

# **I CORINTHIANS**

**by Robert C. Walton**



# I CORINTHIANS - LESSON I

## Introduction

The epistle of I Corinthians probably contains more treatment of practical issues and less doctrine than any other of the epistles written by Paul to the churches with whom he had contact. This week, we will look at some of the background information essential for understanding the letter in its proper context; in the weeks to come, we will go through the epistle one chapter at a time, omitting consideration of the concluding words of Paul in chapter 16.

## THE HISTORY OF CORINTH

The city of Corinth is located on the isthmus separating Attica from the Peloponnesus. It thus is very strategic both for military and commercial purposes. The founding of the city is shrouded in antiquity, and its origins go back more than 5000 years. By the time of the Trojan War (c.1200 B.C.), Corinth was a city noted for its wealth. Along with the rest of Greece, the city was subjugated by Philip of Macedon and ruled by his son, Alexander the Great, in the fourth century B.C. Later, an attempt by the city to assert its independence led to its destruction by the Roman general Lucius Mummius in 146 B.C.

The location, however, was far too valuable to leave barren, and the city was rebuilt under orders from Julius Caesar in 46 B.C. As a Roman colony, it was resettled largely by Roman soldiers and mercenaries. The wide-ranging commerce attracted to the city soon brought people from all over the world, including a number of Jews, though the city remained largely Gentile in its population.

## CORINTH IN THE FIRST CENTURY

The Corinth of Paul's day was a proud and wealthy city. It was the capital of the Roman province of Achaia, the gate to the Peloponnesus, and the center of commerce from East to West in the Empire. The city boasted a temple to the Greek goddess Aphrodite that employed over a thousand cult prostitutes. Like any port city, it tended to have a reputation for immorality of all kinds. In fact, the Greek verb "to corinthianize," coined by the glib playwright Aristophanes in earlier years, meant to engage in loose living. The city also sponsored the Isthmian Games, similar to the Olympics, which were held in the Temple of Poseidon outside the city and attracted some of the best athletes in the Graeco-Roman world. Though they lacked the reputation for philosophical acumen enjoyed by the Athenians, the Corinthians prided themselves on their worldly wisdom. Both the pride and the immorality of the city play prominent roles in the first letter written by Paul to the church in Corinth.

## PAUL'S RELATIONSHIP TO THE CORINTHIAN CHURCH

Paul first arrived in the city of Corinth about 51 A.D., during his second missionary journey (Acts 18:1-17). It was there that he met Aquila and Priscilla, and he worked with them at his job of tentmaking while preaching in the local synagogue. The Jews violently rejected his message, however, so he turned to the Gentiles, setting up headquarters in the house of Titius Justus, a God-fearing Gentile, right next to the synagogue. A few Jews and many Gentiles believed, and Paul remained in the city for a year and a half. The Jews eventually stirred up trouble, however, bringing

Paul before the Roman proconsul Gallio, the brother of the famous philosopher Seneca. The Jews wanted Paul tried as a Gentile, insisting that his teachings were a violation of Jewish law, but Gallio refused to hear the case, insisting that it was an internal Jewish matter and therefore not subject to Roman punishment (the Jews enjoyed official protection in the Empire; as long as Christianity was considered a Jewish sect, it shared that protection, and Gallio's decision left those protections in place).

Paul eventually left the city, but this was not his last contact with the Corinthians. The tendency of the church to compromise with the worldly practices of their city appeared rather early in the church's existence, and Paul wrote a letter to warn them against this shortly after the end of his first visit (I Corinthians 5:9). This letter, which has not been preserved, apparently was misunderstood by the Corinthians. After this, Paul received two delegations from Corinth, one sent by Chloe, either from her family or from the church meeting in her house (I Corinthians 1:11), and another composed of Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus (I Corinthians 16:17), sent by the church as a whole. The first delegation informed him of the divisions and immoral practices going on in the church, while the second brought to him a series of questions from the church, along with a letter (I Corinthians 7:1). It was in response to these groups that he wrote I Corinthians. This occurred while he was in Ephesus during his third missionary journey, probably in the spring of 57 A.D.

The response to I Corinthians was not good. As a result, Paul decided to visit them personally again, but the visit was not well-received (II Corinthians 2:1) - in fact, it is easy to get the impression from Paul's later correspondence that they nearly ran him out of town. He immediately sent off another letter, which again is lost to us (II Corinthians 2:3-5). This rather harsh missive apparently did some good, for Paul's tone in II Corinthians is largely positive, though he still must chastise his critics. His final contact with the church was a visit to pick up the money collected for the poor in Jerusalem, which he made after his third journey, prior to his arrest.

## LATER HISTORY OF THE CORINTHIAN CHURCH

The contentious nature of the Corinthians was not cured by Paul's contact with the church. The earliest non-canonical writing known to us, the letter of I Clement, written about 95 A.D., was addressed from the church at Rome to the church at Corinth, admonishing them for their rebellious attitude toward their elders. The divisiveness and independent spirit apparently still characterized the church forty years after their contact with Paul.

The epistle of I Corinthians was one of the most widely-circulated books of the post-apostolic period. The writers of the second century quote it more often than any other Pauline epistle (particularly Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp). The Pauline authorship of the book has never been seriously challenged, and those who have sought to do so "succeed chiefly in proving their own incompetence as critics" (Robertson).

## OUTLINE OF I CORINTHIANS

- I. Introduction (1:1-9)
- II. Response to Chloe's Report (1:10-6:20)
  - A. Division in the Church (1:10-4:21)
    - 1. The Fact of Division (1:10-17)
    - 2. Divine Wisdom vs. Human Wisdom (1:18-2:16)
    - 3. The Cause of Division (3:1-9)
    - 4. Christ, the True Wisdom (3:10-4:21)
  - B. Moral Laxity in the Church (5:1-6:20)
    - 1. Incest (5:1-13)
    - 2. Litigation (6:1-11)
    - 3. Fornication (6:12-20)
- III. Response to the Corinthians' Letter (7:1-15:58)
  - A. Marriage and Divorce (7:1-40)
  - B. Meat Sacrificed to Idols (8:1-11:1)
    - 1. Strong and Weak Brothers (8:1-13)
    - 2. The Example of Paul (9:1-27)
    - 3. The Example of Israel (10:1-13)
    - 4. Conclusion (10:14-11:1)
  - C. Public Worship (11:2-14:40)
    - 1. The Veiling of Women (11:2-16)
    - 2. The Lord's Supper (11:17-34)
    - 3. Spiritual Gifts (12:1-14:40)
      - a. Gifts and the Body of Christ (12:1-31)
      - b. The Supremacy of Love (13:1-13)
      - c. Tongues and Prophesying (14:1-40)
  - D. The Resurrection of the Body (15:1-58)
- IV. Conclusion (16:1-24)



## I CORINTHIANS - LESSON II

### I Corinthians 1

In the first chapter of I Corinthians, we have Paul's typical salutation, followed immediately by his broaching of the first problem issue - that of disunity in the church.

#### SALUTATION (verses 1-9)

The salutation is common to almost all of Paul's letters, but we do find in this one some hints of matters to be treated at some length later on in the epistle.

- Verse 1 - Paul begins immediately by affirming his apostleship. With this cantankerous group, he needs to flex his muscles of authority immediately if he wants a hearing. The mention of Sosthenes shows that he was assisting Paul in Ephesus; could this have been the same Sosthenes as mentioned in Acts 18:17, who was beaten before Gallio's judgment seat? If so, he obviously had been converted.
- Verse 2 - The phrase "church of God" here has two key functions. The term *ekklesia* was used for many kinds of assemblies, including pagan religious organizations. Paul clearly distinguishes the church of God from such groups (after all, failure to make such a distinction was a major problem at Corinth). Secondly, the phrase indicates that the church of God is broader than its manifestation in Corinth - a clear swipe at the pride of the Corinthian church. The use of the term "saints" also emphasizes the set-apart nature of the Corinthian believers. It is worthwhile to note that Paul uses the terms "church" and "saints" of those that we might today hesitate to address in such a way. Scripture challenges people to examine and live up to their profession, while speaking charitably in a way that gives the benefit of the doubt to questionable manifestations of Christianity.
- Verse 4 - As usual, Paul begins by speaking positively about the church to whom he writes. That this section is so brief says something about the nature of the Corinthian church - he hardly has anything good to say about them for the next sixteen chapters! Notice even here that Paul emphasizes the fact that the good in the Corinthians has only come about by the grace of God.
- Verses 5-7 - Here Paul compliments them for that which is both their glory and their curse - the exceptionally gifted nature of the congregation. With unusual ability comes an unusual temptation to pride.
- Verses 8-9 - What God has started, He will finish. The heavy criticisms of the letter are not to be a source of discouragement, but an opportunity for God to continue His work in their lives.

#### THE FACT OF DIVISIONS IN THE CHURCH (verses 10-17)

Paul had been informed of the divisions in the Corinthian church by a delegation sent by Chloe. He now addresses this problem and begins by dissociating himself from it - he refuses to acknowledge the Pauline party, making it clear that they are using his name without his approval. The main issue we must face in looking at this section is identifying the four factions of which Paul speaks. Obviously, such a task entails a fair amount of speculation and educated guesswork.

- *Paul* - Could the party claiming the name of Paul have been made up of those Gentiles who gloried in the freedom that Christ had given them from the law? There were certainly libertine tendencies among the Corinthians, and we can readily understand why Paul would disavow such followers.
- *Apollos* - Surely these were the philosophers, attracted by the eloquent discourse of the Alexandrian preacher. Even at this early date, the city of Alexandria was associated with intellectual syncretism - the use of Greek philosophy to address religious matters, whether Christian or Jewish. The emphasis on “knowledge” could have been moving this group in the direction of a heresy later known as Gnosticism.
- *Cephas* - The followers of Peter were surely the Judaizers in the group, those who felt a Christian was not complete unless he had been circumcised and was following the Jewish law. Peter would have liked this group no better than Paul liked his “followers.”
- *Christ* - Though all four groups displayed spiritual pride and had reason (or so they thought) to think themselves superior to the others, this last group apparently derived their superiority from the fact that they acknowledged no human leader, but followed only Christ. The elders in the church must have had trouble trying to get the respect of this group!

One side note before we move on: The three men mentioned as having been baptized by Paul all appear elsewhere in the New Testament. Crispus had been the leader of the synagogue prior to Sosthenes (Acts 18:8). Gaius was the one with whom Paul stayed during his first visit to Corinth (Romans 16:23). Stephanas was one of the messengers sent by the Corinthians to Paul to deliver their letter (I Corinthians 16:15,17), and apparently had been one of Paul’s first converts in the city.

#### DIVINE WISDOM VERSUS HUMAN WISDOM (verses 18-31)

We noted last week that the book of I Corinthians contains very little overt doctrine and is devoted largely to the treatment of practical issues. It is also true, however, that Paul always treats these practical issues from a doctrinal basis that he assumes is commonly held by himself and the Corinthians. For instance, the entire argument of the section before us here is built upon the truth of the electing grace of God in salvation, which provides the basis for Paul’s distinction between the wisdom of this world and the wisdom of God. That distinction is made in this passage in at least three ways:

#### THE FOOLISHNESS OF THE MESSAGE TO THE WORLD

There are several reasons why the Gospel seems foolish to those who are without Christ. First of all, without the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives, their natural tendency is to rebel against God and to mock His Word and His messengers. Secondly, the news of a crucified and risen Savior would repel both Jews and Greeks. The Jews sought a conquering messiah, not one who had been cursed by the death of crucifixion. The Greeks associated crucifixion with criminals, not gods, and furthermore considered matter to be evil, reducing the concept of resurrection from the dead to the point of absurdity. The Gospel lacked both the authenticating signs perpetually demanded by the Jews and the eloquent wisdom needed to gain the respect of the Greeks.

## THE FOOLISHNESS OF BELIEVERS TO THE WORLD

Despite their pretensions, Paul reminds the Corinthians that most of them were slaves, common people, “nobodies.” There were few philosophers, rulers, or aristocrats in their midst. Those whom the world considered to be insignificant were the ones God had chosen, not in order to boost their egos, but in order that all the glory might come to Him.

## THE FOOLISHNESS OF THE WORLD TO GOD

With a strong sense of irony, Paul tells the Corinthians what God thinks of the great men and ideas of this world. The Corinthians had been puffing themselves up with pride over their respective insights into human wisdom, but Paul makes it clear that, as far as God is concerned, they were spending all of their time chasing after that which was of no significance whatsoever. Whether they sought to emulate the Jewish scribes or the pagan philosophers, they were seeking a low and unworthy goal, since what they sought could not lead men to God, nor bring themselves into a closer relationship with Him. What they saw as enhancing the Gospel actually hindered it instead.



