *and with one another* (10:16-17).
2. understand that to take part in the meal in a way that denied that fundamental unity was to sin against both Christ (in his death, 'his body and blood' v27) and against his people ('his body' - 29) and bring judgment on themselves (29).

3. examine themselves in their relationship one with another (29). They needed to deal with the divisions amongst themselves. They needed to recognise the unity they had in Christ not only in theory but in practice, and conduct themselves at the Lord's Supper in way that made manifest that which they really were. Only then would they be celebrating the Lord's Supper in reality. Only then would they avoid condemning themselves (29. 31).

The out workings of these principles for them would be to:

- a) First eat at home, so that when they come to the Lord's supper they are not concerned with refuelling but with expressing visibly unity that they have in Christ.
- b) Let others go first during the meal (33).

## **SICKNESS & SIN (30-31)**

Failure to acknowledge the equality before God of His people and express the unity of the people of God at the Lord's Supper had led to sickness and death at Corinth (29-30). These verses seem to challenge the theology of suffering and sickness taught elsewhere in scripture (eg Job). It is worth saying however:

- that to say that there isn't *necessarily* a direct link between specific individual sin and individual suffering (as in Job) isn't to say that there can *never* be such a link (29-30).
- that just because such a link *can* exist is not to say that it *necessarily* does.

Hence any individual case of sickness and death will always be ambiguous. This should caution us (indeed must prevent us) from making judgments about any individual since, by the very nature of things, it is impossible to do so with any certainty; and to do so erroneously has potentially disastrous pastoral consequences.

Paul's purpose here is not to encourage any of the Corinthians who may be unwell to look within for some unrepented sin. Nor even, when coming to the Lord's Supper to reflect primarily on every aspect of their sinfulness; it is rather to encourage them to examine themselves in terms of their relationships within the assembly of believers, the body of Christ for whom Christ died. It is to challenge the congregation as a whole (albeit by challenging individuals within the congregation) to regard one another appropriately; to see themselves as members together of Christ's body and to treat one another as befits such a status.

## **THINKING IT THROUGH ...**

- Does the way we have the Lord's Supper at St Helen's visibly demonstrate our unity with Christ and with one another? In what ways might we be in any danger of repeating the Corinthian error?
- What are the dangers in celebrating the Lord's Supper? How can we avoid them?

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# **1 Corinthians 12:1-11**

## **AIM**

To understand the distinguishing mark of spiritual people.

To understand the origin, purpose and distribution of God's gifts to His church

## **CONTEXT**

- Although often seen as the beginning of a new self-contained section of the letter dealing with spiritual gifts (12:1-14:40) these chapters continue many themes already seen - the nature of the church; unity and division within the congregation; knowledge and love; gifts; the behaviour of God's people when gathered together. Paul has already acknowledged the tremendous gifts of the Corinthians (1:4-9). Now he needs them to get their thinking straight about them.
- As in other areas, when it came to spiritual gifts the Corinthians were thinking like children (14:20 cf.3:1). As with many of those

already discussed (cf ch 7, 8-10, 11) the issue threatened to / was dividing the church. Paul's response to muddled thinking is sustained teaching. In an extended discourse on spiritual gifts (ch 12-14) he addresses the origin of such gifts, their purpose, their significance (or lack of significance), their relative importance and how some of them are to be exercised within the congregation.

- Paul has already distinguished in his letter between differences between people that matter, and differences that don't; those that have an eternal consequence (cf.2:6-16) and those that from the perspective of eternity are an irrelevance (eg cf ch 7). This perspective - one that evaluates the here and now in the light of the end - continues to pervade these chapters (cf esp ch 13).

## STRUCTURE

12:1	Setting the agenda: What it means to be spiritual
12:2-3	A difference that matters
12:4-11	Differences that don't

## THE AGENDA IS SET (12:1)

'Spiritual gifts' (pneumatikon) in 12:1 is a different word in the Greek to that in 12:4 (charisma). It has a more general reference to 'spiritual things' or 'spiritual people'.

As previously (7:1, 25; 8:1) Paul is responding to a question raised by the Corinthians in their letter to him, the precise nature of which can only be surmised from a look at his answer. In 12-14 we shall see that it is likely that the question was along the lines of "What was the mark of the really spiritual person?" or 'Is it not true / surely it cannot be true that certain spiritual manifestations are evidences of truly spiritual people?'

In all that follows (ch 12-14) it is clear that *both* Paul and the Corinthians not only acknowledge different gifts within the congregation but also the superiority of some over others (12:31, 14:1). However it is also clear that the Corinthians (or at least some of them) disagree with Paul over both the purpose of the gifts and their significance.

## THE DIFFERENCE THAT MATTERS (12:2-3)

As elsewhere in the letter Paul divides humankind into two groups (cf 2:12-15): those who acknowledge Jesus as Lord (12:3) and those who worship idols (12:2). It is impossible to do both (10:21, 12:3). Paul reminds them that they have only become what they are - Christians - as a result of the Spirit's work (12:2), for

- the mark of the 'spiritual person' is confession of Christ as Lord.
- only the 'spiritual person' can confess Christ as Lord.

The difference between those who have the Holy Spirit and those who do not is allegiance to Christ.

## DIVERSITY WITHIN UNITY (12:4-6)

Confession of Christ, prompted by the Holy Spirit, is the basis of a Christian unity. However this does not mean that there are no distinctions between Christians and their gifts. As there is diversity within the unity of God (4-6) so also there is diversity within the body of His church.

- The parallelism of 12:4-6 and overlap of the terms 'gifts' (4), 'service' ((5) and 'workings' (6) should caution us against having too narrowly defined category of 'charisma' / gift.
- The term 'different kind' carries with it the idea of 'distributions', emphasising that in the giving of 'gifts' / 'services' / 'workings' it is God who is at work achieving all that He purposes (7, 8, 11).

## INDIFFERENT DIFFERENCES (12:4-11)

Some things about spiritual gifts are clear from these verses:

- **Who gives them.**  
The gifting of God's people is God's work. He gives gifts as He determines (7, 8, 11). He does it by His Spirit and the same Spirit is at work in distributing all His gifts (4, 11).
- **Why they are given.**  
A mark of Corinthian immaturity was an individualism that underplayed the value and significance of the congregation as a whole (1:10-12; 3:1-4; 14:20) and (as we will see, 12:21ff, 14:1ff) overplayed the significance of some gifts over others. At the beginning of the letter Paul had thanked God that the congregation(s) lacked nothing as they waited for Christ's return (1:7) and reminded them of the privileged status of the assembly of God's people (3:17-17). Here Paul reminds anyone tempted to overestimate the

significance of any individual gift (or any individual with that gift) that God has given them for the common good (7): He has distributed gifts as He sees fit not for personal aggrandisement but for the common good.

- **Who receives them.**  
'Each one' (7, 11) has received a manifestation of the Spirit (7) / gift (4). Every Christian has received a 'spiritual gift' from God. No one is without, and hence no-one is unable to contribute to the good of the congregation.
- **What determines who receives which gift.**  
Which gift/s any individual receives is determined by God (11). He does not limit his gifts to one per person - not least because everyone is either married or single (cf 7: 7).
- **The list in 12:7-11 is not exhaustive.**  
This is clear not only from this chapter (12:7-11, 28-31), but the wider context of 1 Corinthians (ch 7).

However other things are less clear - not least what is precisely meant by each gift. Although much ink has been spilt over what each might be little, can be determined with certainty from the text of 1 Corinthians itself: the 'gift of faith' (9), limited as it each to only some believers, must be different from the faith that all Christians have in Christ; there are more than one 'gift' of healing (9), and Paul's use of 'knowledge' and 'wisdom' in ch 1-2 should probably inform any consideration of 12:8. However the lack of this detail is significant for it underlines Paul's purpose, which is to show, contrary to what the Corinthians seem to be thinking, how unimportant differences in giftings are. What is significant, what marks someone out as spiritual, is not what gift they might have been given but whether or not they live in acknowledgment of the Lordship of Christ.

