



Reflections On 1 Corinthians

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Introduction

I'm really not sure what to call this; is it a book, a Bible study, a devotional, a small group study, a commentary? To be honest, it isn't quite any of those things, yet it has aspects of all three. It's hardly long enough to be a book; it isn't complete enough to be a commentary. It's not quite a devotional, but it could be used for devotions. It's not quite a Bible study, but it could easily be used for that, too. If you're creative, it could also be used to teach a class, but it isn't in a proper format to be curriculum.

One thing differs here from the first two collections I have released. For this collection, I have not included discussion questions, but anyone could make up their own for use in a discussion or class setting.

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All blessings to you in Christ!

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A Brief Introduction to 1 Corinthians

Paul, the Apostle of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, was in Ephesus right around the year 55 AD when he began to receive news that the church in Corinth was in trouble. These two cities really weren't all that far apart, being on opposite sides of the Aegean Sea, and both being major port cities. Travel between the two was relatively easy in those days, and it would be no surprise that people from Corinth might make the trip to report their difficulties to Paul, and that Paul might dispatch associates to go over to Corinth check things out. Upon confirming that there were indeed serious issues, he wrote his letter in an attempt to take corrective action.

Corinth had once been a proud Greek city, but in 146 BC it had been conquered and destroyed by the up and coming legions of Rome, and for the next 100 years it remained desolate and sparsely populated. All of that changed in 44 BC when Julius Caesar, shortly before his death, re-established Corinth as a Roman Colony. We know from history that the Romans established colonies for the purpose of projecting their power into the far regions of their Empire, but military force was not the only power they projected. These Roman Colonies also projected Roman culture, religion, economics and trade throughout the Empire, and provided places for their soldiers to retire. One historian of the period wrote that Roman Colonies were miniatures of Rome itself.

Corinth however, was a special case, for it had been a strategically important port city when it was established originally by the Greeks, and it quickly returned to that status under Rome. As a result of its location, it was populated not only by Roman colonists, but also by Greeks, Jews, Syrians, Egyptians; peoples from all around the known world. Since ships could not yet navigate in open seas, they were forced to follow the coastlines around the Mediterranean Sea, and thus every ship that sailed from Rome to a destination beyond Greece had to call in Corinth— Corinth became an economic powerhouse.

As has been the case in major seaports throughout the ages, Corinth had a dark side; the streets late at night might be populated by sailors far from home looking for good times of drinking and female companionship, sexual practices of whatever sort were... shall we say... easy and free-flowing, as was drink and violence.

It would seem from Paul's letter, that some of these factors may have crept into the church.

Scholars often disagree about Paul's intentions in writing to the church there, and certainly he could have been a bit more explicit in setting out the exact problems he was writing to address. Yet we must remind ourselves that he was writing to people who were there on the scene and who knew exactly what he was talking about without any special introduction. While this might make our task slightly more difficult, Paul wrote the letter in a highly structured literary style that makes his purpose clear to anyone who cares to notice it. Looking carefully at the structure of his writing, we clearly find that he addressed eight major issues facing the Corinthian church:

1. Disunity and fragmentation of the church community (1:10-42).
2. Sexual immorality (5:1-6:20).
3. Sexuality, celibacy and marriage (7:1-40).
4. Foods offered to idols (8:1-11:1).
5. Problems in Worship (11:2-34).
6. Misunderstandings about spiritual gifts (12:1-14:40).

7. Misunderstandings about resurrection (15:1-58).
8. Misunderstandings about giving (16:1-11).

Of course, his letter is written in the typical format, including his greeting and prayer at the beginning, and few personal comments at the closing. We will dive into the next time; see you then!

Chapter 1

And so we begin

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,

To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours:

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

1 Corinthians 1:1-3

Although he has followed his typical structure in beginning this letter to Corinth, we can see right away that this isn't his typical greeting. Here he isn't merely an apostle of Christ, he is an apostle "by the will of God." As we have seen in the past, Paul often adjusts his greeting and thanksgiving to emphasize the message of his letters; Philemon provides a good example of that. Here, considering that Paul is writing to Corinth to correct a number of serious problems, he reminds them that God's will stands behind him and his message.

I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge— God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

1 Corinthians 1:4-9

Paul reminds his readers that God has confirmed his (Paul's) testimony to them about the Lord Jesus in that He has provided them with every gift they need to prosper in the faith. They have received all of the gifts of God to sustain them (there is no Greek word for "spiritual" in the original text).

Notice that Paul wraps this up telling them that God will see them through until the end, and they will be blameless in His sight. We might conclude that this is an important bit of encouragement before we get to everything they have messed up. Of course, Paul won't just tell them where they've gone wrong, he will also tell them how to correct their problems, and the fact that he has just reminded them that God's blessings upon them have confirmed his reliability is a nice touch as well.

Disunity and Fragmentation

I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of

you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ."

1 Corinthians 1:10-12

As we enter the first section of the letter, we might notice that Paul hasn't provided a thesis statement, a statement that tells us what he is going to talk about in this letter. If I were writing it, I might say it this way: "It has come to my attention that there are some serious problems in your community, and I am writing to you today in an attempt to help you to correct the situation."

I point this out because this is the first level of context that we need to keep in mind as we continue through the letter: Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to identify and correct several major problems they were experiencing in Corinth, c. 55 AD. If we forget that, we may run into difficulty understanding Paul's comments later on in the letter.