## I CORINTHIANS - LESSON III

### I Corinthians 2

The second chapter of I Corinthians continues the contrast between worldly and godly wisdom that Paul had initiated in response to the factionalism in the Corinthian church in chapter one. Do you remember why such a contrast was an appropriate response to the party spirit of the Corinthians? It is because the divisions among them were drawn along lines dictated by the wisdom of this world and had nothing to do with spiritual values.

#### THE EXAMPLE OF PAUL (verses 1-5)

Paul's own preaching provides a perfect illustration of the point he is trying to make. His message was not delivered with great eloquence or persuasiveness, nor did it contain mind-stretching complexities. It was in all respects simple and straightforward. Note the following:

- Verse 1 - Paul did not preach with great eloquence, either of the rhetorical or philosophical variety. As to what he did preach, a textual variant poses a slight problem. Some MSS read *marturion* (witness or testimony), while others read *musterion* (mystery). The difference is not significant, since Paul could bear personal witness to the validity of the mystery that had been revealed to him.
- Verse 2 - The message Paul preached was simple, not in the sense of lacking either theological exposition or practical application, but in the sense that the basic content of the Gospel was always in the forefront, never in danger of being lost among interesting but unedifying speculations.
- Verse 3 - The weakness of which Paul speaks here is not a weakness due to timidity, although it may allude to Paul's less-than-robust physical condition. Paul's fear and trembling came from his realization of the ultimate importance of the message he was preaching, not from any reluctance to present that message to others.
- Verse 4 - Paul deliberately avoided the use of high-pressure techniques of persuasion in his preaching. The power of his preaching had to come from the Holy Spirit, not from his own ability as a speaker.
- Verse 5 - Here is the key to Paul's low-key approach. Those who came to faith through Paul's preaching were genuinely converted by the power of the Spirit. Those who make professions of faith as the result of high-powered oratory or compelling logic often have no faith at all, but rather a temporary experience which can mislead them straight into hell. Why is it that we value speaking ability so highly among our preachers today? Is it because we want to enjoy what we hear? Is it because we think the Gospel lacks power in and of itself? How many people are walking around today convinced that they are on their way to heaven because a preacher has been too persuasive or too eloquent?

#### THE SPIRIT AND THE MYSTERY OF FAITH (verses 6-13)

Paul now goes on to explain how and why the message that he preaches differs so radically from worldly wisdom.

- Verse 6 - The maturity to which Paul alludes here is not the same as the contrast he later makes between spiritual Christians and babes in Christ. Instead, he is contrasting believers and unbelievers - the kind of mature wisdom of which he speaks here is accessible only through the Spirit, and all who lack the Spirit are by comparison foolish children. The wisdom of the world is shown to be lacking by its temporary and transitory nature.
- Verse 7 - The use of the term *mystery* in Scripture refers, not to something that is unknown or known only to a select few (cf. the Gnostics), but rather to something that was not known or understood in the past, but has since been revealed by God. It once was hidden, but now it is known. It also implies that what was revealed could not have been discovered by human reason.
- Verse 8 - A mystery may now be known, but because it is known by supernatural revelation, it is only known to those who have the Spirit. In fact, some commentators believe that the term is used exclusively for apostolic revelation. Whichever it means, it is clear that those thought to be wise in this world do not have it, the clear evidence of which is their crucifixion of Christ.
- Verse 9 - This verse is the loosest imaginable paraphrase of either Isaiah 64:4, Isaiah 65:17, or both. Paul is making the point that these things that he preaches were not known to the Old Testament prophets, but that God has since revealed them. A further difficulty arises when we notice that the passage in Isaiah is not talking about the marvelous saving grace of God, but instead about the judgment that is sure to fall on the enemies of Israel. We must realize that what Paul is doing here is not asserting “fulfillment” of a particular Scripture, but rather citing in general terms, using the language of Scripture, the teaching of the Old Testament that the mind of God cannot be known apart from divine revelation.
- Verses 10-11 - The mystery has been revealed by the Spirit of God, who knows the heart of God perfectly since He indeed is God. The Spirit of God knows the mind of God in the same way that a man knows his own thoughts - Paul is not asserting that the Spirit of God bears the same relationship to God that our spirits do to our bodies.
- Verse 12 - In the same way that the mystery can only be revealed by the Spirit of God, so it can only be understood with the help of the Spirit of God. “The spirit of the world” here refers to the world’s source of knowledge, i.e., reason.
- Verse 13 - Paul asserts that his preaching has communicated the very mystery of which he has been writing in words that communicate spiritual truth because they come from the Holy Spirit. [NOTE: The translation of the last phrase of verse 13 is a matter of considerable debate, largely because the verb is capable of being translated in several ways - “comparing,” “combining,” “interpreting,” “explaining,” etc. - while the form of one of the nouns could be one of several options. The major thrust, though, is clearly that spiritual truth must be conveyed in the language of the Spirit as opposed to the language of human wisdom.]

#### THE SPIRITUAL MAN AND THE NATURAL MAN (verses 14-16)

Paul here begins a discussion that carries over into the third chapter and brings us into the infamous “carnal Christian” misinterpretation. Though our discussion of this issue will not arrive until next week, we must note that Paul sets the stage for it at the end of chapter two by defining two categories of people (not three!).

- Verse 14 - The natural man (*psuchikos*) is the man who lacks the Spirit of God. Because he does not have the Holy Spirit, he is incapable of understanding spiritual truth, which consequently sounds like foolishness to him.
- Verse 15 - The spiritual man (*pneumatikos*), on the other hand, is not the religious person or the “super Christian,” but simply the man who has the Spirit indwelling him. Because he has the Spirit, he has discernment that enables him to recognize truth and error when he sees them, but his wisdom is not susceptible to evaluation by any man lacking the Spirit (How many times have we seen recently the inability of non-Christians to understand Christian thinking or values?).
- Verse 16 - The quotation this time is from the Septuagint, but it continues to enhance Paul’s point about the mystery that God has revealed to His people. What was in the Old Testament a rhetorical question with the obvious answer of “No one” may now be answered differently - “We have the mind of Christ.” Furthermore, anyone who presumes to judge the wisdom of the spiritual man is in reality attempting to pass judgment on God Himself, who is the source of the wisdom in question.



## I CORINTHIANS - LESSON IV

### I Corinthians 3

The third chapter of I Corinthians continues Paul's contrast between godly and worldly wisdom. In this chapter, he specifically applies the distinction to the divisions in the Corinthian church. He had set forth two categories of people at the end of chapter two - the natural man and the spiritual man. He now uses this distinction to explain the root of the Corinthians' problem.

#### THE CARNALITY OF THE CORINTHIANS (verses 1-9)

This concept of carnality, which seems so clear when Paul uses it in these verses, has been the basis for much misunderstanding, abuse, and damage in the modern church. Because of this, it is necessary for us to examine these verses very carefully, noting both what Paul is saying and how it has been misinterpreted.

- Verse 1 - The use of the terms "brethren" and "babes in Christ" makes it clear that Paul is here addressing Christians. He is thus addressing those whom he has classed as "spiritual men" at the end of chapter two - they are not "natural men." Though the text is uncertain, it appears that the word translated "men of flesh" here is *sarkinos*, which suggests an appropriate condition - babies are expected to act like babies (note that Paul is here speaking of the condition of the Corinthians when he first visited them).
- Verse 2 - The difference between milk and solid food is not so much the content of the teaching, but its depth and manner of presentation. The deity of Christ may be presented simply to a child and with great complexity to an adult, yet it remains the same truth. Paul is not here advocating holding back certain truths from the immature, but rather presenting such truths with simplicity. Remember that Paul had been accused by the Corinthians of being too simple in his preaching. He now tells them why - because they were too immature to handle anything else. While this may not have been blameworthy during his first visit, the fact that the condition persisted years later was a serious fault.
- Verses 3-4 - Paul here switches terminology, calling them *sarkikos*, which implies an unnatural condition. They are spiritual, but are characterized by fleshly behavior and attitudes. They are like adults who act and look like babies. Babies may be cute in their immaturity and helplessness, but adults who continue to manifest these characteristics are repulsive. The clearest example of the fleshly behavior of the Corinthians is their party spirit. They are acting in a way that completely contradicts their profession.

At this point, this whole concept of carnality or fleshliness needs clarification. Paul describes the Corinthians as freaks and monstrosities, those who profess to be Christians and yet live like the world around them. The damage done by this passage in the church today comes from those who see the "carnal Christian" as a tolerated class of people within the church. Several comments should be made here:

Carnality is blameworthy, not normal. No one who is in a carnal condition should be comfortable about it. People who seem satisfied to live their lives as "carnal Christians" are abusing the teaching of Paul.

Secondly, the carnal man is outwardly indistinguishable from the natural man. Because that is the case, one who is carnal can have no confidence of his standing in Christ. Paul knew that these people in Corinth were immature believers. No one who is living according to the wisdom of the world may find reason within himself for any such confidence. Consequently, there are such things as “carnal Christians,” but no man may presume to place himself in that category. The man who lives in a fleshly way has good reason to question his relationship to Christ.

- Verses 5-9 - Paul shows that the Corinthians were using worldly wisdom as the basis for their divisions. The ministers of the Gospel are united because they are channels through whom the same God accomplishes His work. They are not competitors, but fellow-laborers in the same enterprise. How important it is for preachers today to display such an attitude!

#### THE BUILDING OF GOD (verses 10-17)

It is important to note that, although this passage is often used in reference to individual Christians, the context makes it clear that the church as a whole is in view. While the individual acts of a believer make up his contribution to the building of the church, it is the church he is building, not his own individual “mansion.”

- Verses 10-11 - The foundation of the church is Christ, and this foundation is laid by the evangelist (in this case Paul himself) who brings the Gospel to the unsaved. The church is built up by the labors of many, and each is responsible for his own contribution.
- Verse 12 - Different builders use different materials, varying in beauty and permanence. Paul clearly is implying that the Corinthians were building with inferior material (i.e., worldly wisdom), while men such as Apollos and Peter, along with himself, had been using the good stuff.
- Verse 13 - Fire in Scripture can represent either judgment or purification, and here it means both. Inferior building materials are destroyed, while valuable materials are purified and made even more beautiful.
- Verses 14-15 - We are not saved by works. Inferior service to the church does not cause a person to lose his salvation, but he will have no labors of value to offer to the Savior.
- Verses 16-17 - Again, the picture is collective. Though Paul later uses the same image in an individual sense, it is here intended to picture the entire church. The Corinthians are destroying that church with their divisiveness, while they are supposed to be building it up. Paul warns them that God will not tolerate such behavior.

#### THE WISDOM OF THE WORLD (verses 18-23)

Paul now returns to his main theme in this section, namely the fact that their infatuation with the wisdom of this world is tearing apart the Corinthian church. He reiterates the contrast that is found in chapter two.

- Verse 18 - The Corinthians prided themselves on their quantity of worldly wisdom. Paul tells them they would be better off without it.
- Verses 19-20 - Paul bolsters his point with two Old Testament quotations, taken from Job 5:13 and Psalm 94:11. The first is a rather loose rendering of the words of Eliphaz that

conforms to no known Old Testament text, while the second is quoted from the Septuagint with one alteration to apply it directly to the point in question (Paul inserts “of the wise” in place of “of man”).

- Verses 21-23 - Because the wisdom of man is foolishness, the Corinthians are not to pride themselves on the wisdom of any man, even good men like Paul and Apollos. Instead of saying, “I belong to Paul (or Apollos),” they should recognize that the ministries of Paul and Apollos are just part of the grace that God has given to his people and that that same grace includes all of life and all of the world. Lest they move from limiting themselves to one particular aspect of God’s ministry in their midst to an arrogant superiority to all God has given them, Paul reminds them that all of these things, as well as the Corinthians themselves, ultimately belong to God.

Next week, as we cover chapter four, we will conclude Paul’s discussion of this foundational matter of godly wisdom as it applies to the life of the Christian and the church.



## I CORINTHIANS - LESSON V

### I Corinthians 4

This week, as we consider the fourth chapter of I Corinthians, we arrive at the conclusion of Paul's discussion of the divisions in the Corinthian church. At this point, Paul has already hit them with all of the theological and practical arguments he is going to bring up on the subject. He now turns to an intensely personal approach in which he uses his own attitude toward his ministry as an example for them to follow. He had done this already in 2:1-5 with regard to his message and his method, but now he reveals to them his very heart.

#### THE FAITHFULNESS OF THE MINISTERS (verses 1-5)

Paul had ended chapter three by making the point that all things belonged to the Corinthians in Christ, yet they were themselves subject to Christ in all things. He continues now to show the foolishness of their factionalism in this light by emphasizing the unity of the ministers of the Gospel.