All gifts are given by God through the work of His Spirit to all of His people as He sees fit for their good, so that, as a congregation, they lack nothing they need to keep going to the end.

## THINKING IT THROUGH ...

What might be the consequences for an individual / a congregation of regarding any of God's gifts as a mark of superior spirituality?

How do you tend to rank spiritual gifts? What consequences does this have for your attitude to fellow believers?

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# 1 Corinthians 12:12-30

## AIM

- To understand the basis of Christian unity.
- To understand the enormous diversity of giftings within a congregation and the importance of correctly valuing each one.

## CONTEXT

- Paul is addressing a gifted (1:5-7) but arrogant (1:12, 3:3-4, 3:21, 4:7, 4:18, 5:1, 5:6) and divided church (1:10, 3:3-4, 6:6, 11:17ff). In chapter 12-14 he deals again with issues that were threatening the unity of the church (12:14-26) and its witness to the world (14:20-25).
- There was confusion at Corinth over what it meant to be 'spiritual', and therefore of the relative significance of the different gifts that God had given them. It will become clear (ch 14) that the specific point of contention was over the gift of tongues and its relative importance to that of prophecy. Before addressing this Paul first discusses the nature and purpose of spiritual gifts in general (ch 12) and the relative insignificance of *any* of them (ch 13).
- Every believer is 'spiritual' and God has given gifts to each believer as He has determined for their common good (12:3, 7, 11). As he drives these points home Paul continues to express his high view of, and concern for, the corporate body of believers (12:14-27, cf. 1:4-9, 3:16-17, 5:7, 8:9-13, 10:27-28, 11:33).

## STRUCTURE

12:12-13 The experience that unites.



12:14-31 Problems that result from a wrong view of spiritual gifts and their significance.

12:27-30 Unity and diversity within the congregation.

## **A COMMON EXPERIENCE (12-13)**

The church is made up of diverse people with different gifts (12:7-11). its unity (12) is a consequence of a shared experience of all its members (13). But what is this experience?

Amongst those most commonly suggested ones are:

- i. Water baptism (13a) and the Lord's Supper (13b). However if water baptism was meant why does Paul use the term 'baptism by one Spirit' (13a). And no where else in the NT is drinking 'the new covenant in my blood' (11:25) likened to drinking 'the one Spirit' (13b). Even more significantly, elsewhere in the NT ritual observance, such that there is, is always an expression of the unity that believers already have, never the cause for it.
- ii. A 'second blessing' post-conversion experience of the Spirit given to some but not others. However the 'we .. all' of v13 embraces all believers, and any such reading seems alien to the flow of the argument which is to affirm the incorporation of *all* believers into one body on the basis of a *shared* experience (whatever their gifts).
- iii. Conversion. Here the two metaphors of v13 are seen to describe the common experience of all believers in which they are enabled by the Spirit to confess Christ as Lord (12:3). It is this that marks out the believer from non-believer (2:12-14) and that forms them - however varied they are (13) - into one body.

Diverse gifts have been given to the church for its good (12:1-11) because it made up many different parts all of which contribute to the whole. As he elaborates on the metaphor (14-26) Paul's main concern is not their unity but the diversity within it.

## **A DIVERSITY OF GIFTS (12:14-31)**

The body of Christ Paul has in view throughout these chapters is the the local congregation (12:27, cf 1:2, 3:16, 12:12).

All gifts are given by God to his people as He sees fit for their good. Division is inevitable if any one particular gift is considered *the* mark of spiritual maturity. The Corinthians were making this mistake (cf ch 14) with the result that those with other gifts were tempted to feel second class citizens (14-20), 'outsiders'. In contrast those with the particular gift were inclined to view themselves as superior, as 'insiders', and prone to arrogance (21-26).

### **14-20 The 'outsiders' lament**

Jealousy, discontent, self-pity and inactivity are dangers facing those who see themselves as having received less valuable gifts. Whether or not some gifts are to be more sort after than others those who see themselves as inferior need to realise that:

- i. Their gift(s) and the contributions they can thus make to church life are as important and necessary as everyone else's if the church is going to function as God intended (17)
- ii The very nature of the church demands that not everyone is the same (14). Their difference doesn't make them an unwanted 'outsider'. Rather it makes them a much needed insider (15-17)
- iii. To wallow in self-pity, to be discontented, is to challenge the sovereign goodness of God (18).

### **21-26 The 'insiders' conceit**

If those without highly prized gifts are tempted to feel unwanted and unneeded, those who have received them can reinforce such a self-perception by being arrogant and asserting their (perceived) independence (21). It is all too easy for them to fall into the error of dismissing others as unnecessary and unimportant.

They need to realise:

- i. that all members of the body are indispensable if it is to function as God intended (22,18) no matter what one might think (23).
- ii. that God has arranged it this way so that everyone should have equal concern one for another and that there be no division within the congregation (25).

Any individual Christian's concern should not be for his own esteem but for the brother who is usually given less regard. If any suffer, all suffer. If any is honoured, all rejoice (26).

## UNITY AND DIVERSITY

(27-30)

Each individual congregation is not *part of* the church of God, but *the* church of God in any place (1:2). The local congregation is the body of Christ (27). This only serves to underline the rich diversity of gifts that God has given to each congregation for their common good.

Everyone in the congregation is a part of the body of Christ (27) and God has given gifts to everyone as He has chosen (28). No one has all of the gifts (29-30). This underlines the interdependence of all believers, with the implication that to make any one gift *the* standard by which an individual's 'spirituality' is measured is a mark not of maturity but childishness.

## THINKING IT THROUGH ...

1. Which gifts do we most value as a congregation? What, according to these verses are the likely consequences? How can we avoid them? Is the fact that we value such gifts a sign of our maturity or immaturity as a congregation?
2. What might the consequences be of making something other than conversion and the confession of the Lordship of Christ the basis of congregational unity.

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# 1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13

## AIM

- To understand the wider context within which any debate about spiritual gifts must be carried out.
- To begin to think through how this might effect how we exercise our gifts.

## CONTEXT

- The call in 12:31 to 'eagerly desire' spiritual gifts is picked up and developed in 14:1ff. As a result ch 13 might be seen as something of a digression, and is often taught with little regard to its original context. However it is key to the argument of ch 12-14 in the same way that ch 9 was to ch 8-10.
- Paul continues to address a divided (1:10, 3:3-4, 6:6, 11:17ff) and arrogant church (1:12, 3:3-4, 3:21, 4:7, 4:18, 5:1, 5:6) in which concern for individual prowess is destroying congregational relationships (cf 8:1ff). He has already shown how concern for another's good should determine individual actions (ch 9, 10:28-11:1) and will go on to argue that the same principle applies to the exercising of spiritual gifts (14:1-19).  
In ch 9 Paul argued that the way of love ('other person centeredness') was the principle that must determine an individual's actions. Rights and freedoms are to be given up for the sake of others that they may be saved. In ch 13 he returns to consider this 'other person centeredness' (the most excellent way 12:31) in the context of 'spiritual gifts' and will go on to show (ch 14) how to apply this so that they are both viewed and exercised appropriately.

## ARGUMENT

- 12:31a            Desire the greater gifts, but ...
- 12:31b - 13:13    understand that which is even greater so that you view everything in the right perspective...  
14:1ff            then use this perspective to judge between prophecy and tongues and how and when they are to be exercised.

## DESIRE THE GREATER GIFTS (12:31a)

Paul has argued for the interdependency of all spiritual gifts. He has insisted that each individual's contribution to congregational life is equally important and affirmed that it is God who determines who receives which gifts (12:12-30).

However in 12:31 he

- adds that some gifts are greater than others
- and encourages the Corinthians to desire the greater ones.

How, in view of what he has said so far can one be greater than another? And which are the greater ones? Paul hasn't said yet (although there are hints in 12:7) as before he addresses these questions (ch 14) the Corinthians first need to get *all* spiritual gifts in the right perspective (ch 13).

It is clear however that Paul's understanding of the sovereignty of God isn't such as to deny human responsibility. The greater spiritual gifts - like salvation itself - are to be sought after even though the receiving them depends ultimately on God and his purposes.