While Paul didn't announce his overall reason for writing the entire letter, he does clearly mark his change from one topic to another, and here we can easily see that he has moved on from prayer and thanksgiving to a discussion of disunity among the members of the congregation beginning in v. 10: Quit fighting amongst yourselves! To add gravity to his appeal, he cites his source of information, eyewitness accounts from Corinth itself from members of Chloe's household. According to his sources, people in the church are divided by their support for individual church leaders: Paul himself, Apollos, Cephas (Peter)... and Jesus. Ironically, Paul, Peter and Apollos are all on the side of Christ – they are not supportive of this division:

Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so no one can say that you were baptized in my name. (Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

1 Corinthians 1:13-17

Apparently, people were being divided along the lines of who was baptized or brought to belief by whom in a sort of rivalry between leaders that was concocted by followers. Could this thinking be like we might find when several people are fans of a sports team, but then divide over who the team's best player is? Naturally scholars divide over whose theory on this subject is the best, but whatever the reason for the division Paul is telling the people to knock it off.

Paul then goes on, in an interesting way, to say that he's glad that he personally hadn't baptized very many of them so that his faction isn't a big mover in this division and goes on to point out that many came to relationship with Christ through his teaching, which hadn't been terribly eloquent, lest his performance should in any way, overshadow the cross of Christ, which is the whole point of everything.

This is a lesson that would be important for all of us to take notice of, particularly those who are leaders in the church: We must never overshadow the real reason for everything: Christ. We must never encourage people to become followers of us, for we follow Christ, and anyone who is influenced by our leadership or teaching, must be focused on Christ, for in the end our jobs are to bring others face-to-face with Jesus Christ, and then we must get out of His way.

Much has been said this week about Billy Graham, and rightly so, for his was a simple message of salvation through Jesus Christ. His message was simple, clear and centered only on Christ, and so must ours be simple, clear and centered entirely on Christ.

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written:

*“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;
the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.”*

1 Corinthians 1:18-19

In verse 17 Paul began to take a turn into a discussion of the contrast between human wisdom, and the wisdom of God. Keeping context in mind, this comes as Paul's explanation for why the division is taking place in the Corinthian church community. In this subsection, Paul appears to be making the case that wisdom in this world brings about a great social divide between the wise and the unwise; the strong and the weak. This may seem like a rather strange line of reasoning for many of us today, but let's pause a moment and consider...

In our time in the West for instance, we live in societies heavily influenced by Progressive thinking relating to public policy. That thinking says that we must have a society that is regulated by educated and highly trained professionals who will make important decision for the benefit of the masses. The masses of people, it is reasoned, are simply not up to the task of making their own decisions in key areas of life, areas that professionals would be likely to make much better decisions than regular people. So, this professional class begins to make laws, laws that regulate behaviors, that require this or forbid that.

The result of this is that the professionals seldom hang out with the laborers with whom they have little or nothing in common, and society itself begins to fragment. Where that happens in society, and parts of society find themselves together in the congregation, they tend not to mix together very well. In Paul's day, there seem to have been groups in the Corinthian church who didn't mix well together, and they sought to be identified with leaders, like those named in the previous section, and consequently, the church began to fragment. If you recall our introduction to 1 Corinthians, and the brief discussion of Corinth and its status as a Roman colony that was also a major port city, you shouldn't have much difficulty seeing how that fragmentation could have taken place.

With this in mind, let's take a look at the verses:

Contrary to what many have claimed over the years, Paul is not setting Christianity up to be anti-intellectual. Think about it – Paul of all people is pretty much the most educated man in any room he walked into, and his great intellect is very much on display in every paragraph of this letter. No sir, he is not advocating anything anti-intellectual here. Instead, his message here is that Christ's work on the cross renders any social distinction irrelevant. He is teaching the people that they should forget all of their divisions as see one another as God sees them, not as this human world does. After all, brotherhood in Christ lasts for all eternity; social distinction will all perish soon enough.

Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

1 Corinthians 1:20-25

Do I detect the slightest little trace of sarcasm in these words – or would you prefer I call it irony instead? Whatever we call it, Paul is boldly making the case that social and cultural distinctions were playing a big role in the divisiveness that was taking place in the congregation in Corinth. He clearly isn't serious when he calls the simple gospel message foolishness, but in our time as well as in Paul's the learned in society make it out to be foolish. I think it's particularly telling in verse 22 that Jews demand signs, while Greeks look for wisdom "but we preach Christ crucified".

Think of all of the times in the gospels when Jesus performed miracle after miracle, and then someone would say, "show us a sign". Think of how often someone might say that the gospel just doesn't make scientific sense. What did Jesus say about such things?

He said "let he who has to hear, hear, and let he who has eyes to see, see." When our great wisdom, our lofty positions, our fantastic wealth become central to our lives, we might not even be able to see the noses on our faces. God is not limited by human understand, nor is He dazzled by human society or material wealth.

Those among our church communities who have great learning, or great positions or vast wealth must resist the temptation to believe that they are somehow better or more favored or superior to those less fortunate, for in God's eye, we all are His "little ones" and none is greater than the rest. For any of us to do less will eventually bring divisiveness to the church, and our Heavenly Father tends to find division among His little ones to be less than amusing.

God has called us to repentance and grace. He has called both Jew and Gentile, black and white, rich and poor, great and small, for to God all are the same.

I enjoy reading Mark Twain, the 19th century American novelist, humorist and social commentator. Something he wrote keeps banging around in my head, so since I can't seem to chase it away, I'll share it. Mr. Twain once wrote that all government officials, high and low, everywhere in the world should be required to perform their duties completely naked, for without their fancy outfits and impressive uniforms, oppression would disappear from the earth. That's how God sees all of us, and if we dare to think of ourselves the same way that God does, all of our wisdom and earthly importance seems rather silly... or so it seems to me.

Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the

things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.”

1 Corinthians 1:26-31

Paul sums up his point in these verses. Let's not forget that he is actually talking about division in the church, and he's making the general point that training, education, power and social position amount to little or nothing in God's eyes and shouldn't be all that important in the church; certainly, they should never be allowed to bring about the fragmentation of the Body of Christ.

It should be recognized here that from an earthly point of view, Paul's teaching is nothing if not counter-intuitive for us. Of course, that is precisely Paul's point.: God's ways are not our ways.

It is for us to remember that where we are weak, God is strong. Things may seem impossible to us, but with God, all things are possible. Does this all sound too simple, foolish... even childish? Maybe it is. Yet didn't Jesus say that unless we become like little children we couldn't enter the Kingdom of Heaven?

Chapter 2

Apostolic Humility

And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.

1 Corinthians 2:1-5

In this interesting paragraph, Paul moves his discussion of wisdom away from the Corinthian congregation, and onto himself as an example to illustrate his point about division and fragmentation. If we just take it at face value, he makes some great observations that we should take to heart. Yet his real point requires that we recall who is writing this.

Paul has called himself a Jew among Jews, a Pharisee with the very best education. In earthly terms, Paul is entitled to boast a bit, because he can back it up; he has a lot to boast about. As I mentioned earlier, Paul was the smartest and best educated man in most any room he entered, but he wasn't running around Corinth showing it off. In modern terms, there wasn't any swagger about him.

In spite of his accomplishments, in spite of his position as an Apostle, Paul was humble.

Yet it wasn't always that way. Recall that as a Pharisee, he not only participated in Stephen's murder, but he took persecution on a road trip. Yet on that famous journey of terror, he met Jesus Christ face-to-face and everything changed for him.

Apparently, the change Paul experienced in attitude had not yet taken hold in Corinth. If you or I were members of the Corinthian church and we were hearing his letter read for the first time, might we not ask ourselves whether or not such a change had taken hold of us?

As 21st century Christians, might we not ask ourselves if we have undergone such a change today?

The Wisdom of God Revealed

We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we declare God's wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written:

*“What no eye has seen,
what no ear has heard,
and what no human mind has conceived”—
the things God has prepared for those who love him—*

*these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit.
The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God.*

1 Corinthians 2:6-10

Paul's discussion continues in a very interesting way here as he moves from the simple message he preached to something much deeper. Recall that he indicated that his message in Corinth had been simplicity itself, but here he says that when speaking to the mature in Christ, but this deeper message has nothing to do with the wisdom of this world, for the wise according to the ways of this world simply cannot comprehend the wisdom that comes from God.

He refers to this "wisdom" as a mystery in verse 7: *we declare God's wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began.* He goes on to say that: *None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. (v. 8)*

Isn't that an interesting little tidbit? What's this "mystery"?

Paul quotes Isaiah 64:4 and tells his readers that the mystery is something that God has revealed by His Spirit, and that no one can conceive of it...

So, what is the mystery?!!

For who knows a person's thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words. The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit. The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments, for,

*"Who has known the mind of the Lord
so as to instruct him?"*

But we have the mind of Christ.

1 Corinthians 2:11-16

Paul continues his discussion of the wisdom of God with a compelling comparison: No one knows the thoughts of another person, except that person's own spirit within them, and no one knows God's thoughts except His own Spirit. In the 21st century we might be inclined to substitute the word "mind" for the word "spirit", but I would think Paul's statement is clear enough; so how can we know the Spirit or mind of God?

You might suspect that Paul is building an argument here, and if you were thinking along those lines, you would be quite correct, for that is exactly what he is doing. We've seen point one, and

now he moves to the second step: We have, in fact, received the Spirit of God within us in the Person of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Consequently, we actually *can* understand His gift to us, which appears to the world around us to be nothing more than foolishness. When Paul speaks to the mature, to those who can comprehend the mystery of God, he does so not in human reasoning or with merely human understanding, but under the direction of the Spirit.

Even the most brilliant of people cannot understand the mystery of God, for it takes a great deal more than human understanding to see it; it takes the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and we might add, so does saying what we're saying right now. Yet for someone who has the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, these truths are discernable because... (you might want to sit down)... *we have the mind of Christ.*

During the entire period of my training in Seminary, I was taught that we have the mind of Christ in the Scriptures, for they contain the entire written record of God's revelation of Himself to humanity. To this day, I believe that what I learned was true. Yet over the decades since then, I have also come to believe that what I was taught, though true, was incomplete – certainly, it is a bit at odds with Paul's statement in our text. To make this a little more interesting, I was also taught that there are at least 2 types of divine revelation: general revelation (the Scriptures) and special revelation which comes directly from God. Some of the old school professors always added "through the Scriptures" at the end of that statement.

I have enough experience, as do many of you dear readers, to know that God frequently reveals things to us through the Scriptures– no one would argue that point. Yet there are other times when the Scriptures aren't involved that understanding might come to us, perhaps in times of prayer or meditation for instance; there are many possibilities here. Having said this, I've also known people who claimed that God had revealed something to them that sounded an awful lot like the sort of things that came from a source other than God. I recall one young lady who told me that God revealed to her that the perfect expression of His love was found in participating in orgies, and somehow that just didn't quite ring true to me. One time I spoke to a man who said that God revealed to him that his Spirit was present whenever the man was under the influence of a certain illegal intoxicating substance, and that also didn't quite ring true.

There is a lesson here: Yes, we have the mind of Christ in the Person of the Holy Spirit, but we must be careful that His leading is not in contradiction to His Word, for should that be the case, it is much more likely that the spirit we are listening to is a great deal less than Holy.