- Verse 1 - By using the plural "us," Paul groups himself, Apollos, and all other ministers of the Gospel together, in contrast to the way the Corinthians were playing them off against one another. He uses two terms to describe such men - "servants" and "stewards." The word translated "servant" is not the usual *doulos*, but *huperetas*, a word designating a free servant as opposed to a slave (the Corinthians had been treating Paul as if he were their slave). A steward was a servant who was given responsibility over other servants and exercised authority on behalf of his master. In this case, it was the revelation of the Gospel with which these stewards had been entrusted.
- Verse 2 - The most important characteristic of a steward is faithfulness, not eloquence or forcefulness, as some of the Corinthians were contending. Why is it important for us to realize this when we listen to preachers in our own day?
- Verses 3-5 - A steward is responsible to his master, not to the other servants. Consequently, Paul does not care what the Corinthians think of him. They have no right to judge him anyway. In fact, he acknowledges that he does not even have the right to evaluate his own ministry. Such evaluation means little; the judgment of Christ is what counts.

#### THE PRIDE OF THE CORINTHIANS (verses 6-13)

Having asserted the unity of the messengers of the Gospel along with their accountability to Christ alone, he now turns to the Corinthians and chastises them directly for their insufferable arrogance in this whole matter.

- Verse 6 - Paul points out here that the arrogance of the Corinthians is derived from exceeding "what is written." Their factions were built around values that were not found in Scripture. Divisiveness within the church often has its roots in distinctions that involve going beyond the Word of God, requiring more of people than what the Bible does. This can be particularly devastating when it is applied to those who lead the church.
- Verse 7 - The Corinthians, in their pride, were acting as if all of their abilities and gifts (which were considerable) were of their own making. They ignored the fact that all they

were, they were by the grace of God. A person cannot boast about what has been given to him apart from any desert on his part.

- Verse 8 - Paul here mocks the attitude of the Corinthians toward themselves in their supposed maturity and wisdom. How could they actually believe they had advanced beyond the level of the apostles themselves?
- Verse 9 - In contrast, the apostles are universally despised, suffering persecution and deprivation at the hands of all men. The word translated “spectacle” here refers to the shows in the Roman amphitheaters. Though this letter was written almost a decade before Christians began suffering in the arenas of the Empire, Paul sees the handwriting on the wall. He feels as though he were already a spectacle at one of the Roman circuses.
- Verse 10 - Again, the contrast between the attitude of the Corinthians toward themselves and the attitude of the world toward the apostles. The incongruity is intended to strike the Corinthians as being a bit peculiar.
- Verses 11-13 - The description of the ministers of the Gospel is not only intended to illustrate further the suffering that is their lot in life, but also to contrast their attitude with that of the Corinthians. Paul worked when he could have asked the Corinthians to support him; he praised the Corinthians when he could easily have returned their vitriol in kind; he tried to bring peace in the church when he just as easily could have washed his hands of the whole situation.

#### A CHALLENGE TO HUMILITY (verses 14-21)

In the closing verses of the chapter, Paul really gets personal with the believers at Corinth. As a father speaking to children, he both reminds them of his love and wields the rod of chastisement before them as an encouragement to obedience in the future. In the exercise of true fatherly affection, he must do both.

- Verse 14 - Paul addresses the Corinthians as a father speaking to his children. When a father points out the wrongs done by his child, he does not do it to shame the child, but instead to encourage the child to better behavior in the future.
- Verse 15 - As the one God used to found the Corinthian church, Paul perhaps has more right to speak in this fatherly fashion than the other teachers to whom the Corinthians were listening. These other “tutors” are compared to the slaves who would be responsible for teaching the children of a Roman household. The child could gain much from such teachers, but they were not the same as the father of the child.
- Verse 16 - In what sense are the Corinthians to imitate Paul? As he later says in 11:1, he is to be imitated only insofar as he is an imitator of Christ. In this specific context, however, Paul clearly wants the Corinthians to imitate his humble attitude.
- Verse 17 - Paul is sending Timothy to Corinth to help in this imitation process. Why? Because Timothy does indeed imitate Paul in this respect. He displays in his own life the kind of humility that Paul is trying to cultivate in the Corinthians. Paul also does not want the Corinthians to think they are being singled out for special treatment. He makes it clear that the things he has been saying to them are principles he has been teaching to all the churches in which God had placed him.

- Verse 18 - Paul clearly here is referring to the attitude of some of the leaders within the church, who were boasting of their prowess in contrast with the weakness of Paul and were even suggesting that Paul would not have the nerve to set foot in Corinth again.
- Verses 19-20 - Paul responds that he will indeed come, Lord willing (this was not just a cliché with Paul), and that then these arrogant leaders would have to put up or shut up. When he talks here about power, he is not referring to the miracles performed by the apostles to authenticate the Gospel, but rather to the power of a Christlike life that was displayed only by those who were living in the Spirit. Paul practiced what he preached; could the same be said of these arrogant leaders in the Corinthian church?
- Verse 21 - Paul concludes by reasserting his fatherly authority over the Corinthians, asking the same type of question that a father asks his children when he hears noise in the bedroom - “Do you want me to come up there with a hug or with the belt?”



## I CORINTHIANS - LESSON VI

### I Corinthians 5

Having completed the section of the letter in which Paul deals with divisions in the church, he now turns to the second matter reported by those of the house of Chloe, that of immorality in the church. This follows logically from the preceding passage because it was in all likelihood those who took for themselves the name of Paul who were in the forefront of the abominable practice that Paul here chastises. He must make it clear that the libertines who had misinterpreted his teaching did not enjoy his support, either directly or by implication.

#### THE PROBLEM (verses 1-2)

Very simply stated, the problem was the existence in the church of a case of incest - a man in the congregation had married his stepmother. Such sin was frowned upon even by the loose-living Romans. When Herod Antipas married Herodias, his brother's wife, it tickled the ears of many a gossip in the imperial city, as did the later liaison between Herod Agrippa II and his sister Bernice. The imperial family itself was not a stranger to such goings-on, most notoriously so during the reign of the crazed Caligula. But the fact that it occasionally happened does not mean that it was tolerated among the Gentiles. Instead, it was a cause for disgust and scandal.

Worse than the actual practice was the pride of the Corinthians that led them to tolerate it. While Paul sees excommunication as the obvious requisite at this point, the Corinthians view their toleration as a greater good - their broad-mindedness is seen by them as lifting them above the narrow moral bigotry of the rest of the church. Such an attitude, which is extremely prevalent in the church today, implies a standard of morality that is superior to that of God Himself!

#### THE SOLUTION (verses 3-8)

Paul now presents to the Corinthians, in language that leaves no alternatives, the solution to the condition that exists in the church - the offender must be excommunicated.

- Verse 3 - Paul is able to give a verdict without even being present. Some matters leave no room for mitigating circumstances. What is wrong is wrong, and no debate is possible.
- Verse 4 - The excommunication that is to be carried out is said to carry three levels of authority. The first is the authority of the congregation ("when you are assembled"). The act of excommunication is the act of the body in concert, not just its leadership. It is enacted by the body as a whole and enforced by the body as a whole. The second level of authority is that of the apostle. Apostles had special authority in such matters (e.g., Ananias and Sapphira) that has not been passed on to later leaders in the church. The use of this apostolic authority is often thought to be reflected in the wording of verse 5. The third is the authority of Christ Himself. This corresponds to the promise Jesus gave to His disciples in Matthew 16:19; 18:18-20. This does not mean that the courts of heaven automatically rubber-stamp any verdict delivered by the church, but rather that divine guidance will be given to the church in such matters.
- Verse 5 - The language here has produced two major interpretations. The first sees "deliver such a one to Satan" as descriptive of excommunication, in the sense that one who is

excluded from the church is cast out into the darkness of Satan's kingdom. In this case, the destruction of the flesh would imply the turning away from the lower nature that such an action hopefully would produce. Others have maintained that what is in view here is a special exercise of apostolic discipline involving the actual use of Satanic destruction of the body. The perversion of this concept by the leaders of the Inquisition will forever be a blot upon the history of Christendom. Whatever the interpretation may be, one thing is obvious - the purpose of the excommunication is ultimately one of repentance and restoration. The goal is not to condemn a person to hell, but to restore him to repentance and faith. In fact, many scholars believe that this was precisely what happened in this case, on the basis of II Corinthians 2:5-11; 7:8-13. Another interesting point to be noted is that, though excommunication is required by the situation, divorce is not. This confirms the sanctity of the marriage bond by indicating that a marriage is a marriage, even if it was contracted sinfully.

- Verses 6-8 - Paul now borrows an analogy from the Old Testament, likening the Corinthian situation to that of the Israelites prior to the Passover. The leaven that was to be scrupulously removed from the houses of the Israelites is likened to the sin that is to be rooted out from the Corinthian church. The comparison between leaven and sin is an appropriate one because the chief characteristic of leaven is that it spreads and permeates anything into which it is introduced.

#### THE PRINCIPLE (verses 9-13)

Paul now introduces the general principle behind the specific instructions he has just finished giving to the congregation at Corinth. This principle is important not only for this matter of church discipline, but also because of a misunderstanding of some of Paul's earlier teaching by another group within the church.

- Verse 9 - Paul here alludes to an earlier letter he had written to the church at Corinth that had been misunderstood by some in the congregation. This letter has not been preserved for us. Does the fact that this letter is missing cause any anxiety with regard to the composition of the canon of the New Testament? It need not, since we can be confident that God has preserved for us those books that He intended for us to have.
- Verse 10 - Some had taken Paul's earlier teaching to mean that they should separate themselves from all sinners. This would not only lead to a monastic sort of existence, but would eliminate the witness of the church to a large extent and would certainly violate the example of Jesus Himself.
- Verse 11 - The basic principle, which Paul has just applied in the preceding verses, is that Christians are not to associate with professing Christians who are living in open sin. While this obviously requires the exercise of formal discipline within the church, to what extent is this refusal to associate to be taken? What is meant by Paul's command "not even to eat with such a one"? Interpretations have ranged between two extremes, from the simple exclusion from the Lord's Supper to the shunning practiced by certain Anabaptist sects. Just what does Paul require here? His command "not to associate" seems to go farther than exclusion from Communion, yet the Bible never gives grounds for treating anyone as an "unperson." The thrust of the passage seems to be that such a person is not to be treated as a fellow-believer. The importance of this lies in the testimony of the church before the world. Is it any wonder

- that unbelievers have no notion of what a Christian really is when people of all kinds claim to be Christians and churches go out of their way to give legitimacy to such diverse claims?
- Verses 12-13 - Paul concludes by reaffirming the necessity of excommunication, while stating the impossibility of exerting Christian discipline on an unbelieving world. This has not stopped the church from trying to do just that, of course. How often in its history has the church sought to use the arm of the state to enforce Christian standards on unbelievers, whether it be “blue laws” in the early twentieth century or heresy laws in the Middle Ages? The church has no business enforcing discipline on the unbeliever, but is absolutely required to enforce such discipline on those who profess to be Christians.



## I CORINTHIANS - LESSON VII

### I Corinthians 6

In the sixth chapter of I Corinthians, we arrive at the conclusion of Paul's response to the report he received from the house of Chloe. He continues here to deal with ethical matters, namely litigation and fornication in the church. These problems are of a far more general and widespread nature than the matter of incest he discussed in chapter five. Yet the same root of pride is behind both of these problems. The pride that makes them think themselves superior to their brothers moves them to take one another to court rather than trusting the judgment and discernment of their fellow Christians. The same pride makes them disdainful of the moral standards that other Christians think important.

#### LITIGATION (verses 1-11)

It is not only twenty-first-century Americans who are suit-happy. The Corinthians also had the tendency to take one another to court at the drop of a hat. Paul here castigates them for this practice.