## **IT'S NOT WHAT YOU DO BUT THE WAY THAT YOU DO IT - THAT'S WHAT REALLY COUNTS** **(12:31b-13:3)**

It is love, not gifts that matter. Whatever one's gifts and however exalted the expression of them - be they tongues (1), prophecy (2), faith (2) extraordinary philanthropy and social concern (3) or even martyrdom (3) - they can be exercised without love. And if they are exercised without love they are nothing. More than that, the *individuals concerned* are nothing (1, 2)

Appearances can be deceptive (12:31b-13:3). Paul says to those who think that because they speak in tongues / exercise the gift of prophecy / do works of philanthropy / even offer themselves in martyrdom they are spiritual and prove their large endowment from the Holy Spirit: think again. 'You remain spiritually bankrupt, a spiritual nothing, if love does not characterise your exercising of whatever grace-gift God has assigned you.' (Carson)

Paul is not deprecating gifts per se. Rather he insisting that none of them are of any use or witness to the work of God's Spirit unless they way they are exercised is marked by love. It is not what one does but why and how one does it that matters.

Before the Corinthians start scrambling after this or that gift they need to understand the overarching importance of love, that supreme fruit of the Spirit that ought to characterise every person who has been baptised in the Spirit (12:13), that characteristic in which the individual actions are motivated by what is best for others; in which the ultimate good of the other person is the determining principal (cf ch 9:15-23, 10:33b-11:1). It is a way of life, without this way of relating to one another *all* gifts are utterly worthless.

## **SOME CORINTHIAN CHARACTERISTICS? (13:4-7)**

In this list of 15 of love's distinctives Paul is not defining love so much as describing what it looks like. And he does so in a way that applies itself directly to the situation in Corinth.

Love does not envy (13:4)	but the Corinthians did (3:3)
Love does not boast (13:4)	but the Corinthians did (4:7, 18 etc)
Love is not proud (13:4)	but the Corinthians were (4:6, 18, 19; 5:2)
Love is not unseemly (13:5)	but the Corinthians were (11:20-21, 14:40)
Love is not self-seeking (13:5)	but the Corinthians were (1:12, 3:3-4, 10:24)
Love does not delight in evil (13:6)	but the Corinthians did (5:1-2, 10:21-22)
Love is not easily angered, nor does it keep record of wrongs (13:5)	but Corinthians were & did (6:1-8)

They were being self-centered. They were not being patient with one another or forbearing one another (13:4) but were exhibiting a lovelessness gave the lie to all their claims to lofty spirituality.

The love that Paul reminds the Corinthians is not sentimental but behavioural; it is not about feelings, but about actions. Paul doesn't argue that the Corinthians must feel anything about each other in order to act in such a way, nor necessarily that they must want to do so. He simply insists that love for one another will show itself in such conduct, one that persists despite the inevitable disappointments and knocks along the way (13:7).

## **GIFTS v LOVE (13:8-13)**

The contrast here is again between love and spiritual gifts (cf 13:1-3). Love is permanent (8, 13). Tongues, prophecy and knowledge (8,9,12) are temporary (8, 10). 'Now', at the time that Paul is writing, they all exist. But 'then' (12) - when maturity arrives (11), when 'perfection comes' (10) - they 'will cease' (8), 'be stilled' (8), 'pass away' (8).

All this begs two questions: When does perfection come, and in what does it consist? Amongst the most frequently given suggestions are:

- 'Perfection' refers to Christian maturity. Drawing heavily from 13:11 (cf 3:1, 14:20) the argument is that far from being signs of spiritual maturity 'tongues prophecy and knowledge' are a sign of individual (and some also argue, corporate) immaturity. The implication is that those who involve themselves in such things should all grow up and leave such childish behaviour behind. However against this is the fact that Paul's application of ch 13 in ch 14 argues not for the abandoning such gifts but exercising them as the principle of love demands.
- 'Perfection' refers to the completion of the NT canon. Commonly taken by those who have a high view of the authority and sufficiency of scripture and who fear that continuing prophecy undermines both of these, 'perfection' is understood to refer to

the completeness of God's revelation to humankind.

However i) It is highly debatable that Paul held to the progressive nature of God's self-revelation in the NT that such an understanding implies. ii) There is nothing in the context that gives us reason to think that Paul would have expected the Corinthians to have understood 'perfection' to have referred to completion of the canon. iii) 12b argues for the Christian's knowledge to be in some sense comparable with God's present knowledge of them. It is difficult to see how such a situation comes about with the completion of the NT canon.

- 'Perfection' refers to Christ's return. This would make more sense of 12a and of the theophany implied in 12b. Paul would be continuing to challenge Corinthian understanding of God's timetable of salvation (4:8-13) and particularly any understanding that exercising such gifts was a mark of 'having arrived'.

However the precise timing is irrelevant to Paul's main point here, and focusing on the 'when' of the 'then' risks missing it. Paul is concerned not so much as to tell them *when* such gifts stop but simply that they will. Gifts cease. Love doesn't. This shows that it is love that really matters, so any discussion of gifts must be seen within that context. In ch 14, when Paul gets at last to answer the Corinthians questions about tongues and prophecy it is this principle of love, of 'other person centeredness' that controls all he has to say, and should be controlling all that they do.

## THINKING IT THROUGH ...

What are the dangers in exercising spiritual gifts? How do we risk repeating the Corinthian errors?

How might the principle of love effect how you exercise your gifts for the common good?

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# 1 Corinthians 14:1-19

## AIM

- To understand what determines the relative importance of tongues and prophecy and its implications of this for a congregation.
- To begin to think through how to ensure that everything we do in our meetings is intelligible in order that everyone is built up in the faith.

## CONTEXT

- 13:4-7 has made clear that although the Corinthians thought themselves mature and that they had 'arrived' (4:8ff) they hadn't. Paul will now go on to apply the criteria of maturity - the 'way of love' - to how they should be exercising the gifts of tongues and prophecy (14:1ff).
- The discussion about spiritual gifts and the superiority of one over another (12:13, 14:1ff) needs to be understood against the backdrop of 12-13:
  - that the exercising of any gift without love is both vacuous and futile (13:1-3).
  - that the purpose for which all gifts have been given is the building up of the congregation.

## ARGUMENT

1. Uninterpreted 'tongues' are unintelligible and therefore only of benefit to the individual concerned. 'Prophecy' is intelligible to all and therefore everyone benefits from hearing it.
2. This difference is what makes 'prophecy' greater than 'tongues'.
3. That tongues are of limited corporate benefit needs to be taken into account when Christians meet together.

## TONGUES v PROPHECY

After the lists of spiritual gifts in 12:8-10 and 12:28-30 Paul limits his discussion in ch 14 to 'tongues' and 'prophecy'. It is likely therefore that this was where the Corinthian confusion lay. It is possible that they had come to value more sensational tongue speaking

over the more prosaic prophecy, and even possible that they had, on the basis of the tongue speaking on the day of Pentecost and the promise of Joel (Acts 2:17), come to equate the two (Acts 2:17).

Whatever the reasons behind it there was disagreement and division in the congregation over the exercising of the gift of tongues. Some were keen to exercise it when they met together (2, 6, 16, 26-28). Others were keen to forbid it all together (cf. 14:39).

Paul responds by arguing that tongues and prophecy are different, that prophecy is superior to tongues and that 'following the way of love' (ch 13) places constraints on how they are to be exercised.

## A DIFFERENCE IN FUNCTION

- Tongues are unintelligible unless interpreted, even to the speaker (2, 5, 13) and address God rather than the congregation (2). The only person to be built up by uninterpreted tongues is the speaker. Speaking or praying in tongues is therefore a selfish thing to do (14, 13).
- In contrast prophecy is understood by others and is directed towards them to build them up in the faith (3,4). It is therefore at root 'other person centred'.