Chapter 3

Planting, Watering and Growing

1 Corinthians 3:1-16

As Chapter 3 begins, we need to pause and check our contexts. Paul is writing to the Corinthians to address several serious problems in the church in Corinth as they existed c. 55 AD. In this, the first section of the letter, Paul is still addressing the issue of division and fragmentation in the congregation. In the previous subsection he has been pointing out that there is a divide along social lines, and we have just been looking at a comparison and contrast between human wisdom and Divine wisdom, and we saw that a person can only understand God's wisdom through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, for with merely human understanding, God's wisdom is most likely to appear silly or foolish, while with the guidance of the Spirit, we discover that it is actually human wisdom that is lacking.

In this chapter, Paul moves on to his next point, this time dealing with the notion that various leaders, and he mentions himself and Apollos by name, have become the focal points by which the congregation has split into opposing camps. Both he and Apollos are merely servants of the Lord Jesus Christ; neither is great in his own right.

To make his point, he uses a couple of metaphors, beginning with an agricultural one in which he, Paul, plants seed, and Apollos comes after to water it so that both Paul and Apollos have done their part in the process of growing a crop. God comes along and causes the seeds to germinate and grow. Both Paul and Apollos are God's co-workers, and for doing their jobs they will receive their rewards, but God is the key. The congregation in Corinth is the field of new growing plants. Yet they are still very young plants.

Paul cites some evidence of their immaturity in the faith: Since they are merely at a point where they will split into two camps and say things like, "I follow Paul" or "I follow Apollos", they are, in a sense, declaring their own lack of maturity, because both Paul and Apollos are followers of Jesus Christ, and so should they all be. Doesn't that remind you of little kids arguing over who has the best Dad or Mom?

If you look back at what Paul wrote in 2:1-5 when he admitted that he hadn't come to them with any great eloquence of speech or any great sophistication in his content, then you can easily understand what he means here in saying that they are spiritual infants, and that he hasn't yet brought them anything other than a baby's milk, for they are not yet ready for "solid food". My guess is that the Corinthians didn't find that observation terribly endearing, but clearly it was a message that they needed to hear.

As Paul continues, he will shift to another metaphor to illustrate his point.

Beginning at verse 10, Paul switches to a building metaphor: He laid the foundation for the church at Corinth, and Apollos build upon that foundation– the foundation that Paul laid was Jesus Christ. Apollos, or any other builder who comes along must be wise enough to build with the proper materials, or the building will not stand up to the test of time. Since the church is the Body of Christ, it is not only built upon Him, it is built up by and through Him. A church that is

built upon a human personality, will not pass the test of time, and since Paul's day we have seen that fact borne out too many times to even consider listing.

You might recall that earlier I mentioned that Paul was setting out a persuasive case, and we will shortly see his persuasive conclusion.

Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple.

1 Corinthians 3:16-17

Paul enters the final phase of his argument about division and fragmentation in the church with these words, which are actually a transition. Even so, they are compelling not only for the members of the church in Corinth, but for us today, for they ring true through the mist of time as warning for each of us to avoid creating or becoming involved with factions in the church.

Church is not a human institution, and it must not be treated as such. Church is not a cult of personality, and it must not be allowed to become as such. Church is the entire body of believers in whom the Holy Spirit dwells.

Do not deceive yourselves. If any of you think you are wise by the standards of this age, you should become "fools" so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: "He catches the wise in their craftiness"; and again, "The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile." So then, no more boasting about human leaders! All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.

1 Corinthians 3:18-22

As the chapter comes to its close, Paul again brings back his comparison and contrast of wisdom and foolishness, bringing all of the preceding points together. If we think we are wise by the standards of this world, we need to become "fools" for Christ, for the wisdom of this world counts for nothing where eternity is concerned. Does this line of thinking remind you of Ecclesiastes?

It does for me; I can hear Solomon's words ringing in my mind as I read this: "Useless, useless!"

Everything we need, we have in Christ. If we have everything we need in Christ, then what is it that we need outside of Christ? The approval and admiration of society? To be associated with a great church leader?

For heaven's sake! We have association with the King of kings and the Lord of lords— it doesn't get any better than that!

We who are followers of Jesus – all of us together – we are one in Him, and He is in us. To bring something of this world into the mix is to break the fellowship of the Body, and to wreck our relationship with Him.

Talk about foolish!

Chapter 4

Paul's Example

This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God.

1 Corinthians 4:1-5

Having taken his readers to the woodshed, now Paul, as any good father might do, explains things again so that his errant children might learn the right way to go about things. Paul himself, and Apollos, Peter and any other person in leadership, are servants of Christ, entrusted with certain things. Among those things, although not directly mentioned here, would be the care and edification of those in their care. Of course, what he mentions more or less specifically are “mysteries” that God has revealed.

Again with mystery! The real “mystery” here is whatever it is Paul is referring to!

Then Paul continues, as if we already knew what this big “mystery” is, to tell the arrogant children of Corinth that he really doesn't care what they think of him. Don't forget that this letter is written for the entire congregation, and that includes both those who say they follow Paul and those who say they follow someone else, so apparently his detractors will be receiving his words along with his fans— both are being corrected.

As these few verses continue, Paul makes it clear that we are to withhold our judgements about others, and wait until Jesus returns, when all is revealed, and all will receive their praise. Please note that he didn't say that all will receive their just due, as in some will get praise while others fry in hell.

He is writing to Christians, after all.