- Verse 1 - The phrasing of Paul's question both defines and criticizes the behavior of the Corinthians. The cases in question are property cases, civil rather than criminal in nature. Paul clearly indicates in Romans 13 that criminal cases are within the jurisdiction of the state. Paul's suggestion that Christians should handle their own civil cases is not at all unusual, since it was common practice for the Romans to turn such matters over to their subject peoples (e.g., the jurisdiction given the Sanhedrin in deciding matters of Jewish law). Paul now goes on to give some reasons why such matters should be handled by Christians among themselves rather than taking them to secular magistrates.
- Verses 2-3 - The first reason Paul gives is that Christians will in the future be given much more weighty matters to judge. Though he does not elaborate on the specifics, the point is that those who are to reign with Christ should be able to rule their own affairs. [NOTE: Other reasons can also be given besides those mentioned by Paul. The presence of the Spirit of God in the believer gives him resources for judgment unavailable to the non-Christian. In addition, the sight of Christians taking one another to court does nothing to enhance the reputation of the church among unbelievers.]
- Verse 4 - There are several interpretations given to this verse. Some suggest that Paul is asking a question: "When your church deals with civil issues, do you appoint the least esteemed among you to serve as judges?" Others say he is speaking ironically: "If you must bicker about these things, then set the least of your members up as judges over you (rather than submitting them to unbelievers)!" Still others see the reference to "judges who are of no account" as an allusion to the secular courts. In any case, Paul is indicating that the secular courts are far less qualified to deal with disputes among believers than are the Christians themselves.
- Verses 5-6 - Paul considers their behavior to be shameful. For all their pride at their worldly wisdom, they are implying that there is no one in their midst who is qualified to judge their disputes. Actually, this attitude is a manifestation of their pride, since they are unwilling to submit themselves to the judgment of another believer. The same individualism and

- unwillingness to trust the judgment of others often brings shame upon our churches today, as disputes go unresolved and eventually spill out embarrassingly into the secular courts.
- Verses 7-8 - The very fact that they are taking one another to court is seen by Paul as a defeat. This is true for two reasons. The first is that their church discipline obviously is not working properly - disputes are not being handled in the early stages in an edifying manner. The second is that the Corinthians are obviously thinking of themselves before their brothers. They are willing, not only to gain at the expense of their fellow Christians, but even to cheat other believers and take advantage of them (Do we not face the temptation to take financial advantage of our brothers and sisters *because* they are Christians?).
  - Verses 9-11 - Paul now lists again the sins that characterize unbelievers in order to imply that their current behavior is every bit as bad as these overt sins from which God had delivered them. How easy it is for us to classify some sins as more serious than others, while winking at our own sins of selfishness and covetousness. But if the Spirit of God empowers God's people to leave behind the heinous sins of the flesh, He can also enable us to turn away from the more subtle sins that continue to plague us.

#### FORNICATION (verses 12-20)

It appears that not all of the Corinthians had turned away from the more obvious sins of the flesh. The libertarians again poke up their ugly heads to assert their liberty in Christ in areas of fleshly indulgence, particularly in relationship to human sexuality.

- Verses 12-14 - Some Corinthians were using a startlingly modern argument to support their sexual license. They maintained that sex was a natural physical drive, like hunger, and that the gratification of such a physical drive was essentially amoral, like eating. The body was transitory in nature, and therefore what we did with our bodies was of no spiritual significance. [NOTE: This line of argumentation was characteristic of the Epicureans, who concluded that the insignificance of the body in the eternal scheme of things meant that the pleasures of the flesh carried no ultimate moral weight.]  
 Paul gives four principles that must be considered when dealing with any ethical issue. The first is the principle of edification. We should ask, "What is good about it?" instead of defensively asking, "What's wrong with it?" The second principle is that of mastery. If it controls my life and my time rather than me being able to control it, it is wrong. The third is the principle of stewardship, which says that the body belongs to the Lord by right of creation and should be used for His glory. The fourth is the principle of redemption, which says that the Lord cares about the Christian's body enough to have redeemed it, and therefore it should be used appropriately. This is further reinforced by the promise of the resurrection of the body, about which Paul will have more to say in chapter fifteen.
- Verses 15-17 - Paul now turns specifically to the problem of sexual immorality. Two points are to be noted here. The first is that sexual union involves more than the joining of two bodies. The notion that sex is no more than physical, tragic in its implications, is not unique to the twenty-first century. The broken lives of many attest to the falsity of the idea that sex is a purely physical act. The second point to be noted is that Christians have been incorporated into the Body of Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit. This union is far more basic and foundational than anything of a physical nature. Consequently, any physical union

must be in congruence with, rather than in contrast to, the mystical union of believers in the Body of Christ. Paul makes it clear in Ephesians 5 that the marriage bond is such a congruent union, but it is equally evident here that immoral liaisons are a contradiction of the purity of the believer's union with Christ and other Christians.

- Verse 18 - A further argument is that immorality is self-destructive, opposing the very self-love that is inherent in each of us. Whether he alludes here to sexually-transmitted diseases is not the issue, but he could well have had such things in mind.
- Verses 19-20 - What Paul applied to the church as a whole in 3:16-17 he now applies to the individual believer. The body of the Christian, far from being insignificant, is the Holy of Holies, the dwelling place of the Shekinah glory. Having been bought out of the slave-market, the body is now devoted to its new owner - Jesus Christ.



## I CORINTHIANS - LESSON VIII

### I Corinthians 7

The seventh chapter of I Corinthians begins the second major section of the book, in which Paul addresses questions raised by the Corinthians themselves in a letter sent to him. This chapter is enormously controversial in many ways and has been subject to many different interpretations. It is also quite lengthy, and thus will pose a major challenge to us as we try to cover it in a single week. The chapter falls into two major sections. The first deals with those who are married, the second with those who are single.

#### INSTRUCTIONS FOR MARRIED CHRISTIANS (verses 1-24)

These instructions fall into three categories - sexual conduct in marriage, the problem of divorce, and the general principle behind the instructions.

#### SEXUAL CONDUCT IN MARRIAGE (verses 1-7)

The issue here is asceticism, which apparently was being espoused by some of the married members of the Corinthian church. Paul indicates that asceticism has its value, but that it is not for the married, both because of the full union that marriage entails and because of the sexual temptation to which a person opens himself through abstinence. Paul allows only brief periods of abstinence for the purpose of prayer, but emphasizes the fact that this is not the normal pattern for marriage partners. It is certainly not possible to conclude from this passage that asceticism is a higher spiritual state than marriage. [NOTE the difficulties Jerome faced when he sought to encourage the married women of Rome to live lives of asceticism.]

#### THE PROBLEM OF DIVORCE (verses 8-16)

- Verses 8-9 - Paul begins here by advising the unmarried to remain in that state, but makes it clear that this is advice, not a commandment. Since Paul elsewhere advises that those who have lost spouses at a young age remarry (I Timothy 5:14), his advice to the Corinthians must be tied to “the present distress” mentioned in verse 26, which we will discuss later. His advocacy of celibacy must be viewed as *situationally conditioned*. We will return to this question later; Paul now turns to the married members of the congregation.
- Verses 10-11 - In dealing with those in the congregation who were married to Christians, Paul simply reiterates Christ’s teaching that the marriage bond is not to be dissolved. This in no way negates Jesus’ statement that the bond is dissolved by adultery, but asserts the general principle behind Christ’s teaching - that marriage is sacred in the sight of God and intended to be permanent. He also reaffirms the teaching of Christ by saying that one who unlawfully severs the marriage bond is to remain unmarried, or else be reconciled.
- Verses 12-16 - Paul now turns to mixed marriages in the church in Corinth. Since we know from II Corinthians 6 that Paul strictly forbid believers to marry unbelievers, we must note here that these mixed marriages occurred because of the conversion of one member of an unbelieving couple. In such situations, the believer is not to initiate divorce against the unbeliever. Paul gives two reasons for this. The first is that the godly influence of a believer

in the home is beneficial for the unbelievers in it (both spouse and children), and the second is that God may use the testimony of the believing spouse to save the unbeliever.

Verse 14, of course, is one of the key verses behind the doctrine of the covenant family. Some have interpreted this verse to mean that children of believing parents (or even of a believing parent) somehow partake of the grace of God, and thus are to be considered part of the people of God until they are old enough to decide such things for themselves. The pernicious evil of this teaching has long been seen among the children of professing Christians, who are taught to think of themselves as Christians despite the total absence of the evidence of God's grace at work in their lives. Like the "strangers within the gates" of the Israelites in the Old Testament, unbelieving spouses and children of believing parents enjoy some of the blessings of a godly environment without actually being under the covenant.

In verse 15, Paul indicates that a mixed marriage severed by an unbeliever is legitimately ended, and that the believer is no longer under bondage in such a situation (cf. Romans 7:2 - it is as if her husband has died; she is free to remarry). The reason he gives is that a believer is to seek peace, which certainly would not be found by forcing an unbeliever to remain in the family against his will.

#### THE BASIC PRINCIPLE (verses 17-24)

Paul takes the idea of peace that he has already mentioned in verse 15 and expands it into an application to the lives of all the Corinthians, as well as their many disputes. The basic principle he emphasizes in these verses is that different Christians have different callings, and that no one should look down on others because they have been called to a different sort of life than himself, nor should others be forced to conform to an artificially restrictive model of Christianity. Jewish Christians should live like Jews and not feel constrained to live like Gentiles. Gentiles should not think that they have to become Jews, either. Slaves should not clamor for their freedom (How different this is from the preaching of the theologians of liberation!), but should gratefully seize the opportunity should it become available. Our focus should be on our relationship to Christ, not our human condition.

#### INSTRUCTIONS FOR SINGLE CHRISTIANS (verses 25-40)

Paul here talks about the situation of those Corinthians who are not married. Though his instructions are essentially his own opinion, we may not forget that this opinion is part of inspired Scripture - as Paul himself points out in verse 40.

- Verses 26-27 - Paul continues his emphasis on remaining within one's calling by saying that those who are married should not seek divorce, while those who are single should not seek marriage. The reason given for the latter is "the present distress." This is not necessarily a reference to the Second Coming, as some have assumed, but probably refers to impending persecution faced by the Christians in Corinth.
- Verses 28-35 - Under the circumstances, Paul's advice has a very practical ring to it. He wants to spare the Corinthian Christians unnecessary grief and trouble. He knows that during times of persecution, one who is married carries greater burdens than one who is not because he must be concerned not only for himself, but also for his family. Some have even turned

from the faith in order to escape persecution, not for their own sakes, but for the sake of their loved ones. Paul notes that even those who are married are going to have to live as if they had no families, since they cannot concern themselves about the welfare of others when their testimony for Christ is on the line. He emphasizes the greater ability for single-minded devotion to the Lord found in one who has no family responsibilities. This should not be seen as an argument for priestly celibacy; Paul's words apply only to times of special stress and are addressed to all Christians, not just to leaders.

- Verses 36-38 - He closes the chapter by addressing those who must make such decisions on behalf of others (whether fathers of unmarried daughters or men engaged to them is unclear). Interestingly, he notes that the fact that the woman is "getting along in years" is a legitimate reason to go through with the marriage.
- Verses 39-40 - Paul concludes with a summary statement, which makes the following points that have come up earlier in the chapter:

1. Marriage is permanent, and the marriage bond may not be broken, even for allegedly religious motives.

2. When the marriage bond has been broken, either by death (stated) or by those things said in Scripture to sever it (implied), the person is free to remarry.

3. There is no justification for a Christian to marry an unbeliever. A Christian may be a witness to an unbelieving spouse, but this is no excuse for "missionary dating."

4. When the church faces times of great stress, there is good reason to consider refraining from marriage.



## I CORINTHIANS - LESSON IX

### I Corinthians 8

I Corinthians 8 begins a section of the book in which Paul is responding to another question raised by the Corinthians themselves. Last week, we saw his answer to a question raised about marriage. Today, he begins to respond to a question relating to Christian liberty. Since the chapter is so short, we will not attempt to divide it up into sections, but instead will look at the chapter as a whole, discussing its content by exploring a series of questions.

#### WHAT IS THE SPECIFIC ISSUE RAISED BY THE CORINTHIANS?

The issue raised by the church was that of meat offered to idols, but Paul uses this as a springboard to deal with a much larger question, that of Christian liberty and its proper uses. Corinth was a pagan city with a very cosmopolitan population. As was true with most large Roman cities, it was full of idolatry of all sorts. It was customary that when a sacrifice was offered in a pagan temple, it would be divided into three parts. One part would be burned on the altar, one part given to the priest, and one part returned to the person who had made the offering. The Corinthian Christians thus could hardly avoid contact with such meat. This is the meat that would be eaten at civic festivals, brought home and served for dinner by their non-Christian friends, and sold, often at a reduced rate, in the marketplace (the priests often had more than they could eat themselves, and would sell the extra to raise money for the temple). The question asked by the Corinthians - one which obviously had caused serious division in the congregation - was whether or not Christians may in good conscience eat such meat.

#### TO WHAT CLASS OF ISSUES DO THE PRINCIPLES ENUNCIATED BY PAUL PROPERLY APPLY?

It is often thought that the principles found in this chapter and in the parallel passage in Romans 14 apply to “gray areas.” Strictly speaking, this is not true. There really are no such things as gray areas. Everything is either right or wrong because it either honors God or dishonors Him. What we must recognize, of course, is the enormous complexity of categorizing different actions. There are some actions that are clearly proclaimed to be sinful by the Word of God. About such matters there can be no dispute. On the other side, however, it is virtually impossible to state categorically that a particular action is good, since an action is judged, not only on its own merits or on the results that it produces, but on the attitude of heart of the person performing the deed. Thus even an act of worship can be sin if it is done with a wrong attitude.

Another factor must be considered here as well. We are not only talking about actions that are adjudged to be right or wrong on the basis of the motive of the one performing the action, we are also talking about actions that in themselves are thought to be right by some and wrong by others, yet are not classified specifically as wrong by the Word of God. In other words, these are matters that involve the application of the principles of Scripture, but where Christians disagree on the application of those principles. Notice that the question of meat offered to idols fits this description perfectly. Paul states clearly that there is nothing wrong with eating the meat, but it is equally clear that some Corinthians think it is wrong. What are some matters today that would fit into the category just described?