## A DIFFERENCE IN STATUS

Their different effects determine their relative status. Uninterpreted tongues only builds up the speaker (14:4). Prophecy builds up others (14:3-4). When assessed by the criteria of ch 13 the 'other person centeredness' of prophecy makes it greater, and therefore more eagerly to be desired (14:1, cf 12:31).

(That is not to say that prophecy (whatever it is - see notes on 14:20-39 for fuller discussion) is necessarily the greatest of the gifts, but simply to say that it is greater than (uninterpreted) tongues for the reason stated.)

## INTELLIGIBILITY IS ALL

The Corinthian meetings had become marked by unintelligibility (9, 12). Using three illustrations (7, 8, 10) - or two illustrations followed by a summary statement if 'speaking in tongues' means speaking in a foreign human language (see discussion below) - Paul emphasises the importance of intelligibility in all that is said. Only by understanding what is said are those who are present edified.

If a tongue speaker is not interpreted those who don't understand receive no benefit (16-17). Those who pray in tongues ('pray with their spirit' - 14a, 15a, 15c) must also pray that they are able interpret what they say ('pray with their mind' - 13, 14b, 15b, 15d) so that all may benefit (16-17).

## PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Paul does not forbid exercising the gift of tongues (cf 14:39). Indeed he wouldn't object to their all speaking in tongues (5) (which implies, or course, that some of them didn't - 12:30). His objection is not to tongue speaking per se but rather to too much *public* tongue speaking stemming from a false estimation of its importance.

His concern is for the building up of the people of God. Intelligibility is the key, for only that which is intelligible edifies (5, 6). That is why he would rather have them all prophesy than speak in tongues (5). Since uninterpreted tongues cannot do that they have no place in a public meeting (14:26b, 28). Indeed the place of even interpreted tongues is extremely limited (4:27) and for Paul almost ruled out (4:19).

Thus their different functions determine how they are to be exercised. Prophecy in public. Tongue speaking primarily in private (18-19). (A practice for which 14:18 provides a robust defence.)

## BUT WHAT ARE THESE 'TONGUES' ANYWAY?

Opinions over what Paul means by to 'speak in a tongue' (2) are legion but fall into two broad categories:

- A. Those that understand him to be referring to unlearned human languages - xenoglossia. The speaker may be able to understand or may need someone else to translate for them (14:5, 13).
- B. Those that understand him to be referring to verbal forms that cannot be identified with any human language but that nevertheless have meaning - glossolalia. Interpretation is required (14:5, 13) either by the speaker or someone else in the congregation.

Most if not all claims to speaking tongues today is to glossolalia. Although most concede that they are not human languages they nevertheless see themselves as speaking real languages, possibly even those of angels (13:1).

Deciding what exactly Paul is referring to "is an extraordinarily difficult question to answer convincingly on either side" (Carson, Showing the Spirit, p79). Relevant observations and questions include:

- 1 Corinthians 14 and Acts (principally ch 2) are the only NT references to speaking in tongues (other than one verse in the disputed

longer ending of Mark's gospel that in any case adds little to the debate). Any decision therefore must come from weighing these passages. Most of those who see glossolalia in ch 14 admit that xenoglossia is in view in Acts 2. On what basis can it be concluded that something different is in view in 1 Corinthians?

- The Greek word translated 'tongue' in 14:5, 6, 18, 22, 23 & 39 is the same word translated as 'language' in 14:10 where it clearly refers to an unknown human language. On what basis can it be concluded that something else is meant when it is used elsewhere?
- The more usual rendering of the Greek word 'interpret' (14:5,13) is 'translate'. Use of either demands that what is said is a language with cognitive content. But what is the basis for choosing the less common translation with the resulting implication that a non-human language is in view?
- 13:1-3 argues for the uselessness of any spiritual gift exercised without love. Paul uses hyperbole to make his point. Does 13:1 allude to their speaking in the tongues of angels, or simply that *even if they were* to speak such languages it would be of no significance if they did so without love?
- 128:11-12 refers foreign human languages, those of invading Assyrian soldiers. On what basis can it be claimed that Paul uses it to refer to something different when he illustrates the purpose of tongues in 14:21-22.
- Paul says 'no-one understands' the tongue speaker unless they are enabled to interpret the tongue (14:2). To what extent is it valid to limit 'no-one' to 'no-one who doesn't speak the human language the tongue speaker is using'?

Although what 'tongue speaking' refers to is of great contemporary interest it is, in many ways, tangential to Paul's main point (for the Corinthians would have known what he was referring to). Our concern is to know what 'speaking in tongues' refers to so that we can work out how to exercise the gift when we meet together. In contrast Paul's concern in ch 14 is that *we don't* exercise the gift when we meet together (14:19). Paul's assertion that even though he spoke in tongues more than any of them he would (effectively) never speak in tongues in church comes as close to banning the practice as is possible without actually doing so (14:19, 39).

'Tongues' (whatever they are) need to be interpreted to build people up. 'Prophecy' doesn't. Given that not everyone in a congregation can understand what is being said when someone speaks in a tongue Paul would prefer that it wasn't spoken in the first place.

## THINKING IT THROUGH ...

- When might it be better to limit the exercising of my gifts so that others might be built up?
- How we can better build one another up in our meetings by ensuring that all we do in our church meeting is readily intelligible.

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# 1 Corinthians 14:20-40

## AIM

- To think through how to ensure intelligibility and accountability in our congregations.
- To think what it will mean for us to take Paul's teaching on board and understand the dangers of not doing so.

## CONTEXT

- Paul has established the principles that should determine the exercising of spiritual gifts (ch 12-13) and then considered their implications for how the Corinthians should exercise the gifts of tongues and prophecy when they meet together. (How they treat one another when they meet has been one of the themes of the letter from ch 11:2). Since when they meet their concern should be for one another's good (10:33, 13:4-7) each person's gifts should be directed to building others up in the faith (14:3, 5, 12, 19).
- There was confusion at Corinth as to the place speaking in tongues and prophecy should have in their meetings. The Corinthians appeared to be valuing tongues more than prophecy - perhaps even equating the two. Paul has argued that:
  - i. they are different gifts
  - ii. that prophecy was to be preferred to tongues in public meetings as, unlike tongues, it was understood by everyone and therefore, in contrast to tongues, would benefit everyone.
- Paul continues to be concerned
  - i. that they understand the differences between tongues and prophecy
  - ii. that their meetings are conducted appropriately.

## STRUCTURE

14:20-25 Relation of tongues and prophecies to unbelievers

- 14:26-36 Ensuring edification in public meetings:
- i. with tongue speaking (27-28)
  - ii. with prophecy (29-35)

14:37-38 A serious warning

14:39-40 Summary

## **A CALL TO MATURITY (20)**

The Corinthians considered themselves mature. Paul regards them somewhat differently (cf 3:2, 14:4-7) and their muddle over tongues and prophecy reveals how immature they are (14:20).

At least some of them viewed a particular spiritual experience, tongue speaking, as the hallmark of maturity. They were pursuing this without consideration of the constraints of love that demanded that they should pursue that which builds up others. Paul wants then to get their thinking straight.

## **SIGNS FOR UNBELIEVERS (21-25)**

Tongues

In Isaiah 28:9-13 the prophet warns ancient Israel that since they refused to repent when God spoke clearly to them He would bring a foreign army (the Assyrian army) against them in judgment. Hearing the foreign languages of these troops in the promised land would be a sign to them that God was against them (cf. Deut 28:49-50).

Paul appeals to these events (21) to show that although tongues speaking was a sign - as they thought - it was not - as they thought - a sign of spiritual maturity for believers. Nor, as they might have thought and is sometimes argued today, was it even a sign to unbelievers of God's powerful presence amongst them. Although it was a sign for unbelievers (22) it was not a 'positive' one. Rather it was a sign of God's commitment to bring judgment on those who refuse to repent.

Prophecy

When God speaks through strange tongues and the lips of foreigners to unbelievers it does not convey meaning (23) unless it is interpreted. In contrast prophecy does (24); building up and encouraging believers and can be used by God to bring the 'not yet' believer to repentance and worship (24-25). Intelligibility is the key issue, both for believers (cf 14:2-19) and unbelievers (24).