Now, brothers and sisters, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, “Do not go beyond what is written.” Then you will not be puffed up in being a follower of one of us over against the other. For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?

1 Corinthians 4:6-7

Once again Paul is speaking rather bluntly here: He and Apollos are merely the Lord's servants, and the Corinthians mustn't try to gain by choosing one over the other and divide the church, for no one of them has any right or business acting like someone greater than they are. All Christians are followers of the Lord, His humble servants, no more, no less.

Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have begun to reign—and that without us! How I wish that you really had begun to reign so that we also might reign with you! For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession,

like those condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings. We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world—right up to this moment.

1 Corinthians 4:8-13

This is kind of a fun little passage, don't you think? Of course, we could go on a very lengthy analysis of the whole thing, line-by-line. Yet something gets lost when you start to analyze things too much. This isn't that complicated: Paul begins with sarcasm.

They are so smart, they are so important, they are reigning with Christ. Just ask them, they have the tiger by the tail!

How are their "leaders" doing? Did they somehow miss the boat? Did Jesus return and not tell Paul, the guy entrusted with all those mysteries of God?

Nonsense!

Looks like we've gone back to the woodshed to me, how about you?

OK, some might be mortified that I said Paul is being sarcastic in Scripture. We think of sarcasm as being nasty and negative... and it can be. Yet it doesn't need to be, for it is a communicative tool that can also be extremely valuable in making a tough point to get a person's attention onto something they might find inconvenient to face. Usually it is used, as in this case, to say: For Heaven's sake wake up!

By the way, do you know what the mystery is yet?

A Warning or a Threat?

1 Corinthians 4:14-21

The NIV adds a subheading to this passage that reads, "Paul's Appeal and Warning". I think that the editors were very diplomatic, for I would have written it more like this: "Paul's Threat to Corinth". When I read these verses, they sound to me like Paul is saying, "Don't make me come over there and straighten you people out!"

However, we might view it, one thing is clear: Paul means business.

This is a consistent message in the New Testament, as we see many times that divisiveness in the church, from whatever source is not to be permitted. In this case, Paul has given us a model to follow: He receives a message that division and fragmentation are taking place in the church at Corinth. In response, he writes them a letter of instruction and warning so that the people might learn their error and take corrective action. He is sending Timothy along with the letter to help them correct the situation, but if that doesn't work, more drastic steps will be taken. This is the way of love, teach and correct, follow up and try to help people get their act together, and then take serious steps if necessary.

Some might be inclined to bristle at this and say that “they” are just trying to control me, yep that’s it, they just want to control me! Nobody is going to tell me what to do, I will do what I want, when I want: Nobody is going to control me!

I can’t begin to tell you how many times I have heard that sentiment, and how impressed I was each time I heard it, with the vast level of maturity it exemplifies. That is why the first step is instructive. I have also heard it said that “the God I know would never be so intolerant that He would let anyone tell me what to do!” That one also shows an amazing level of maturity and insight. Nevertheless, the Church embodies the Kingdom of God, established by the Lord Jesus Christ in His blood, on this earth until He returns. As such, it is *the key element* in God’s eternal purpose. God is going to see His purpose completed, and no one is going to frustrate His purpose by division and discord. You see dear reader, as error goes in the New Testament, dividing the church is just about as serious as it gets, and God will not permit it.

How ever you might want to view all of this, Paul has completed his discussion of division, and will begin his next topic in chapter five.

Have you figured out the mystery? If not, here’s a hint: Paul has told us more than once, that the mystery of God has been revealed to us. OK, there you go, good work everyone. Of course, it’s the gospel of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the very thing that seems so foolish by merely human understanding. That’s why it was able to hide in plain sight for so long, even though the entire Old Testament points directly to it.

Chapter 5

Wrong on so Many Levels

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that even pagans do not tolerate: A man is sleeping with his father's wife. And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have gone into mourning and have put out of your fellowship the man who has been doing this? For my part, even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. As one who is present with you in this way, I have already passed judgment in the name of our Lord Jesus on the one who has been doing this. So when you are assembled and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord.

1 Corinthians 5:1-5

You may recall that in the introduction to this letter I mentioned that Paul uses a writing structure that can be a bit tricky to follow— here's a case in point. He completed his first section about division in the congregation at the end of chapter four, and without transition or warning, he jumps into another subject; this time it's sexual immorality. More specifically, it's a case of incest in the church.

Evidently there was a guy in the congregation who was sleeping with his father's wife. Of course, that begs several questions: Was she his mother, or was she his step-mother? Did his father know about it? Was his father dead? Was his father divorced?

Paul doesn't say, but then he didn't need to say, for it would appear from the context that the good people of Corinth knew exactly what was going on, and the news of this affair had made its way to Paul in Ephesus. Whatever the exact particulars were, it appears that Paul was almost as mortified by the man's acceptance in the church as he was by the man's behavior.

I should also point out that Paul engages in just a bit of hyperbole in verse 1 when he says that this is a behavior that even the pagans don't tolerate. We do know that incest went on back then, for we have Cicero's denunciation of the practice, for example. Why would he denounce a practice that wasn't going on? Most likely, that day was much like ours when there is a sexual practice that went on but was repugnant to many or most people.

In the second verse, Paul shames the congregation for allowing this man to continue in fellowship with them in a way that hearkens back to their trips to woodshed in the previous section; how can they be so proud of their wisdom and greatness while allowing this in their midst? That is followed by Paul pulling rank for the first time in the letter as he commands them to put this man out of their fellowship. His words are crystal clear in vv. 3-5, at least for the recipients of the letter, but verse 5 can be a bit of a stumbling block for us.

hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord.