## WHAT DO KNOWLEDGE AND LOVE HAVE TO DO WITH THIS PROBLEM?

In the first three verses of the chapter, Paul establishes a contrast between knowledge and love. This is not done because knowledge and love are in opposition to one another. Paul makes it clear in Ephesians 4:15 that truth and love are inseparable - there can be no real truth without its application in love, nor can there be any real love unless it is grounded in truth. The apparent contrast here is based, not in truth, but in supposed "knowledge" that the Corinthians are using to beat one another over the head about this question. It is clear that the Corinthians not only differed over the rightness or wrongness of eating meat offered to idols, but that each side was also firmly convinced that it was right and the others were sinfully in the wrong. True knowledge leads to humility and unity, not to arrogance and divisiveness. In the application of the principles of Scripture, love must be the determining factor, not supposed "knowledge." In matters such as this, people are more important than the rightness or wrongness of actions. The application of principle is to give way to the importance of showing love for fellow believers.

## WHO WERE THE STRONG AND WEAK BROTHERS?

Unlike the attitude of many of our more legalistic brethren, Paul makes it clear that those who feel the behavior in question is wrong are the weak, while those who can engage in it with a clear conscience are the strong. It must also be noted that both sides in the dispute in Corinth had wrong attitudes. While the strong were right in their assessment of the behavior and while the weak were being unnecessarily scrupulous, both had negative attitudes toward those with whom they differed. The weak viewed the strong as loose-living sinners who had never broken with their pagan roots, while the strong viewed the weak as super-pious snobs who sought to force their pharisaical values on everyone else, while at the same time living lives of constant fear and guilt. The strong despised the weak, and the weak condemned the strong.

Though we often think of this question as more readily applying to our fundamentalist brethren, does it not apply to us as well? On the one hand, we often look down on fundamentalists for their lists of do's and don'ts. But we at the same time have our own legalistic squabbles, whether it be over Sabbath-keeping, holidays, or the application of the Regulative Principle (which is itself an *application* of Scripture). We have our own strong and weak to look toward in these matters.

## WHAT IS A STUMBLINGBLOCK?

As it is used in this passage, a stumblingblock is that which causes someone else to sin. It is *not* something that causes offense - an infelicitous KJV translation that has led in many cases over the years to the tyranny of the weak in many churches. How can the fact that someone engages in behavior that is thought by someone else to be sinful cause that other person to sin? The sin occurs when, through the influence of the stronger brother, the weak brother does something that violates his own conscience. A person who violates his own conscience sins, even though the behavior may not be in itself sinful. This is true because a person who does something that he believes to be wrong is showing an attitude of rebellion against God, even if his judgment of the behavior in question is erroneous. Thus a strong brother may influence a weak brother to sin by his lack of sensitivity to the weak brother's (admittedly hyperactive) conscience.

## HOW ARE SUCH ISSUES TO BE RESOLVED?

The key matter for resolving such conflicts is the primacy of love within the body of Christ. It is vital to notice that Paul does *not* say that all Christians must agree on issues of this sort. *It is not necessary for the church to have total agreement on these issues in order for there to be unity in the body.* The attitude of the strong brothers should be one of loving concern and sensitivity for those who are weak. This sensitivity should include sufficient love for the weak so that they would be willing to forego activity that is completely moral in order to avoid leading the weak into sin. The weak, on the other hand, must show love to their stronger brothers in two ways. One is by refusing to condemn those who differ from them in applying the principles of Scripture. The other is to be open to instruction from the strong. Pride makes people unteachable. The weak will remain weak, their consciences bound about matters that are not sinful, as long as they arrogantly refuse to open themselves to the instruction of the strong. Each must give priority to deferring to the other.



# I CORINTHIANS - LESSON X

## I Corinthians 9

After outlining the basic principles involved in the issue of Christian liberty in chapter 8, Paul now illustrates those principles using the example of his own life. The defense of his apostolic ministry here is not of the same character as that in II Corinthians. In that later epistle, he is defending the legitimacy of his apostleship against those who were attacking him, perhaps even because of the content of this first letter. Here he is using his own apostolic conduct as an example of the kind of selfless love to which he was exhorting the Corinthians in their conflict over Christian liberty. The main thrust of the chapter is Paul's willingness to forego his legitimate rights and allowable preferences for the good of others.

### THE RIGHTS OF MINISTRY (verses 1-18)

The best example that Paul can give of a love that sets aside its own rights for the benefit of others is that of his own conduct as an apostle. The Corinthians were so wrapped up in defending their own rights (the right to eat meat offered to idols, for instance) that they failed to consider that there are times and reasons why rights may be deliberately foregone.

- Verses 1-2 - The first sentence of the chapter establishes Paul's intention to use himself as an example of the proper way to exercise Christian liberty. He then goes on to indicate the area in which he is going to draw his illustration - the exercise of his apostolic office. Though others within the church may question the legitimacy of Paul's apostleship, the Corinthians certainly cannot, since they themselves are the evidence that God has put His stamp of approval on Paul's ministry.
- Verses 3-6 - The prerogatives of the apostolate (and by extension, the Gospel ministry today) include three things as enumerated by Paul in these verses - the right to food at the church's expense, the right to support by the church, and the right to travel and enjoy these things in the company of a family. In short, the apostle has the right to expect the church to support him and his family financially, including food and lodging. Peter, the other apostles, and the physical brothers of Jesus (e.g., James and Jude) did these things; apparently, Paul and Barnabas were the only ones who did not. Paul does not say these things to elevate himself above the other apostles, but to show the Corinthians the extent of his commitment, which they apparently had taken for granted.
- Verses 7-10 - Paul now gives further examples to support his point, both from common sense and from Scripture. The government pays those who serve in the army, one who cares for a vineyard gets to enjoy its fruits, one who tends a flock uses the milk from the goats, and even the ox that is threshing the grain gets to stop and eat some once in a while. A basic principle of labor is that one who labors should expect to enjoy the fruits of his labor.
- Verses 11-14 - The spiritual application of this is that one who labors in the Gospel should enjoy (i.e., be supported by) the fruit of his labors. Those who sow spiritual seed should not only reap spiritual fruit, but material fruit as well. Jesus Himself indicated as much in His instructions to His disciples in Matthew 10:10 and Luke 10:7. What did Paul mean when he said that he refrained from exercising this right in order to cause no hindrance to the Gospel? Was he implying that Peter and the others were hindering the Gospel? What he is saying is that, under certain circumstances, living off the Gospel, while perfectly legitimate, might be

a *stumblingblock*. How could this be? We know that in Paul's day, as is true today, many charlatans were seeking to enrich themselves by passing themselves off as religious teachers. The extent of this problem is indicated by the detailed instructions given in the *Didache*, an early second-century manual of church practice, for ferreting out false teachers. Paul thus voluntarily passes up what is clearly his right in order to keep from causing evil suspicions among the Christians (and perhaps the unbelievers as well) in Corinth.

- Verses 15-18 - Paul immediately makes it clear to the Corinthians that his use of this example is not a subtle way of asking for the church's support. In fact, he disavows any boasting on his part by indicating that his behavior is not in the least praiseworthy. It would be praiseworthy if he were acting freely, exercising great magnanimity in carrying out his ministry. The actual truth of the matter is quite different from that, however. Paul insists that his conduct of the ministry is not voluntary at all. Instead, he is acting under compulsion, like a steward who has been given an awesome responsibility. Paul's reward is not in what he receives from the ministry, but in the conduct of the ministry itself. The work of God is its own reward. [NOTE: People today often remark about the nobility and self-sacrifice of those who serve Christ in low-paying positions as pastors, Christian school teachers, etc., implying that those who do so are worthy of praise for the choices they have made. While the writer of Hebrews does praise Moses for just such a decision, the fact of the matter is that those who serve Christ in ways such as this would be miserable if they were not doing so. Obedience to Christ, being the right use of a stewardship, is properly self-interest rather than self-sacrifice, though this is no excuse for not paying such people fairly.]

#### THE PRIVILEGES OF LIBERTY (verses 19-23)

Paul's refusal to exercise the prerogatives of his apostleship is not the only example of his life of love and concern for others. With regard to the Christian liberty issues specifically raised in chapter eight, Paul also passes up his rights in order to enhance his ministry. In matters of Christian liberty, he defers to the preferences of those among whom he ministers in order to be able to deal with them more effectively.

- Verse 19 - His freedom in these matters is absolute. Paul is the epitome of the strong brother in chapter eight. He may in good conscience participate comfortably in all of the behavior under dispute in the churches, but he refrains from what he knows may be good and profitable, thus "enslaving" himself to those who are weak, in order to preach the Gospel effectively to them.
- Verses 20-22 - Whether he is dealing with those who have scruples concerning the Jewish ceremonies or those who are uncomfortable about those things associated with pagan worship, Paul can blend in. He can mix with any group of Christians without sticking out like a sore thumb or making a point of their differences. This does not mean, of course, that he subscribes to the legal scruples of the weak; he is simply willing to be bound by them for the sake of fellowship and ministry. On the other hand, he refuses to take an "anything goes" attitude; his flexibility is always limited by the law of Christ.
- Verse 23 - Interestingly enough, he does this not only to win others to Christ, but also to partake himself of the Gospel. He clearly recognizes that one who is not willing to forego his rights and privileges for the sake of others is not living up to his profession, and thus may legitimately question his Christianity.

## THE DISCERNMENT OF PRIORITY (verses 24-27)

Paul closes the chapter by using several sports images, drawn from the Isthmian Games held every other year outside Corinth, to illustrate the value of discipline rather than indulgence in matters of Christian liberty. The Christian is not like the marathon runner whose main goal is to finish. The Christian life requires maximum effort, doing whatever is necessary to succeed. The discipline of the runner and boxer is nothing to that of the Christian, since the former seek only a temporal reward. The commitment of the Christian may even require him to turn his blows against his own body - not like the medieval flagellants, but in the sense of denying himself, for the good of his ministry, those things that are lawful. Proper use of Christian liberty is thus essential for effective ministry.



# I CORINTHIANS - LESSON XI

## I Corinthians 10

As we study I Corinthians 10 today, we reach the conclusion of Paul's discussion of the problem of meat sacrificed to idols. In chapter nine we saw that he used his own apostolic ministry as an example to the Corinthians of how such matters should be handled. That example was positive, in the sense that Paul was encouraging the Corinthians to follow his example. In this chapter, we find him using a negative example - that of the Israelites in the wilderness. The chapter contains three paragraphs. The first cites the example of Israel, the second clarifies the difference between liberty and immorality, and the third summarizes the entire matter on which Paul has spent the last three chapters.

### THE EXAMPLE OF ISRAEL (verses 1-13)

Though this passage is often used to support the instructional value of Old Testament history in particular and the study of history in general, the specific thrust of the material given here is to present Israel as an example of the dangers associated with the misuse of Christian liberty, concerning which Paul has been exhorting the Corinthians.

- Verses 1-5 - The basic purpose of these verses is to establish the fact that Israel was a covenant community. Because they were a group of professing believers, the behavior in which they indulged, and the judgment of God that followed it, is able to serve as a substantial warning to the Corinthians. All Israel together enjoyed the grace and deliverance of God, His guidance and provision in the wilderness, and the leadership of Moses. This did not prevent God from destroying them because of their unbelief and disobedience, however.
- Verses 6-10 - Paul now goes on to list specific examples of the disobedience and unbelief of the Israelites. How are these examples relevant to the Corinthian situation? The first example (verse 6) is taken from Numbers 11, when the people were complaining about the manna and remembering fondly the food of the Egyptians. God sent them enough quail to make them sick to their stomachs. The second example (verse 7) is from Exodus 32, the incident of the Golden Calf. The worship of Yahweh quickly took on pagan trappings in the absence of firm leadership. The third (verse 8) is from Numbers 25, where the Moabites seduced Israel to participate in immorality. The fourth (verse 9) refers to Numbers 21, the incident of the brass serpent. The final example (verse 10) refers to the rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram in Numbers 16. All of these illustrate aspects of the Corinthian practice of eating meat offered to idols, or dangers of the controversy that had grown up around it. They show the Israelites putting physical gratification ahead of spiritual values, allowing idolatrous practices to enter their own worship, giving in to the immorality of the world around them, complaining against those God had set up as leaders over them, and fomenting rebellion and schism within the community.
- Verses 11-12 - The above examples are intended as a warning. Those who profess to be God's people should not take their standing for granted. They cannot afford to take their profession lightly and expect God to ignore their behavior.
- Verse 13 - This verse is intended both to reinforce the warning given in the previous verse and to provide comfort and encouragement. It supports the warning because it eliminates all excuses; no one can claim he has ever faced an insuperable temptation or that his situation

was unique. The comfort comes from the promise of divine help in the face of frequent difficulty.

#### THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LIBERTY AND IMMORALITY (verses 14-22)

The Corinthians had indeed succumbed to the same temptation as that faced by ancient Israel. Their confident partaking of meat offered to idols had led them too close to a boundary they could not refrain from crossing. Though eating meat offered to idols was not wrong in and of itself, participation in the revelry associated with the feasts held in the idol temples was clearly sin.

- Verses 14-18 - Paul first establishes the point that participation in a religious feast symbolizes unity both with the deity and with the other worshipers. One may not engage in a feast in honor of an idol without acknowledging both the validity of the god being worshiped and affirming a unity with the worshipers of that deity.
- Verses 19-22 - This is true even though the idol does not in fact represent a god at all. Though the god may not be real, the worship of such false gods is demonic in origin and power, and a Christian may not participate without being tainted by it. This is terrible, both because of the impossibility of serving two masters (God and demons are totally incompatible), and because of the jealousy to which such infidelity stirs the righteous and holy God.

Before leaving this section, we need to consider its application for us today. In what way might the line between Christian liberty and idolatry be a fine one in our world? How can the arrogant exercise of Christian liberty seduce Christians into the practice of idolatry? In what ways can the exercise of Christian liberty be a danger to the strong brother who indulges with no twinge of guilt as well as to the weak brother who may be encouraged to act against his conscience?

#### FINAL SUMMATION REGARDING CHRISTIAN LIBERTY (verses 23-33)

Paul now brings together the warnings and exhortations he has already presented concerning this issue of Christian liberty.

- Verses 23-24 - These verses contain the two basic principles needed to deal with matters of liberty. The behavior that is freely permitted must also be beneficial to the one who is practicing it and edifying to others in the congregation. Furthermore, the second principle takes precedence over the first - the building up of others is more important than any personal benefit to be derived from the behavior in question.
- Verses 25-30 - Paul now gets down to the practical nitty-gritty. What do these principles mean for specific situations? He first says that, for the sake of one's own conscience, if a person encounters meat of unknown origin, whether in the market or in the home of an unbeliever, don't ask where it came from. This is not dishonest, because the meat has its ultimate origin in God, wherever it may have been since then. However, if someone makes the point of mentioning that the meat was sacrificed to idols, it is better to refrain, both for the sake of your testimony before unbelievers and because of the tender consciences of other Christians. This is not intended to be a dictatorship by the weak - they have no right to criticize the strong - but a matter of consideration of one believer for another.

Again, the matter of practical application for us arises. The important thing to keep in mind is that all of us are responsible to be sensitive to the consciences of others within the church, and to be careful also of the effect certain actions might have on our testimony in the world. Even if something is right and may be done with thanks to God, it should not be done if it is going to lead others into sin or tarnish the name of Christ in the unbelieving community.

- Verses 31-33 - All must be done to the glory of God - this is the ultimate standard for matters of Christian liberty. This not only means that a person should choose to do those things in which he may glorify God, but also that he needs to be concerned as to whether or not the impact of his behavior on the lives of others will bring glory to God. The Christian has no right to cause another brother to sin or to scandalize the worldling, no matter how much he thinks his behavior is glorifying to God. Paul closes with the same idea he emphasized in chapter nine - that his own example in these matters is worthy of emulation by the Corinthians. [NOTE: I Corinthians 11:1 is actually the last verse in this paragraph, and finishes the thought.]



# I CORINTHIANS - LESSON XII

## I Corinthians 11

The eleventh chapter begins the third section of the book in which Paul responds to specific questions that have been raised by the Corinthians themselves. The section before us goes from chapter 11 to chapter 14 and involves the conduct of public worship. The eleventh chapter deals with two subjects related to public worship - the covering of women and the conduct of the Lord's Supper.

### THE COVERING OF WOMEN (verses 2-16)

This paragraph deals with another outmoded custom that has not survived in modern society, much like the problem of meat offered to idols. Like that problem, however, the principles enunciated by Paul to deal with it are highly applicable to the church today.

- Verse 2 - Paul begins with words of praise, acknowledging the fact that the Corinthians had adhered to the practices in worship about which they had received specific instruction. There were clearly some things that Paul had neglected to mention, however, and the Corinthians had chosen to handle these matters in ways that showed poor judgment, to say the least.
- Verse 3 - Paul here lays down the basic principle that serves as the foundation for everything he says in the remainder of the paragraph. The relationship between men and women is analogous to the relationship between Christ and God - equality of essence alongside differentiation of role - while all, men and women alike, are subject to the authority of Christ. As the role of Christ within the Trinity requires submission to the authority of His Father, so the role of women in the church and in the world requires their submission to their husbands, and to male leadership within the church.
- Verses 4-6 - The problem that had arisen in the worship of the Corinthians involved the covering of the head during worship, especially on the part of the women. One of the major difficulties we face in understanding this passage comes from the problem of defining exactly what practice is here in question and why it is being forbidden. The following may serve as an outline of the interpretive options facing us.

### THE ISSUE IS HAIR

Some suggest that the problem was that women were wearing their hair in some unseemly way that disgraced their husbands and brought scandal upon the church. These views are based more on context than on custom.

1. Women were wearing their hair short like men. Some commentators believe that, in the light of verse 15, hair itself is the covering to which Paul refers, and the disruptive behavior of the women involved wearing their hair like men, somewhat like the unisex styles of "liberated" women in recent years.
2. Women were allowing their hair to fly around in a loose, disheveled fashion while engaging in ecstasies of worship. According to Numbers 5:18, a woman whose hair

was allowed to fly around in an unkempt manner was marked as having thrown off the authority of her husband through an adulterous relationship.

## THE ISSUE IS VEILS

Some maintain that the basic question is one of the veiling of women, one that is still an important cultural question in many places in the Middle East. These views are based more on custom than on context.

1. The unveiled woman was flaunting her freedom by removing the symbol of submission to her husband. Equality in Christ, some say, had caused the women of Corinth to practice equality in worship, in dress as well as the exercise of gifts (verse 5).
2. The unveiled woman was flaunting her Christian liberty by dressing in a way that only a prostitute would dress, thus scandalizing the church and the community.

There are several factors that in my view mitigate against the conclusion that hair is the issue here. The first is the distinction made between the absence of a covering and the cutting of hair in verse 6. Admittedly, the distinction could be between short hair and no hair, but the comparison would be far more vivid if some other covering were in view. The second objection involves the contrast set up between women and men in verses 4 and 5. The man is said not to have whatever covering is in view, not simply to possess less of it. This objection is particularly strong in opposition to the view that unkempt hair is in view, since the passage would then be suggesting that men should have unkempt hair. Furthermore, to suggest that the Corinthians should be bound by a ceremonial law, not only the Jews in the congregation but the Gentiles as well, would go strongly against the whole tone of Paul in this as well as his other letters.

I would therefore conclude that the veiling of women is the issue. Though there is no clear evidence for the idea that only prostitutes went about unveiled, it is obvious that the veiling of women was as much a sign of submission in the Middle East then as it is in some parts of it today. It must be emphasized that the issue involved is a cultural one. It was because of the symbolic significance of veils in the Mediterranean culture that the prohibition against unveiled women is given. A woman who went unveiled in public was making a statement, and that statement involved the rejection of the authority of her husband. The application to us today thus lies in principle rather than in particular. To take a prohibition directed at a cultural practice and absolutize it for all times and all places leads to legalism (e.g., the absolutizing of the prohibition against boiling a kid in its mother's milk producing the kosher legislation; the absolutizing of Jesus' prohibition against swearing producing the notion that one should not take an oath in court). Cultural practices against which prohibitions are directed cannot be asserted at whim, but must be discovered by study of the Scripture in its cultural context.

These verses thus say that any man who wears a veil abdicates his authority and disgraces himself (this did not become common practice among the Jews until 300 years later, but apparently some were experimenting with it even in Paul's day). A woman who goes unveiled, on the other hand, disgraces herself. Paul is not saying that this is only the case while she is praying and

prophesying, but that if it is true in general, it is no different during worship. We should also note that Paul is not here advocating that women in Corinth should prophesy - he deals with that part of the problem in chapter 14 - but simply acknowledging that such things are going on.

- Verses 7-10 - Paul now gives reasons for his prohibition. The man reflects the image of God through his dominion and authority, while the woman glorifies God through her submission. Woman was both taken out of man and created for the sake of man. Furthermore, even if none of the men in the congregation found the unveiling of women objectionable, the angels who attend worship would certainly be scandalized by the rejection of male authority by the women in the congregation.
- Verses 11-12 - Paul reemphasizes the fact that the differences in roles (authority versus submission) do not reflect essential inequality or even spiritual inequality.
- Verses 13-16 - Paul further bolsters his argument by referring to common sensibility, nature, and the common practice in the churches. The common opinion of men would condemn the unveiling of women in worship. Furthermore, nature itself has indicated that women are to be covered, through the provision of long hair for women and short hair for men (admittedly, “nature” has not always drawn the same conclusions on this subject). Finally, Paul pulls rank on the Corinthians by indicating that all of the apostles and all of the other churches do exactly what he has instructed the Corinthians to do.

#### THE CONDUCT OF THE LORD’S SUPPER (verses 17-34)

This passage is a very familiar one, and brings out a problem in the Corinthian church that was far more severe than the one discussed in the first half of the chapter.

- Verses 17-22 - The problems manifested in the Corinthian observance of the Lord’s Supper were fairly basic ones, but not really associated with the Supper itself. Rather, they involved an abuse of the pre-celebration meal, or *agape* feast. In the first century, Christians would often enjoy a communal meal together, culminating in the observance of the Lord’s Supper. But what was intended to convey the unity of the Body of Christ became in Corinth something that underscored the already serious divisions in the congregation. The problem seems to have been twofold. First of all, the factions within the church would stay to themselves, refusing to eat with those in the other groups. Secondly, the rich would gorge themselves and get drunk during this “love feast” while the poor members of the congregation sat by with nothing to eat. Thus the celebration of the Lord’s Supper was illustrating precisely the opposite of what it was supposed to show.
- Verses 23-26 - Paul here repeats for the Corinthians the proper procedure connected with the observance of the Lord’s Supper in a fashion very similar to that found in the Gospel accounts. He relates the occurrence at the Passover *Seder* the night before Jesus died, indicates that its continued observance is a memorial of Christ’s death, and says that it is to be practiced periodically until He returns.
- Verses 27-32 - Paul now warns them of the consequences of their behavior. The unworthy manner of eating and drinking clearly refers to the disunity and lack of love for one another shown by the Corinthians. A person’s relationship with God cannot be right if he abuses or disdains his brother. The solution to this is self-examination; the alternative is judgment, not

in an eternal sense, but in the disciplinary sense described in verse 30. This discipline is for the purpose of avoiding condemnation.

- Verses 33-34 - The proper practice, then, is to eat the *agape* in unity and brotherly love, or not at all. If the Corinthians were unable to wait for one another and share together in a harmonious meal, they should eat the meal at home rather than polluting the Lord's Table with their factions and haughty behavior.

## I CORINTHIANS - LESSON XIII

### I Corinthians 12

The twelfth chapter of I Corinthians is the first of three chapters devoted by Paul to the third worship-related issue with which he deals in the book, namely, that of the exercise of spiritual gifts in the church. Chapter twelve talks about the nature of spiritual gifts, chapter thirteen about the motivating force behind spiritual gifts, and chapter fourteen about the use and abuse of spiritual gifts. The chapter before us today falls into two sections. The first deals with the distribution of spiritual gifts (verses 1-11), while the second addresses the complementarity of spiritual gifts (verses 12-31). [I might as well mention before we start that in today's lesson we will not be addressing the issues surrounding speaking in tongues or the sign gifts in general. Paul deals with such things in chapter 14, and we will consider them at that time.]

#### THE DISTRIBUTION OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS (verses 1-11)

We saw in chapter one that the spiritual gifts possessed by the church in Corinth were a source of great pride to the people of the church. Paul now attempts to put these gifts in their proper perspective, and he begins by emphasizing the divine sovereignty at work in their distribution.