## **ENSURING EDIFICATION (26-36)**

The many conflicts and divisions at Corinth meant that their meetings were fraught with difficulties. Since 11:1 Paul has established several principles that should govern how they conduct themselves when they meet, namely that

- they should be motivated by a concern for others rather than self (11:33, 13:1-13)
- they should have edification of one another in view (14:2-19)
- everything should be intelligible - to all believers (14:2-19) as well as unbelievers (14:24)
- that they conduct themselves in a way that doesn't undermine male / female relationships as established by God's activity in creation (cf 11:2-16).

He now applies these principles to the issue of how the gifts of tongues and prophecy are to be exercised at their meetings, and sets limit so that order is maintained (33).

### **WITH RESPECT TO TONGUES:**

Paul imposes three limitations on tongue speaking in the congregational setting:

- there must be an interpreter present (although the issue of how to establish this is not addressed). (27,28)
- only one tongue speaker may speak at a time (27)
- only two - or at most three - may speak in turn (27)

### **WITH RESPECT TO PROPHECY**

Paul imposes similar limitations:

- only one prophet may speak at a time (30)
- only three at the most may speak (29)
- the prophecy needs to be weighed (29)

In both cases the aim is to instruct and encourage the congregation (26, 31). In neither case does the work of the Holy Spirit mean the speaker loses control of what they are doing (28, 30, 32, cf 33).

### **WITH RESPECT TO THE WEIGHING OF PROPHECIES**

Prophecies, though 'revelatory' (30), needed to be evaluated (29). Paul places two restrictions on how this is to be done:

- Not by an elite group of prophets (29):  
The 'others' in v 30 refers most naturally in the Greek to the congregation as a whole rather than any elite group within it (which would be in accord with that taught elsewhere (1 Thess 5:21, 1 John 4:1-6). Although the specific gift of 'distinguishing between spirits' (12:10) is sometimes equated with the weighing of Christian prophecy there is nothing in the NT to suggest that such an identification is appropriate.
- Not by women publicly (33b-36):

These verses are often regarded as problematic as at first glance they seem to place an absolute prohibition on women speaking in a congregational setting thus contradicting 11:2-16, verses that assume that both men and women were addressing the congregation by laying down instructions about how they are to do it. However the problem disappears when it is realised that it is within the specific context of the *public weighing of prophecies* that silence is demanded.

Arguing as he has already (34c, cf 11:8,9) from God's activity in creation (Gen 2:20b-24) Paul asserts that since man was made first, and that woman was made for man, a pattern has been laid down regarding their relationship. One aspect of this is that woman is to be subject to man - or at least wife to her husband. This is to be manifest in the congregation by:

- i. appropriate dress / hairstyle (11"2-16) and
- ii. women not being involved in the public weighing of prophecy

The 'creation order' could not be preserved once women become involved in the public weighing of a male prophet. The first man/ husband to utter a prophecy of dubious, or at least mixed, quality could precipitate the problem. The public challenging of it by his wife / women in the congregation would challenge this relationship (as would appearance that blurs gender differences - cf 11:2-16). Women must therefore, in this context, remain silent (34, 35). (This does not mean of course that they should not question and learn (35).) For the Corinthians not to submit to such restrictions would be to set themselves apart from the other churches (33b) and pit themselves against the scriptures (36).

## **A SERIOUS WARNING (36-39)**

The word translated 'spiritually gifted' (37) is the same as that for the 'spiritual person' in 12:1. Hence in these verses Paul makes acceptance of what he said not only the mark of a prophet but the mark of the 'spiritual person', of a Christian (12:1-3). The foundational test therefore of the Spirit filled person is their acceptance of the apostles writings as 'the command of the Lord' (37).

The application here is even wider than the immediate issue of women weighing prophecies, for 'what I am writing' (37) is plural - 'the matters about which I am writing'. Paul therefore has in view not only the immediately preceding instructions about women's silence but everything from 12:1, and arguably the whole letter. If the Corinthians ignored what he had to say they risked being ignored by God (38). 'The Corinthians may pursue their own self-interested definitions of what is spiritual and run the risk of being ignored by God; or they may recognise afresh that their confession of Jesus as Lord is not only the significant criterion of the Spirit's presence (12:1-3) but something that can be tested by enthusiastic obedience to the Lord's commands mediated through his apostle' (Carson, *Showing the Spirit* p134).

## **BUT WHAT ARE THESE 'PROPHECIES' ANYWAY?**

Options vary from 'teaching God's word' to 'the reception and subsequent transmission of spontaneous, divinely originating revelation'. Ch 14 doesn't tell us what prophecy is, only what it does (3). It is notable however that:

- i. unlike those of the OT prophets, rejection of whose words was a rejection of God Himself, the words of the Corinthian prophets had to be evaluated
- ii. although 'revelatory' (30) Paul places the authority of Christian prophets under his own (37-38). (For further discussion of prophecy and prophets in the NT see Carson p91-100.)

## **THINKING IT THROUGH ...**

- How should we be fulfilling our responsibility to evaluate what we are being taught?
- How should you / should we as a congregation react if someone began to pray in tongues during a Sunday service?

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# **1 Corinthians 15:1-19**

## **AIM**

- To understand the centrality of Christ's bodily resurrection, and ours, to the gospel and begin to work out what it might mean to take this fully on board.

## **CONTEXT**

- From the start of the letter Paul has addressed many things that threatened the church. If they persisted in ignoring what he had to say - about their disunity and party spirit; the true nature and power of the gospel; the nature of genuine Christian leadership; the extent and limits of Christian freedom; and the nature of the church and Christian maturity, and continued to tolerate immorality and disunity within the congregation - they risked being ignored by God Himself (14:37-38).



- Paul has encouraged them to reevaluate all these areas in the light of the gospel that he had brought them (1:6, 2:1-5, 4:15-16). He has done so in a way that has revealed errors in their thinking and encouraged them to repent of them. He has also answered his critics and reestablished his authority and his gospel amongst those who were beginning moving away from both (4:14-21, 9:1-24, 14:37). However there is one further issue that he must address.

## OVERALL ARGUMENT

Some amongst them were denying the future bodily resurrection of the dead (5:12), and as a result some were being led astray (15:33), moving away from the faith (15:58). But a believer's bodily resurrection was at the heart of Paul's gospel (15:13, 21-22), as was Christ's (15:3-5). His response is simple. 'Given that you, together with all other churches everywhere, believed in the bodily resurrection of Christ (12, cf 1-2, 11) how is it that you are now denying the future bodily resurrection of believers?'

There are three parts to his response:

15:1-11 Christ was bodily raised

15:12-34 Denial of a future believers bodily resurrection is a denial of the gospel

15:35-58 The nature of this future resurrection

## STRUCTURE 15:1-19

Paul argues that

- Christ died: It was witnessed. He was buried.
- Christ rose: It was witnessed. He was seen over and over again.

This was the gospel that the Corinthians together with all the other churches everywhere had received and which had saved them. Therefore denial of the resurrection of the dead is a denial of the gospel and its benefits (15:12-19).

That some at Corinth were denying the resurrection of the dead (15:12) is clear. Why they were doing so is less so. Possibilities include:

- i) They were too influenced by the surrounding Greek culture that ridiculed such an idea (cf Acts 17:32).
- ii) In their downplaying of the body (6:12ff), overblown 'spirituality' (ch 12-14) and perception they had already arrived (4:8ff) they misunderstood God's timetable with the result that any future corporal resurrection became an irrelevance.

Whether the denial of a future bodily resurrection was the cause or result of muddled thinking, Paul shows how such a view reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of the gospel.

## CHRIST'S RESURRECTION CENTRAL TO THE GOSPEL (1-11)

Paul reminds them of the message he had brought them. It was a message that

- he had received (he hadn't made it up - 15:3)
- that he had passed on to them (15:3)
- that they had received
- upon which they had taken their stand (15:1).
- and that they were now in danger of deserting (12, cf 2).