When Paul says that they should hand him over to Satan I highly doubt that they would meet at some border check point under cover of darkness and send the man walking across no man's land to a waiting Satan, as we might have seen in an old Cold War era movie. Instead, since this phrase is found elsewhere in the New Testament, I think it is used as a sort of idiom to refer to this world around us. This man has apparently accepted Christ, but hasn't repented of the old

ways of living, and his old way of living is so egregious that he cannot remain in the fellowship until he changes his outlook on certain things, and this is to protect the congregation, which as we have already seen, is very immature in the faith. It is quite clear that the man is not beyond redemption because Paul goes on to say that this would be to save his soul in the end.

Even so, there is still a stumbling block for us in the sentence: *for the destruction of the flesh*.

This is a hard one to translate; even the NIV has not one, but two footnotes. Many have suggested that this means the man would die, but that seems very unlikely, for how can he repent if he is dead?

The Greek word that is used here is *sarx* which requires some interpretation to translate. It can mean the human body, but it can also mean the material condition of the body, or the flesh as the center of passion or frailty. The way I read this, and you are welcome to disagree, is that Paul intends that this guy needs to be put out of fellowship so that he can learn his lesson in the situation, while protecting the “young” of the congregation itself.

Does anyone think this twisted relationship can end well?

Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old bread leavened with malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

1 Corinthians 5:6-8

Paul continues in this unpleasant business with a metaphor of the unleavened bread of Passover, and another mention of their boasting and arrogance from the last section. They need to have an unleavened loaf, not a loaf that is full of the sins from their past, after all, Jesus has taken sin away, so they need to be a new loaf without the malice and wickedness of the past.

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people. (5:9-11)

Here Paul moves from the metaphorical into the practical, reminding them that in his previous letter of instruction, he had warned the Corinthians not to associate with people who are sexually immoral. Apparently, they had misunderstood his instruction, thinking that he was referring only to people outside of the church.

This brings all of us to a very important point, one that is the subject of a great deal of confusion in our time. We should not be surprised when people who do not have a relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ behave as though they do not have a relationship with Jesus Christ— that is the normal state of things. Should we associate with such people?

Well, here's a question to ponder... If we don't associate with such people, then who will tell them about Jesus? Will they hear the Good News from the pagans?

The man being discussed here, the man who was sleeping with his father's wife, was supposedly a brother in Christ! A brother (or sister) in Christ has already repented of the old way of living, and if they, after turning away from immorality, have jumped back into it, that is a very different story. In such a case, the shepherd must step in to protect the flock, and ask the person to leave until such time as they can demonstrate repentance.

Notice that Paul mentions more than just sexual immorality here, adding *greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler* to the mix. Can you see how such people could endanger the flock– can you see how such people might bring the Gospel into disrepute in the community? Remember, these people are supposed to be followers of Christ.

Paul wraps his comments up in 5:12-13, but we should bear in mind that his response is not only to protect the congregation, but also to bring the offender to repentance for the sake of their immortal souls (5:5).

Chapter 6

Settling Disputes

1Corinthians 6:1-11

This is a strange passage, not because of its content, but because of its placement in context. Paul has been talking about sexual immorality in the church at Corinth, and here he jumps into what seems to be a wholly different topic, the settlement of disputes among believers. After this, he's back on sexual immorality. Why did he do that?

As always, scholars have their theories, and some of them sound alright, while others seem a stretch: Situation normal. As is my custom in blogging, I'll let others theorize, and just say that I'm not sure why he did this in the way he did and leave it at that.

Apparently the Corinthians were suing each other over disputes of some kind. Paul takes a very dim view of this, pointing out several rather interesting things:

If any of you has a dispute with another, do you dare to take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the Lord's people? Or do you not know that the Lord's people will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life! Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, do you ask for a ruling from those whose way of life is scorned in the church? I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers? But instead, one brother takes another to court—and this in front of unbelievers! (6:1-5)

As you can see, we're back in the woodshed again. The point Paul makes about taking a dispute between Christians, who are no longer "of" this world into a worldly forum for adjudication is obvious enough, and it is something we should consider in our time. In this little rant, which he admits was done to shame them, he also says some things that have provided fodder for scholarly debate for centuries.

We are going to judge the world? We are going to judge angels?

This comes from a first century view of the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint) of Daniel 7:22 and was popular with the early Christian and late Jewish writers. I would suggest that in this context, Paul's reference to this view may well have been intended as a popular frame of reference, rather than a theological statement. Whatever his thinking may have been, Paul's message is very clear: We Aren't to be suing each other in worldly courts.

There is really another element in play here, that might help to answer some of our contextual questions, while also clearing up Paul's content. Access to the courts was something that was most often available to the wealthy and powerful, and in Corinth, the wealthy and powerful would have been Roman citizens of means. Consequently, not only would the courts be very useful for a powerful person to collect his due for another, less powerful person, but they could also be abused to collect what was not rightfully due, as a sort of legal extortion. (We could say the same about lawsuits and courts today, couldn't we?)

With that in mind, go back to the way the church was being fragmented and divided in 1-4, and we might see why Paul brought this up. There was a spiritual problem in the church, and in

Paul's view, the problems that bring brother to pagan courts against brother, is just about as serious as sexual immorality, as we in 6:9-10.

Paul's Conclusion

"I have the right to do anything," you say—but not everything is beneficial. "I have the right to do anything"—but I will not be mastered by anything. You say, "Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both." The body, however, is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, "The two will become one flesh." But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit.