- Verses 1-3 - Paul sets the stage for the discussion that follows by indicating that it is the Spirit of God that distinguishes the Corinthians from the pagans they used to be. Those who acknowledge Jesus as Lord do so only by the power of the Holy Spirit. To assert, however, that Jesus is accursed (a term denoting devotion to God for the purpose of destruction, as happened to the city of Jericho in the Old Testament), which would imply that His death was a deserved punishment, is impossible for one who has the Spirit. The Corinthians, by their profession of submission to the lordship of Christ, show they are empowered by the Holy Spirit.
- Verses 4-7 - The gifts for which the Corinthians pride themselves are here said to be diverse. As we see later in the chapter, this diversity was the cause of much jealousy in the church. Here Paul points out the diversity, but accompanies his emphasis with several crucial ideas that the Corinthians seem to have ignored. In verses 4-6, he notes the unity upon which the diversity of gifts is based, since all have come from the same Spirit. The verses may seem repetitious, but the three different words he uses to describe the gifts tell us much about their nature (some have also pointed out, somewhat less convincingly, the Trinitarian possibilities in the three names used for God in the three verses). In verse 4, he calls them *charismata* (from which we get the word “charismatic”), a word that emphasizes the gracious nature of the gifts. In verse 5, they are *diakonia*, which indicates that they are means of service in the church. In verse 6, he calls them *energēmata*, which emphasizes the power being exercised by Christ through His church. He then notes in verse 7 that gifts are given to all, not just some, for the good of all, not just some.
- Verses 8-11 - In these verses Paul gives examples of some of the gifts given by the Holy Spirit. We know this is only a sampling by comparing it with other passages where the subject is discussed, such as Romans 12 and Ephesians 4, as well as with the list given by Paul at the end of this chapter. The gifts listed here involve speaking gifts, gifts of endurance and discernment, and various types of supernatural signs. These are given variously and sovereignly, and are intended for the purpose of edifying others.

## THE COMPLEMENTARITY OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS (verses 12-31)

Anything that is a source of pride to some becomes a source of jealousy and dissatisfaction to others, and this was exactly what had happened with the spiritual gifts prized by the Corinthians. To show the utter folly of such a situation, Paul turns to the image of the human body. The image is so familiar to us that it is difficult for us to imagine the power with which it must have struck the Corinthians.

- Verses 12-13 - The image is established in these verses, as Paul points out that, like the body that has many different parts and yet is one body, so the church of Jesus Christ possesses diversity within the context of a fundamental unity. The Spirit, which Paul has already established to be the distinguishing mark that sets Christians apart from unbelievers, has taken people from many diverse backgrounds and incorporated them into a single unit. [NOTE: It should be pointed out that while Paul is here speaking of the universal church, as seen by his use of the pronoun “we,” his application of his teaching to the congregation at Corinth shows that it has equal relevance to the local church.]
- Verses 14-19 - One result of the pride manifested in the church in Corinth was dissatisfaction on the part of many with the gifts given to them by God. The more visible gifts were coveted, and those who lacked them were discontent. Paul points out that diversity is necessary for any body to function properly. If the entire body were a great big ear, it could not function or even survive. All parts are needed. Furthermore, all parts belong to the body whether they like it or not. The fingers cannot take a vote to secede because they cannot see. God has put them where they are, and they really have little choice in the matter. They must acknowledge the sovereign wisdom of God.
- Verses 20-25 - Another manifestation of the pride displayed by the Corinthians was disparagement of the gifts of others. In the same way that those who lacked the more visible or spectacular gifts were dissatisfied, so those who had these gifts looked down on those who did not. The illustration Paul turns to here is very much like the modern expression “cutting off your nose to spite your face.” The idea is that one part of the human body does not deliberately injure another part, because all belong to the same body. In fact, those parts of the body that are weaker or less presentable in the eyes of the world are protected, covered up, adorned, and defended by the stronger parts of the body (somewhat like an athlete who compensates for injured joints by building up the muscles around the joints, or wearing protective equipment to shield the vulnerable areas). It is therefore natural that the weaker members of the Body of Christ should be given the greatest attention, since they are most in need of care. Besides, those who are unusually gifted have received their gifts for just this purpose. The result, whether in the human body or the church, is a smoothly-functioning *unit*.
- Verse 26 - If the body is functioning the way it should, it will experience corporate joy and sorrow. Have your hands ever been glad when your head was aching? If your fingers write a brilliant lesson or play a great piece of music, do your toes step on them in spite?
- Verses 27-31 - Paul here does something rather peculiar. After spending most of the chapter emphasizing the unity of the Body and the importance of all its members, he now turns and emphatically states that some gifts are greater and more important than others. This only makes sense in the greater context of this entire section of the book. The Corinthians were clearly focusing their attention on gifts of decidedly secondary importance, especially the gift

of tongues. He therefore makes it clear that tongues are of minor importance compared to the gifts associated with the proclamation of the Word of God. No one gift is possessed by all Christians, so it is unrealistic to think that any single gift can stand as a measure of spirituality. If this is true of significant gifts like those of the apostles and prophets, how much more is it true of a minor gift like tongues? Therefore Paul concludes by stating that, if the Corinthians insist on coveting the gifts of others, at least they should set their sights on something important, rather than squabbling over a gift that can be rather showy, but has limited value for the edification of others. Such a lesson has been a painful one for the church to learn in the past few decades, but there are encouraging signs that believers, both of charismatic and non-charismatic persuasion, are beginning to realize the value of Paul's teaching here.



## I CORINTHIANS - LESSON XIV

### I Corinthians 13

The thirteenth chapter of I Corinthians is one of the most familiar passages in the entire Bible. Standing on its own, it is a beautiful description of the virtue and character of love. In the context of Paul's discussion of spiritual gifts, it is a rebuke to the pride and selfishness of the Corinthians and lays a foundation for the proper exercise of the gifts given by the Holy Spirit to the church. The passage divides easily into three sections, dealing with the necessity (verses 1-3), character (verses 4-7), and endurance (verses 8-13) of love.

A word should be said before we begin to examine the passage itself about the Greek word for love used in this passage. As has often been noted, there are three principal Greek words translated by the English word "love." The three are *eros*, which is sexual or romantic love, *phileo*, which is the love of friendship and mutual interest, and *agape*, which is the unconditional love said to be an attribute of God. It is the third with which this chapter deals (interestingly enough, the same word was used to describe the communal meal prior to the Lord's Supper at which the Corinthians had been behaving so disgracefully). The ambiguity of the English word, particularly in the way our culture uses it, requires that we establish prior to our consideration of the chapter exactly what kind of love Paul is talking about. This love is supernatural, a fruit of the Spirit, and is commanded of all Christians in relationship to God and one another.

#### THE NECESSITY OF LOVE (verses 1-3)

The Corinthians, as we saw in the last chapter, had taken much pride in their spiritual gifts, but were exercising them with a high degree of competitiveness, caring nothing for one another, which had produced arrogance in some and jealousy and depression in others. Paul thus begins by making it clear that spiritual gifts, no matter how great they may be, are meaningless apart from the exercise of love in their performance.

These verses omit no division of the gifts Paul mentioned in the previous chapter. Speaking gifts, serving gifts, and sign gifts are all included. He mentions first the gift that appears to have been the greatest source of contention in the church, the gifts of tongues. Some suggest that the reference to the "tongues of angels" refers to ecstatic speech corresponding to no known human language, while others see it as a hyperbolic reference to a level of language facility unknown to man. Whatever Paul means by this statement, the implication is clear - the gift of tongues is empty noise when exercised without love. He then goes on to apply the same criterion to the gifts of prophecy, knowledge, faith, giving, and even martyrdom. The greatest preacher (dispute goes on over whether prophecy refers to supernatural revelation or edifying discourse on previously-given revelation; in my mind, 14:29 favors the latter, since passing judgment on divine revelation would hardly be necessary), the most discerning interpreter of Scripture, the greatest visionary, the most generous giver, the boldest martyr is nothing apart from love.

Why is this true? In the church, all things are to be done unto edification; the motive is to build others up, not draw attention to the one who exercises the gifts. As a person concentrates on building others up and meeting their needs, he himself is encouraged because he sees his life bearing fruit in the lives of others. In the context of the entire church, he finds that others are ministering

to him at the same time. It is important to note that the person who exercises gifts apart from love “is nothing” and “profits nothing.” Paul does not say that those around him will not profit. God has often graciously helped others by means of the gifts of self-centered men. The one who exercises the gifts gains nothing from this, however, because the fact that others are being helped serves only to build up his pride, and thus increase his sin.

#### THE CHARACTER OF LOVE (verses 4-7)

Having talked about the necessity of love for the exercise of spiritual gifts in the church, Paul now defines what love is like. It is interesting to note that he defines it in terms of what it *does*. In Scripture, love is an action verb. The section is built like a sandwich. Paul begins by telling us what love is, then what it isn't, then returns to what it is.

Love is patient and kind. It puts up with the shortcomings of others and compensates for the weaknesses of others. Anyone who seeks to exercise a spiritual gift in the church must do so with consideration for the ones to whom he hopes to minister. An insensitive person will never be able to reach others, no matter how great his gifts. One who serves must adapt to those he is serving, not expect them to adapt to him.

Love is not jealous, boastful, or arrogant. As we saw last week, the first of these was characteristic of those who lacked the more visible of the gifts in Corinth, while the last two were displayed by those who possessed such gifts in the church.

Love is not rude or selfish. Both were problems at the Corinthian *agape* feast (how ironic!), as we saw in chapter eleven, and we will see next week in chapter fourteen that they were also a problem in the regular worship of the church.

Love is not easily provoked and does not hold grudges. The party spirit and schismatic behavior of the Corinthians showed their fundamental lack of love, as minor differences drove them apart and kept them apart. They not only took offense easily, but they found it impossible to reconcile to one another once offense had been taken.

Love does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices in truth. Harking back to the body image of chapter twelve, Paul said there that the body cannot function if it does not suffer and rejoice together. There is no place in the body for one part to delight in injury suffered by another, and all should rejoice together when God is honored, no matter what instrument He chooses to use in the process.

Love bears, believes, hopes, and endures all things. This does not mean that love makes a person gullible or a doormat, but does insist that love accentuates the positive rather than the negative. Love will suffer rather than cause suffering, be deceived rather than deceive, think more of others rather than less, and in general be vulnerable to others rather than building up high walls of self-defense.

## THE ENDURANCE OF LOVE (verses 8-13)

The final quality of love that Paul chooses to emphasize is the fact that it never fails. This sets it apart from the spiritual gifts as well as other Christian virtues. The major contrast established by Paul in this section of the chapter is between the current situation and a future situation in which things will be different. This future time is defined as a time when prophecy, tongues, and knowledge will pass away, when the partial will be done away with because the perfect has come, when knowledge will be full rather than partial. Some see this as a reference to the believer's experience in heaven, while others think Paul is talking about the time when the canon of the New Testament has been completed and the revelation of God to man is finalized. Several factors favor the first view. First of all, the context of Paul's discussion suggests that what he says in verse 8 is intended to refer to all the spiritual gifts. The second interpretation would require that only the gifts associated with the apostolic office be intended, but Paul has been talking about all the gifts in this chapter, not just the sign gifts. Secondly, it is doubtful that Paul was anticipating, as verse 12 would indicate on the second interpretation, that his knowledge of God would be qualitatively greater at some future time in his earthly life than it was at the time of this letter. It is far better to see this section as referring to heaven, where spiritual gifts will no longer be needed, since all will be perfect and none will need edifying. Even the great virtues will be needed no longer; faith will have no more "unseen" to believe and hope will be realized, but love will go on forever.



## I CORINTHIANS - LESSON XV

### I Corinthians 14

This chapter concludes Paul's discussion of worship in the church, and focuses on what seems to have been the spiritual gift with which the Corinthians were most preoccupied - the gift of tongues. From the preceding two chapters, we already know that those who spoke in tongues in the congregation were looking down on those who did not, not only deriving spiritual pride from their gift, but also making it a test of spirituality. Paul now trains all guns on this divisive practice, and in this chapter indicates that tongues are of limited value (verses 1-25) and require strict regulation (verses 26-40).

Before we examine the text itself, it is necessary to discuss briefly two issues often raised in connection with this chapter. The first is the nature of tongues and prophesying; the second is the question of the cessation of tongues-speaking in the church.

As far as the nature of tongues is concerned, the question that arises is whether the tongues in question were human languages unknown to the speaker and hearers or some ecstatic tongue that corresponded to no human language. The incident in Acts 2 is often cited to support the former position. Two factors, however, favor the latter as far as I am concerned. The first is Paul's positive assertion that tongues are unintelligible to the speaker and hearers alike (verse 2). In a cosmopolitan city like Corinth, people would at any given time be present who could speak many of the world's languages. The incident in Acts 2, quite in contrast to what Paul says here, indicates that what was spoken was understood by the hearers, though probably not by the speakers. It is also possible that the tongues in Acts 2 could have been ecstatic speech, but that the miracle of interpretation was done in the ears of the hearers (note the precise wording of Acts 2:6).