It was a message at the heart of which was the bodily resurrection of a dead and buried Christ

- i. Firstly, God's Messiah was dead and was buried (15:3-4).
- ii. Secondly, He was then raised to life and seen (15:4-8).

Neither occurred in a corner. Each indispensable part of the message was verifiable. Both were witnessed. He was really dead (4) and he was really raised (5-8).

In arguing as he does (1-11) Paul:

- i. establishes the nature of Christ's resurrection - a bodily one
- ii. establishes it as commonly held ground from which he will argue against their assertion that there is no such resurrection from the dead.

## OUR RESURRECTION INSEPARABLE FROM THE GOSPEL (15:12-18)

Having established that they had accepted that Christ, once dead, was raised Paul shows the absurdity of their current position and its consequences if true (12-19), against the splendour of his (20-28):

- i. If they accept that Christ was raised from the dead (1-11) - and they did (12) - it is impossible also to maintain the the dead are not raised (12).

ii. If the dead aren't raised (as they were suggesting -13a) then:

- Christ remains dead and buried (13b).
- The apostolic preaching is empty and their faith is baseless (14).
- All the apostles are liars who are bearing false witness against God, claiming Him to have done something He hadn't done (15-16).
- Their faith is worthless, for they are still under God's wrath (contra 6:11).
- Those who had at the time of their death put their trust in Christ have no future. They had in fact perished (18).

If Christ did not rise then there is no provision for sins. To deny their future and their bodily resurrection - was in effect to deny the past.

## **FALSE GOSPEL: NO HOPE (19)**

By believing in Christ's death and resurrections the Corinthians had placed their trust in Christ for the forgiveness of sins (1). However their denial of believers resurrection was a denial of Christ's resurrection and therefore of the gospel. If Christ is not raised, not only did they remain unforgiven in the present (17) but all hope for the future was vain (19). All hope was false, and such false hope is especially pitiable when suffering and ridicule results (4:16, 9-13). Denial of a future bodily resurrection for believers was in effect a denial of Christ's resurrection and tantamount to a denial of Christian existence altogether.

## **THINKING IT THROUGH ...**

In affirming the historicity of Christ's death and bodily resurrection (15:1-11) Paul isn't seeking to persuade non-Christians of its truthfulness (which is often how we use it) but to challenge believers with its implications. Paul wants the Corinthian's to get their thinking and living straight (34).

- \* Do we shy away from talking about the believer's bodily resurrection? Why? What does this reveal about our attitude to the gospel?
- How does Paul's perspective on Christ's resurrection and our's challenge our thinking on the subject? When does our neglect of the subject border on a denial of it?

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# **1 Corinthians 15:20-34**

## **AIM**

- To understand the cosmic significance of Christ's resurrection.
- To think through what it means for us to live lives consistent with a belief in the resurrection.

## **CONTEXT**

- In the final main section of the letter (15:1-58) Paul writes an extended treatment on the importance and nature of resurrection. Some of the Corinthians had begun to deny the future resurrection from the dead (12) and it seems many others were tempted to follow them (33). However if there were no resurrection of the dead there would be no gospel. So Paul gives a robust defence of the doctrine and draws out some of its implications for believers.
- Having established the fact that Christ was resurrected from the dead (1-11) - a fact that they had preciousy embraced (1,11) - Paul has shown them the inconsistency and consequences of denying a believer's bodily resurrection. It was to deny Christianity altogether (12-19).
- Having dealt with the negative - what no resurrection would mean for the gospel (12-19) - he now changes to the positive as he works out the consequences of the fact that Christ has indeed been raised and its implications.

## **STRUCTURE**

15:20-28 The consequences of Christ's resurrection.

- 15:29-30 The Corinthians are acting as though the dead are raised.  
 15:31-32a Paul is acting as though the dead are raised.  
 15:32b-34 Don't be persuaded to act like those who are ignorant of the fact.

## RESURRECTION MEANS ... (15:20-28)

### THE KINGDOM IS INAUGURATED

The first fruit of the harvest was the first gathering of the crop. It both marked the fact that harvest time had arrived and anticipated its completion.

Christ's resurrection from the dead is the firstfruit (20, 23a) of all those who belong to Him. His resurrection marks the beginning of the end, anticipating and guaranteeing the future resurrection of all who are His. The resurrection of believers may be delayed until he returns (23b) but it is just as certain.

### THE CURSE IS REVERSED

Paul contrasts Christ with Adam (20-22) and refers to the extremities of the history of Death, its beginning and its end. Adam introduced Death, and Christ will abolish it.

- The 'seed' of every man and woman in history was present in the man Adam, so that all people owe their life and their physical descent to him. But because of his sin, Adam's 'seed' was infected with the fatal virus 'Death' with disastrous repercussions for the whole of mankind (21) - all His descendants are condemned to die (22) to face judgment (25-27a).
- The man Christ, however, has been raised from the dead, making resurrection from the dead possible for others.

Just as in Adam all die so also in Christ all will be made alive (22). Christ's resurrection undoes the consequences of Adam's sin for all those who belong to Him (23b). The curse of sin and death is reversed. When He returns those who are 'in him' will be physically raised to new life (21).

### GOD'S ENEMIES ARE DESTROYED

Judgment is intrinsic to the idea of resurrection, for God's kingdom can only be fully established once His enemies are destroyed. Christ must reign as king over all his enemies - all 'rule, authority, and power' - and death - until they are all finally and visibly removed (24-26). The last one abolished is Death.

- The tense of the verb 'destroyed' (26) is significant: 'is being destroyed' is present passive which means that Death *is being* abolished by God. Thus Death 'is being abolished' (present tense) because the risen Christ is reigning as king (present tense). And Death will be finally and visibly removed when he comes again (24).
- Christ exercises his kingly rule and abolishes these 'powers' through the preaching of the Gospel of himself crucified and risen. Through *this* Gospel (cf 1:18-2:5) sins are forgiven and those formerly in bondage are set free from the powers of darkness (6:9-11) and, in the power of the Holy Spirit (12:2-3), brought under the dominion of Christ (cf. Col. 1:13-14).

Since Christ's resurrection guarantees everyone else's resurrection it also guarantees the destruction of death, and thus the subjugation of all of God's enemies and the establishment of God's rule (24-26).

### THE BEGINNING AND END OF CHRIST'S RULE

Following Adam's sin God promised to reestablish a people under his rule by sending a Messiah who would establish and rule His people (Gen 12, 2 Sam 7 etc). Jesus, the Christ / Messiah has risen as a man (21) and, now exalted, has assumed the promised kingly rule over God's people (27, cf Psalm 8).

However when Christ returns the End will come (24a). 'Perfection' (cf 13:10) - the 'goal,' and 'end-point' of history - will have arrived as all God's enemies - and in particular death - will have been abolished. At this point Christ will 'hand over' his kingly rule to God his Father (24 b), for His rule was only ever a *delegated* one (v27, cf Psalm 8:6).

The humility and obedience of Christ shown in his incarnation and death is shown also in his voluntary subjection to the Father once his work of ruling is completed. From that moment God will be 'all in all' - God will reign supreme over all that is evil and that has been opposed to him. Then we will 'see God face to face' and we will 'know him as we have been known' (13:12)

Christ's resurrection is therefore much more than just proof that His death on the cross has won forgiveness, or that Jesus was who He claimed to be. It marks the opening moves and guarantees the culmination of all of God's purposes: the ultimate subjugation of God's enemies and the re-establishment of His kingdom. So certain are these events that Paul can talk about them as having already happened (Rom 8:30).

## YOU ARE BEING INCONSISTENT

(29)

As with so much else at Corinth people were confused about resurrection from the dead. Some were saying that there was no resurrection (12) while at the same time doing something that assumed that there was (namely 'baptising for the dead' - v29).

Whilst the meaning of the Greek of v29 is clear - 'those who are being baptised for the dead' - what this meant in practice, and its rational and significance for those who were doing it, is much less clear. This is the only NT reference to the practice and this, coupled with the fact that the commentaries contain at least 40 different interpretations, suggests that it is impossible to know for certain what they were doing and why.