1 Corinthians 6:12-17

As we began our study I mentioned that we need to be careful with context in reading this letter, because if you don't, you can find "proof" for something that Paul isn't even talking about. This text is a great example of that: I can't tell you how many times I've heard someone quote from this text a proof text to prove that smoking cigarettes is a sin. "The body is the temple of the holy spirit; smoking is a sin" (short version). Paul is talking about sexual immorality, not smoking.

In v. 12 he quotes things people say, in our day in a context like this, we might declare that we have a right to do whatever we want, the Supreme Court says so!

If he were writing this today, Paul might well point out that the Supreme Court will perish along with the rest of this world.

Essentially, Paul's whole point here is simple: Our bodies are members of the Body of Christ, they are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, they are created in the very image and likeness of Almighty God. They were designed and created for a Purpose, God's Purpose. They are not to be abused by being united with, or become the playthings of, anyone outside of the purpose for which God created them. The union of husband and wife is an integral part of God's Creation and of His Purpose for Creation, and any other union is a perversion of His image and of His purpose.

This is why Scripture makes such a big deal about sexual immorality: It is offensive to God. You see, the union between husband and wife pictures and foreshadows the union between Christ and His Church, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is the union of humans and God. With this in mind, new look at the final verses:

Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies. (6:18-20)

As you can see, there is a great deal more at stake in these verses than simply a person's inconvenience or personal preferences.

Chapter 7

Sexuality, Celibacy and Marriage

1 Corinthians 7

Chapter 7 is a new section, the third in this letter. We can be certain that a new section has begun because Paul says in verse 1: *Now for the matters you wrote about: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."*

When we keep in mind that this letter was written to address problems that were facing the church in Corinth c. 55 AD, we can infer that they had written to Paul asking him for help in at least one area which we can glean from the text as concerning sexuality, celibacy and marriage. Since we are inferring and gleaning, you can imagine how many theories scholars have debated concerning this short section and considering the delicate and personal nature of Paul's subject matter, you can also imagine how fierce those debates have gotten over the years.

As amusing as such arguments might be for some people, I won't trouble you with a listing here of arguments. Oh, it isn't that some of them aren't quite interesting, no. It's because there is simply no way to settle any of them. Here's what I mean: Notice verse 1 above... We can see that they wrote him a letter, but Paul doesn't mention what the letter was actually about. Of course, he really didn't need to restate its contents, for they would have known already. Yet for those of us who came along later, it sure would have been nice to know what Paul is talking about. Then he goes on to quote someone: *"It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."* Who said that— Paul or someone else? Was that Paul's conclusion to the matter, or was there a question associated with this statement in the letter? Did this mean that it was better for a man to be celibate, or that it was better for a man to be a homosexual? Was someone making that case in the letter, or... what?

If this were a traditional Sunday school exercise, these questions would never come up; instead everything wonderful and nice would be conveniently assumed, and you are welcome to make those assumptions. However, we must acknowledge that there is really no way to answer these questions for sure, although we can gain insight from Paul's comments, there is no absolute certainty and thus, context here cannot be a sure thing.

I did mention that this was a tricky book, right?

Look at verses 1 and 2 together:

Now for the matters you wrote about: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband.

Do you see how verse 2 begins with the word "but"? Grammar aside, a reasonable person might look at this and come away with the impression that Paul is telling people that marital sex is only appropriate when there is sexual immorality in the church or community. Of course, that would be silly in light of what comes later, but that is exactly how teaching with "proof texts" works, and since the exact context of this chapter is so difficult to establish, a fair argument could be made for that proposition. Of course, a better argument could be made that Paul is saying that husbands and wives should be celibate in their marriage unless they just can't

control themselves. Oh yes, from this chapter such an argument could be made, and it would be very difficult to overcome.

I would never make that argument myself however.

I've taken you through this little exercise so that you might get a feel for how tricky this section is to keep straight. As we go through the section, I will take big pieces of it, and try to glean basic principles that are in harmony with Paul's other writings, and the New Testament as a whole, rather than discuss what this or that particular statement might mean for us, as I usually do.

1 Corinthians 7:1-7

Paul addresses himself to married couples in these verses; that is something that becomes clear as we read through it, and even more clear when we get to verse 8 and he addresses the unmarried. Essentially, his message to the married is that they should restrict themselves to sexual activity within the marriage, and that in this, neither partner should deprive the other of marital comfort except by mutual consent for a time of prayer (7:3-5), and then to come together once more so that Satan cannot exploit human weakness to lead them away from righteousness.

This seems to me to be in general accord with Paul's teachings for husbands and wives elsewhere in the New Testament (see Col. 3:19 ff. and Eph. 5:29 ff.). It has a practical component in that he recognizes the fact that humans are sexual creatures, and that a man or woman who is unfulfilled in that area is more likely to be tempted to stray than one who is not. There is also a deeper recognition, although Paul seems reluctant to mention it here as he did in Ephesians 5: The physical union of husband and wife is illustrative of the union between Christ and His Church, and thus it must be respected by everyone.

Now we come to something quite interesting which may explain Paul's general attitude toward this issue:

I say this as a concession, not as a command. I wish that all of you were as I am. But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that. (7:6-7)

Verse 6 tells us that nothing in the preceding verses is a command, for it is a *concession*. Whenever I read this chapter, I get the impression, rightly or wrongly, that Paul takes a rather dim view of sexuality. I ask myself why he would do that, and I never have a satisfactory answer, not even enough to be sure that he had the view I think I see, so I always just move on...

Yet my vague impression remains.