With regard to tongues and prophesying alike, it is clear that Paul does not consider them to be revelatory in nature. Those who spoke in tongues or prophesied were not received as those who spoke the words of God - this was by no means perceived by the church as being on the same level as the inspired revelation of the Scriptures. Paul's comments in verses 29 and 32 show that the messages conveyed by means of tongues and the words spoken in the act of prophesying were to be subject to the judgment of the leaders of the congregation with regard to their orthodoxy and appropriateness. Were these words on a par with inspired Scripture, such judgment would be both unnecessary and blasphemous. Thus we must conclude that the gifts discussed in this chapter were not revelatory in nature, but were means of exhorting, instructing, and edifying the church. In the same way that preaching today is to be compared with the written Word and not simply accepted without question, tongues and prophesying were to be evaluated for the truth and orthodoxy of what was said by the speakers.

As far as the matter of the cessation of tongues is concerned, I myself am somewhat ambivalent. I have no difficulty seeing the validity of the argument that gifts of healing and miracle-working ceased with the deaths of the apostles, since such gifts are specifically associated with the apostolic ministry as confirming signs. The gift of tongues, however, is never specifically associated

with the apostles in Scripture, and I must admit that I have always found the arguments for the cessation of the gift less than convincing. On the other hand, much of what professes to represent the gift of tongues today tends to ignore the restrictions that Paul places on the gift in this chapter.

#### THE LIMITED VALUE OF TONGUES (verses 1-25)

In the first major section of the chapter, Paul emphasizes the fact that the Corinthians are generating pride, jealousy, and division over something that is really very insignificant. The insignificance of the gift is seen not only in the reasons given by Paul here in this chapter, but also in the fact that the gift is mentioned nowhere else in the New Testament epistles.

The first nineteen verses of the chapter make one basic point - that tongues is the least of the gifts because it alone among the gifts lacks the capacity to edify when exercised in isolation.

- Verses 1-4 - Tongues-speaking edifies no one but the speaker because no one but God understands what is being said. Even the speaker is not edified in terms of his understanding, but in his spirit, which may be uplifting, but is ineffable.
- Verse 5 - Interpretation is a distinct gift from tongues. Not everyone who speaks in tongues can interpret, nor can all who interpret speak in tongues. Thus the tongues-speaker cannot edify others unless his gift is used in combination with the gift of interpretation.
- Verses 6-11 - Paul now uses several illustrations to bolster his point, speaking of his own preaching, the use of musical instruments, and the common use of language. The Corinthians would not have been helped by his preaching at all if they could not have understood it. Music is meaningless unless it follows some intelligent pattern. The army bugler communicates nothing to the soldiers unless the correct pattern of notes is played. When people speak to one another, they communicate nothing unless they speak some language known to the other.
- Verses 12-19 - Worship in the church is to involve the whole man and the whole body. One who prays, speaks, or sings with his spirit, but without understanding, benefits less than one who does these things with understanding. One who worships in a way that leaves out the other members of the congregation does less than one who produces that which benefits the others who are present.
- Verses 20-25 - In this paragraph, Paul uses his second argument concerning the insignificance of tongues, which involves their effect on unbelievers. The quotation in verse 21 is from Isaiah 28:11-12, which speaks of the judgment God is about to bring upon the Northern Kingdom by means of the Assyrian invasion. The point made by Isaiah is that, because the people had not listened to the messages of the prophets, God was going to speak to them in another kind of language - the unintelligible tongue of the brutal Assyrians, through which God would communicate His words of judgment. The analogy Paul seeks to make is that any unbelievers who are exposed to tongues-speaking will think that the Christians are crazy and will be even more hardened in their unbelief. Thus to them the gift of tongues is a sign of judgment and an agent of hardening. Prophesying, on the other hand, can convict and save the unbeliever, in addition to speaking powerfully to those who believe.

## THE NECESSITY OF ORDER IN WORSHIP (verses 26-40)

The pride of the Corinthians had generated a competitive atmosphere in their worship services in which each was trying to outdo the others in the exercise of their gifts. The result was chaos. Paul thus gives strict regulations for the conduct of worship in Corinth. The following should be noted:

- Verse 26 - The worship of the early church was much more informal than ours. It was similar to the synagogue worship of the Jews in that many participated, interjecting at various points their contributions to the worship. The closest analogy we have in our church is the first part of our observance of the Lord's Supper, where members of the congregation are free to share openly.
- Verses 27-33 - The rules Paul gives are simple enough. One person is to speak at a time (as occurs in some charismatic services, the Corinthians apparently were producing cacophony by speaking all at the same time). Only a few should contribute in any one service, so that the people would not be confused by having to absorb a multiplicity of messages. No one should speak in tongues unless an interpreter was present (significantly, these requirements all indicate that the gift of tongues, like the other gifts, is under the control of the speaker, and is not a spontaneous thing that suddenly "grabs" a person uncontrollably). All that is spoken should be judged for its accuracy and usefulness by the "prophets" - those gifted expositors of the Word of God that God had given to the congregation. People were not to interrupt one another, but no one was to dominate the worship, either - if someone who was seated had something to say, the one speaking should allow him to contribute. The result is order, not chaos.
- Verses 34-36 - Paul now adds to the already-mentioned regulations that the participation in the formal worship of the church is to be by the men only. Women are not to prophesy or to speak in tongues (or, by inference, any of the other things mentioned in verse 26). Some have imagined a contradiction between this passage and 11:5, but it should be noted that in chapter 11 Paul did not assert approval of the practice he was describing. He apparently was willing to tackle one issue at a time and knew that he would be dealing with the practice later in the letter, so said nothing about it while dealing with the matter of covering. Verse 36 indicates that the Corinthians, in their arrogance, felt free to go against the common practice of all the other churches. They appear to have been unique in their toleration of female participation in the service, as they had been in the matter of women going unveiled in public (Paul's instructions to Timothy in I Timothy 2 appear to have been more in the nature of prevention than correction).
- Verses 37-38 - Paul again pulls rank, asserting his authority as an apostle and calling upon the Corinthians to recognize the truth of what he is saying. He also indicates that if they fail to do so, they and their practices will not be recognized as valid by other believers.
- Verses 39-40 - His conclusion to the whole matter is a very useful one. Though prophesying is vital and tongues-speaking insignificant, he does not want to generate an overreaction that would involve the banning of tongues-speaking. The gift is useful, but only within the carefully-circumscribed framework laid out in the preceding verses. The basic goal of all this is one of decorum and order in the worship of God.



# I CORINTHIANS - LESSON XVI

## I Corinthians 15

In the fifteenth chapter of I Corinthians, Paul deals with the final topic broached in this letter - that of the resurrection of the dead. Unlike the subjects dealt with in previous chapters, this was not a primarily practical issue, but we will see that it was a theological issue with significant practical implications. The Corinthian problem in this area stemmed from their preoccupation with knowledge - the issue with which the book began. The respected philosophers of the first century were all in one form or another dualists, exalting the spirit while deprecating the body. Sharp differences in practical application existed, since some argued that the insignificance of the body should lead a man to asceticism, while others maintained that a licentious lifestyle was more appropriate. Examples of both extremes existed in the Corinthian congregation, and Paul takes the opportunity provided by this example of selling out to popular culture to initiate a wide-ranging discussion of the nature and significance of the resurrection. The chapter is divided into six paragraphs, dealing with the importance of and the evidence for the resurrection of Christ (verses 1-11), the theological implications of the denial of the resurrection of the body (verses 12-19), the relationship between the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of believers (verses 20-28), practical implications of the denial of the resurrection of the body (verses 29-34), the nature of the resurrection body (verses 35-49), and the eschatological context of the resurrection of believers (verses 50-58).

### THE IMPORTANCE OF AND THE EVIDENCE FOR THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST (verses 1-11)

Paul begins the chapter, not with debate, but with established fact. The resurrection of Christ is not seen here as something for which Paul must argue. He presents it as essential to the Gospel he preached to the Corinthians and as a vital factor tied in with the salvation of sinners. He presents two forms of evidence for the resurrection of Christ, taken from Scripture and from numerous eyewitness accounts. These latter included many people known to the Corinthians, both personally and by reputation, as well as Paul himself, who saw Christ, not in the flesh, but on the Damascus Road. The resurrection of Christ is therefore not a matter of debate, and any teaching that contradicts this fundamental truth of the Gospel is not to be tolerated.

### THE THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE DENIAL OF THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY (verses 12-19)

In this paragraph, Paul shows that the denial of the resurrection of the body not only contradicts the fundamental truth of the resurrection of Christ, but that such a denial leads to other problems as well.

- Verses 12-13 - Paul makes the basic point that any denial of the general teaching of the resurrection of the body implies a denial of the resurrection of Christ.

- Verses 14-15 - Carrying the argument further, Paul points out that if Christ is not alive, those who spend their time preaching the Gospel are engaging in an exercise in futility (either that, or they are outright liars), and those who believe them are the most gullible of fools.
- Verses 16-19 - Not only would this imply the gullibility of believers, but would also leave all hopelessly in sin. Furthermore, those who have died in Christ are gone forever, never to be seen again. Christians are pathetic figures indeed if the resurrection of Christ is a myth.

#### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST AND THE RESURRECTION OF BELIEVERS (verses 20-28)

In this paragraph, Paul uses the Old Testament image of the firstfruits to illustrate the relationship between the resurrection of Christ and that of Christians. At harvest time, the first grain to be brought in was offered to the Lord. This did not mean that only the first grain harvested belonged to God, but was a symbol of the fact that the entire harvest came from Him and belonged to Him. Paul pictures the resurrection of Christ as a firstfruits offering - God was claiming Christ as His own, but Christ was not the entire harvest. The resurrection of Christ thus foreshadowed and guaranteed the resurrection of believers.

Paul also uses the idea of federal headship treated at greater length in Romans 5. If the death of Adam was the foreshadowing of the death to be experienced by all over whom he was the head, so the resurrection of Christ, which involved the conquest of death, foreshadowed the resurrection of all over whom He is the Head. Paul presents the resurrection of believers as being within the broader context of the defeat of death by means of the establishment of the Kingdom of God. [Some have seen indications of the order of future events in these verses, with different commentators using them to support both premillennial and amillennial eschatological schemes. In either case, the resurrection of believers must be seen within the context of the ultimate defeat of death by means of the work of Christ.]

#### THE PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE DENIAL OF THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY (verses 29-34)

Most of the attention given to this paragraph has been focused on verse 29. Though the verse is of some interest, the problem posed by it is probably at this point insoluble.

- Verse 29 - Commentators become extremely creative when they arrive at this verse, ranging from those who use it as a basis for church practice (as do the Mormons) to those who see it as another example of Corinthian aberration (whatever the Corinthians were doing, Paul is pointing out their inconsistency, not countenancing their practice) to those who seek to explain it away as an unusual way of describing something legitimate (some suggest that Paul is referring to replenishing through the baptism of new members the ranks of the church, depleted by the deaths of some). I tend to favor the second explanation, since we have already seen many instances of practices among the Corinthians that were unique among the churches of the first century.

- Verses 30-32 - A far more serious problem than the contradictory nature of Corinthian practice is the loss of motivation to suffer for Christ. If there is no resurrection, Christians certainly would be tempted to cling with much greater tenacity to this life.
- Verses 32-34 - Other Corinthians obviously had recognized the Epicurean conclusion drawn from a denial of the resurrection. As we saw earlier in the book, some in the congregation saw no problem with engaging in overt immorality based on a fundamental disrespect for the body.

#### THE NATURE OF THE RESURRECTION BODY (verses 35-49)

Paul now tackles the issue of the nature of the resurrection body. He considers arguments against the resurrection based on this question to be nothing more than straw men, and indicates through various examples in nature that the resurrection body is both the same as and different from the earthly bodies we now inhabit.

- Verses 35-41 - Taking examples from plant and animal life as well as inanimate objects, Paul shows that God is perfectly capable of taking the same matter and arranging it differently according to His purposes. Thus God is able to take the same bodies in which we now live and renew them for eternal life.
- Verses 42-49 - If it is true that the resurrection body is the same as the body in which we now live, it is also true that the body given to believers in the resurrection is different from the one we now inhabit. The old body is mortal, while the new is immortal; the old is sinful, the new is perfect; the old is weak, the new is strong; the old belongs to the life of the natural man, the new to the life of the spiritual man; the old is of the earth, while the new is of heaven; the old has its source in Adam, the new in Christ.

#### THE ESCHATOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF THE RESURRECTION OF BELIEVERS (verses 50-58)

Paul concludes his argument by pointing out the necessity of the resurrection of the body. Our present bodies simply are not capable of eternal life. Because of this, the dead must not only be raised to a new bodily existence, but those living at the time of Christ's return must be changed - their bodies transformed into the likeness of the body of Christ (the resurrection body of Christ is the best model available to us of what our bodies will one day be like). [Some have noted facetiously that verse 51 should be the theme verse of all church nurseries.] It is only when the resurrection has occurred that death will be finally defeated. It is because this final victory is already assured because of the resurrection of Christ that Paul is able to end the chapter with the confident exhortation to faithfulness of verse 58.