However to some this detail is irrelevant as Paul's purpose in citing it is clear. What they were doing made no sense if there is no resurrection from the dead (29b).

The Corinthians were being inconsistent and as a result were in danger of being misled (33). Paul wants them to stand firm (58), and so reminds them of how the resurrection of Christ should set the agenda for all that they do.

## DON'T BE MISLED!

(30-34)

What you do in the present reveals what you really think about the future; and that what you really think about the future will determine what you do in the present.

The Corinthians :

1. were being too influenced by the concerns, priorities and perspective of this world. This has been seen over and over again in their confusion :
  - over the nature of the gospel, and of wisdom and knowledge (ch 1-2).
  - over personality cults and the nature of leadership (ch 3-4).
  - over immorality and congregational relationships (ch 5-6).
  - and in being more concerned with their own rights rather than the priorities of the gospel (ch 8-10).
2. had misunderstood the timescale of God's purposes. This has been apparent in their confusion over
  - a gospel of a *crucified* Christ (ch 1-2)
  - the nature of genuine apostleship (ch 1,2,3,4,9,14) and what it means to follow Christ (ch2, 4).
  - the significance and relative importance of spiritual gifts.

They were insufficiently informed and motivated by the ultimate purposes of God revealed in Christ's resurrection (20-28) and too influenced by those who knew nothing of God and His purposes (34a). They should have known better (34a) and are faced with two alternatives:

- A. They could live, as some of them were doing, limited by the perspective of and guided by the appetites of this world (32b).
- B. Or they could live as Paul was doing (30-32a), giving themselves fully to the work of the Lord (58); standing firm in the face of opposition and suffering. [Paul's trials only make sense when viewed from the perspective of eternity (30-32). Without such a perspective they would seem - and would be - utter folly (19, 32)].

## THINKING IT THROUGH ...

How much am I influenced by those who are ignorant of the significance of Christ's resurrection? What would it mean for me to be more consistent in living in the light of all that it means?

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# 1 Corinthians 15:35-58

## AIM

- To have greater confidence in the gospel of a resurrected Christ.
- To begin to work through what it will mean to always give oneself fully to the work of the Lord.

## CONTEXT

1. Beginning at 15:1 Paul has shown :
  - that belief in bodily resurrection from the dead - of Christ in the past (15:1- 8) and of all believers in the future (12-19)- is an

indispensable part of the gospel.

- how the future resurrection of all believers is to be understood within God's overall purposes for His creation (20-28). The reversal of the curses of Genesis 3 (21-22) and the ushering in of God's promised Kingdom involves the establishment of a new people under His Son (25-27). This will be fully and visibly accomplished when He returns, at which point all those who belong to Him are to be raised to new life (23).
2. Some of the Corinthians were saying that there was no future bodily resurrection (12). The danger of their misunderstanding the future is that they misunderstand the present as well (32b), with potentially disastrous consequences (33 cf 14:37-38). Paul wants them to avoid this. He wants to ensure that they understand the future in order that they persevere with the gospel in the present (58-59). Therefore he continues to address the issue of their resurrection (35-56).

## STRUCTURE

15:36-44 Our resurrected bodies will be a body - but a different kind of body.

15:45-49 They will bear the likeness of both Adam and Christ.

15:50-57 Bodies are important - and transformed bodies are essential for heaven.

## CONTINUITY BUT TRANSFORMATION

- Paul has already argued that the body (and what one does with it) is important, not least because it is to be raised (cf 6:12-14). He now goes on to address by way of analogy the question of what the resurrected body will be like (35).
- It seems that some of the Corinthians viewed bodies, even resurrected ones, negatively (35), out of sympathy, perhaps, with prevailing Greek ideas that downplayed the importance of the body and therefore scorned any idea of resuscitated corpses - cf Acts 17:32. In contrast Paul's attitude to the body is positive. Both our present ones and the one God will provide us with at the resurrection (38, 40) (which is going to be far more than just a resuscitated corpse) have their own splendour.

### 1. SEED AND PLANT (36-38)

The Corinthians were fools (36). They were failing to take God into account (38, cf Psalm 14:1). Their own experience with crops should have told them that what is sown in death is brought forth in life; and that the process involves both continuity and discontinuity - or rather continuity and transformation.

Although the seed and plant share the same 'life' (there is continuity between the two) they appear very different (there is transformation). In 'essence' they are the same but each is very different from the other. Though different they both have *real* bodies.

It is impossible to guess by looking at the seed what the plant will be like. God transforms each one as He sees fit (38).

### 2. DIFFERENT BODIES - DIFFERENT SPLENDOUR (39-41)

There are different kinds of bodies - human, animal, birds, fish (39) - each having its own splendour. The Corinthians should have realised that heavenly bodies will be distinct, with their own particular glory (41).

Paul uses these two analogies to compare a believer's earthly and heavenly body (42-44). The earthly body is subject to decay, lowly and weak - 'natural'. The heavenly body will be imperishable, glorious, 'raised in power' - 'spiritual'.

Talk of such a 'spiritual' resurrection body would have been shocking to any in Corinth too influenced by the surrounding Greek culture, or by any overblown 'spirituality' that left little need for any future resurrection. For Paul 'arriving' (cf 4:8) means bearing the likeness of Christ (49) in a transformed body fitted for the new age.

## TWO PLACES (45-50)

The contrast here is between two men: the two humanities that they inaugurate and the bodies that are characteristic of each.

- i. The first man, Adam, came to Earth before Christ (45). His body was fitted for earthly existence. It was 'natural' and all those who are 'in him' (cf 15:22) share that state with all its attributes (48-49, cf 42-44). It belongs to the present existence. It is corruptible (42, 50b). It will die.
- ii. The 'last Adam', the man Jesus Christ, came afterwards (46). His body is fitted for heaven (47). Now resurrected as a man (cf 15:21, Psalm 8) and glorified He has a 'spiritual' body. Although all those who are 'in him' have earthly / natural bodies in this world they will also have a 'spiritual' body similar to His when He comes again (49).

## TWO RACES : (50-53)

That which belongs to this age - the 'natural' body' (44), 'flesh and blood' (50), the 'perishable' (42, 50b) - cannot *untransformed* inherit

the kingdom of God. Therefore the body that belongs to this age must be changed (50).

And it will happen in a moment (52). When the trumpet sounds - announcing the coming of the Lord (Zech 9:14), judgment (cf. Joel 2:1), and summoning God's people from the corners of the earth (Is 27:13) - the living and the dead will be changed in an instant (51-52) fitted for their new existence with Christ in the Kingdom of God. The 'natural' / 'perishable' / mortal will be replaced by the 'spiritual' / 'imperishable' / 'immortal' (53). Death will have been defeated and Christ's victory will be apparent to all.

## **THE DEATH OF DEATH IN THE DEATH OF CHRIST (54-57)**

As Paul looks forward to the culmination of all things, when God's people will be resurrected to inherit the Kingdom of God (54) he is moved to mock Death whose own death has been accomplished through the death of Christ (54b, 55).

But death is not the end. The sting of death (56) is the judgment that all men must face on the other side (cf Heb 9:27) where all those still 'in Adam' will stand guilty. It is this sting - the power of the law to condemn - that Christ's work has removed. Victory over sin and death is theirs for those in Christ (57).

## **THEREFORE ...**

Paul has been concerned that the Corinthians don't desert the gospel of the crucified and risen Christ that he first proclaimed to them. Muddled views of the resurrection were placing them at risk (33). Having explained the significance of Christ's resurrection as both inaugurating and guaranteeing their future inheritance of the kingdom of God (15:20-57) he exhorts them:

- i. Not to move from the gospel he had preached to them (15:3-5).

Much of their confusion seen in the letter as a whole seems to have come from misunderstanding what it means to follow a crucified and risen Christ .

- ii. Give themselves to 'the work of the Lord'.

Christ's work is to establish God's Kingdom so that He can hand it over to God the Father (15:20-28). He achieves this - is achieving it (15:26)- by destroying death. His means is the preaching of Paul's gospel of a crucified and risen Christ (1:6, 17, 2:1-2 etc ).

If Christ was not raised then to give ones-self to such a work is a complete waste of time

- indeed it is pitiable (15:19, 32). Since He was raised it is the only work which is not in vain (58). Paul's desire is that each of the Corinthians always give themselves fully to that task - as the gifts that God has given them allow (cf 12:4-31).

## **THINKING IT THROUGH ...**

How often do you think of the gospel in the terms of resurrection that Paul has discussed in ch 15. If you don't often reflect on the gospel in these terms what danger does that place you in?

How can we better encourage one another to always give ourselves fully to the 'work of the Lord'. What will this mean for you in practice?

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# **1 Corinthians 16**

## **AIM**

- To understand what it means to 'do everything in love'

## **CONTEXT**

As we have seen the Corinthian church faced considerable difficulties. Numerous theological confusions reflected deeper misunderstandings of the gospel. The result was licentiousness and growing rebellion against the leadership of their apostle.

1 Corinthians has been Paul's response to this growing crisis. He hasn't appealed primarily to his authority as an apostle. Instead he has concentrated on reminding them of the gospel that he first brought them (1:17ff; 3:10-11; 4:14-16; 15:1-2ff) and the example he has set (4:17; 11:1). Although he has addressed particular practical concerns that they had raised (7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1) he has done so in a way that has emphasised a wider understanding of the gospel, for right living starts with right thinking.

In the closing chapter he signs off (21) having first addressed their last two questions (1, 12), advised them of his plans to visit them (14:21) and made provision for them in the interim (10ff).

## STRUCTURE

1-4	The collection
5-9	Paul's plans
10-18	Paul's team
13-14, 22	Final warnings and exhortations

## THE COLLECTION

Much of the letter has shown a concern that the divisions and infighting at Corinth be replaced by a sincere love for one another; for arrogance, boasting, self-promotion and party spirit to be replaced by a selfless 'other person centeredness' (1:10ff; 3:34:7; 5:6; 8:1-3; 10:33; 11:33; 13:4ff) that the gospel demands of those who profess Christ (11:1). However as the work of God is not limited to Corinth their love for the saints should extend beyond themselves.

Paul was coordinating a collection of money from the Gentiles churches established by his ministry in Galatia, Macedonia, Achaia and Asia for the church in Jerusalem who were facing both famine and persecution (Acts 11:27-30). Such a collection was to be:

- i. a confirmation of their genuine acceptance of the gospel (2 Cor 9:13).
- ii. an compassionate and practical expression of the unity and fellowship between believers (2 Cor 8:14, 9:13).
- iii. 'repayment' by material means of the 'debt' the Gentiles 'owed' to the Jews for the spiritual blessing they had received in the gospel (Rom 15:27).

However Paul addresses none of these issues here! His concern is rather that the Corinthians give in an appropriate way.

- Their giving should be planned:  
The putting aside of monies before Paul's arrival would not only, in all likelihood, result in a greater contribution but also protect Paul from any accusations from his opponents of being a money grabbing preacher - 2b (cf 9:12-18).
- Their giving should be in accordance with their means (2). In another example in the letter of the exercise of Christian freedom (ch 9-10). Paul doesn't insist on a particular amount or percentage of income (pre or post tax!). Each person should give - that is the general principle. What any individual gives is a matter for them.
- It should be administered properly. It is not Paul's money. It is theirs. They need to take responsibility for it.

## PAUL'S PLANS

He has already told them that he plans to visit them (4:19) and does so again here. He wants to spend an extended time with them and enlist their support for his onward journey (5-7). It is notable that:

- Paul's plans are motivated by ministry. He wants to go to Corinth but stays in Ephesus because of the openings he had there for the gospel (8-10).
- Paul does not regard opposition necessarily as a reason to move on (9), for rejection and acceptance of the gospel go hand in hand.
- All his plans are qualified by an acknowledgment of the sovereignty of God (7b, cf 4:17). In the event Paul did leave Ephesus, but not voluntarily or when he planned (Acts 19:23-20:1), and his next visit to Corinth was short and unscheduled.

## PAUL'S TEAM

Although Paul doesn't intend to go immediately to Corinth he is keen that his letter is followed up soon. Timothy had worked alongside Paul in Corinth (2 Cor 1:19, Acts 18:5) and so was well known by them. He too is fully committed to the work of the gospel (10, cf 15:58). Apollos is also known to the Corinthians (1:12, cf Acts 18:27-28), and they had asked after him (12). Paul wants them to go to Corinth to reinforce all he has said and done (4:17; 11:1, 16:12).

These details give us some insight into Paul's ministry:

- He was a 'team player'.  
This can be seen throughout the NT (eg cf Rom 16). Even divisions at Corinth possible stemming from Apollos ministry doesn't prevent him from urging Apollos from returning there.
- Freedom to disagree  
Paul wanted both Timothy (4:17) and Apollos (12a) to return at once to Corinth. Apollos was quite unwilling to do so. He was free not to go and didn't go (12b) (The 'if' in v10 might suggest a similar reluctance on the part of Timothy). Although as an apostle Paul's teaching carried with it the authority of Christ (14:37) that didn't mean that he 'lorded' over people. Apollos was free to make

up his own mind. 'Doing everything in love' (14) doesn't mean that everyone has to agree about everything.

## WARNINGS AND EXHORTATIONS

Two passages stand out in this last chapter: the exhortations in 13-14 and the seemingly harsh words of v22. Why are they here?

### 13-14

In many ways these verses summarise the whole letter.

#### **'Be on your guard; stand firm.'**

The Corinthians had received the 'good news' from Paul and taken their stand on it (1:4-6; 15:1-2). However some fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of the gospel (1:17-2:16; 15:9-57) and what it means to follow Christ (ch 3-14) had grown up amongst them. They were vulnerable and risked throwing it all away by deserting Christ (10:12; 14:37). Paul has addressed their misunderstandings, and called them to stand firm and not be moved from the message of the crucified and risen Christ (15:2, 58).

#### **'Be men of courage; be strong'**

These words might be directed to the persecutions and suffering that inevitably come to those who 'stand firm' on the gospel. However within the context of the whole letter it is more probably a call to deal with the errors and behavioural aberrations that he has identified (14:37-38).

#### **'Do everything in love'**

Paul wants the Corinthians to persevere as Christians until Christ comes again. All he has said and done is to that end and an expression of his love for them. He wants them to understand that (24) and have the same concern for one another (cf 10:33b-11:1).

So much of their behaviour reflected a lack of love for one another. Replacing self-centeredness with 'other person centeredness' in which the other persons 'good' is that they keep going as Christians until the end would address not only the issue of spiritual gifts (ch 12-14) but most of their other problems as well: their quarrels about leaders (ch 1-3), immorality in the church & lawsuits (ch 5-6), husband and wife relationships (ch 7), the 'weak' and the 'puffed up' (ch 8-10), and behaviour when gathered together (ch 11-14). If they were to do 'all things in love' these problems would not arise (cf 10:33).

### 22

#### **'If anyone does not love the Lord - a curse be on him'**

Throughout the letter Paul has divided humankind into two groups:

- i. Non-Christians ('the wicked' (6:9)), who curse Christ (12:3) and whose concerns are limited to this world (15:32). The message of Christ crucified is foolishness to them and they are perishing (1:18),
- ii. Christians who have been rescued from that way of thinking and living (6:11). They are those with the Spirit of God who understand that which God has freely given them, confess Christ as Lord (2:12, 12:3) and are waiting to receive that which Christ has won for them

Paul longs for the completion of 'the work of the Lord', when Christ returns and all of Gods enemies are finally defeated (15:23-28). If v22 sounds at once a bit harsh and a bit too 'other worldly' it suggests that we are blurring Paul's distinctions and are more enamoured with this world and its concerns, and more at ease with its hatred of God, than he was.

## THINKING IT THROUGH

How has studying 1 Corinthians together this year changed your understanding of God and His gospel and how you should behave in response to that which He has done?