Look at the last verse: Paul concludes his thought by making the issue revolve around spiritual gifts, as so much of this letter does later on. Sex is not a *spiritual* gift, but celibacy is, so when Paul says that he wishes everyone could be like he is, (which is celibate) doesn't it seem that he is telling us, between the lines, that he has the spiritual gift of celibacy?

I tend to think so.

Spiritual gifts are given by God at His sole discretion, so we can't run out and get one on our own, and if we could choose our gifts, I doubt that most people would choose celibacy. Yet for

Paul it was different, for I highly doubt that he could have served God the way he did if he had a wife and family back home to support.

1 Corinthians 7:8-16

This section is divided into three clearly marked parts that contain general instructions relating to family life. As they occur in this tricky section dealing with sex and marriage in response to an inquiry from the Corinthian church that we do not have access to, I, and I'm speaking only for myself, really cannot say much more about the section than that.

The first part begins with verse 8: *Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do.* We know exactly who Paul is addressing his remarks to, the unmarried and widows. Keeping in mind Paul's comments about celibacy in the last section, we shouldn't be too surprised at what he says here, and that he rather grudgingly concedes that they should marry if they "cannot control themselves".

The second of the three parts begins in verse 10: *To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband.* Surprisingly, at least for me, he follows this "must not" by saying "but if she does..." which seems an unusual concession following an imperative statement, as it does. So, if she leaves him anyway, she should remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband, and he shouldn't divorce her.

The third part begins with verse 12: *To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her.* In the next verse, he gives the same instruction to women, and then tells us that the unbelieving spouse is "sanctified" by the believing one and their children are not "unclean". This would seem to be an Old Testament metaphor, making a comparison with a Jew being married to a Gentile. I say this realizing that there are several theories out there for understanding Paul's intentions here. Once again, considering the strange context, I'm loathe to go much further than that, except to remind you that we are in a section dealing with sexual practices. It might just be that Paul is referring to couples in which infidelity has taken place, but there is no way to know for certain. Paul continues in verse 15 to say that if the unbeliever decides to leave the marriage, the believer should let them go in peace, for they are no longer bound together.

The section concludes with a statement that helps us to understand where Paul has been coming from: *How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?*

I don't know about you, but I sure wish I could find a copy of the letter Paul was responding to!

1 Corinthians 7:17-24

In the last section, Paul spoke about marital status, as he does in the final part of the chapter, but here he takes one of his little asides. In doing so, he also clarifies some of his meaning in 7:8-16. The theme of 7:17-24 is 'don't change your status'.

7:17-20 If a man was circumcised when he was called (when he became a Christian) he should not become uncircumcised; considering the impossibility of that in the first century, we can

safely infer that Paul is speaking metaphorically here. So, if a Jewish person becomes a Christian, they remain a Jew. If a Gentile (uncircumcised) person becomes a Christian, they do not become Jews. This was an issue that Paul dealt with a number of times in his writings, and his comments here are quite consistent with all of the others; I doubt this is terribly confusing to anyone reading this in the 21st century. The next part, however, might strike some as a little more difficult...

7:21-24 If a person was a slave when they became a Christian, they remain a slave. If a person was free when they became a Christian, they must remain free. The exception is that if a person who is a slave can obtain their freedom, then that would be a good thing to do. Most of us today know about slavery from history, but not all are familiar with a form of slavery that came to be called ‘indentured servitude’. An indentured servant was a person who sold themselves into slavery for a certain period of time to satisfy a debt, and indeed thousands of people in the 17th and 18th centuries sold themselves into indentured servitude to escape the oppression of England and pay for the crossing of the Atlantic to get to America.

In ancient Rome, people sold themselves into slavery to pay debts, or to feed their children. A person who had a past due account could be taken to court and put into slavery to satisfy their debt. If such people started fleeing their lawful (in those days) masters because they became Christians, that would have had a disastrous effect on the Gospel, and since our priority must always be on making disciples of all Nations, Paul gave the instructions that we see here.

At the same time, his advice to people who are not slaves means that they need to handle their financial affairs very carefully, lest they find themselves in bondage to more than one Master.

With this set of priorities in better focus, some of Paul’s comments in the last section are easier to follow, particularly those concerning separation and divorce. Consider this: If a person’s accepting Jesus Christ began to cause divorces all over town, how long would it be before the cause of Christ found itself on the wrong side of a moral crisis? That would surely damage the cause of Christ and bring the Gospel into disrepute– thus Paul’s advice.

Now that we have a better feel for the context in this chapter, you can see why this letter is so tricky. If we took Paul’s comments in verse 10 that a wife must not separate from her husband, and applied that instruction to a woman in the 21st century who was being regularly beaten up by her drunk husband, you would not only be doing a grave injustice, you would be engaged in false teaching, for the instruction was being given in a vastly different context in a vastly different set of circumstances that existed in c. 55 AD. Sadly, such false teaching has been going on for centuries, and it needs to stop.

Advice for the Unmarried

Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy. Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for a man to remain as he is. Are you pledged to a woman? Do not seek to be released. Are you free from such a commitment? Do not look for a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this.

1 Corinthians 7:25-28

Now, Paul turns back to his main theme and addressed the unmarried. In doing so, he is very clear about the fact that he is speaking as a trustworthy person, a man who is wise, but not for the Lord. As he gives his advice in this section, it is much like his advice in the previous text; remain as you are. If you are single, remain single. If you are engaged, remain faithful to your commitment. He gives this advice “because of the present crisis” (7:6), which begs the question: What crisis?

As you might expect, there are a great many theories about the “crisis”, and there really isn’t a way to be entirely certain about what he is intending here. We might just consider the context of the letter– Paul has written the church to correct a great many serious problems, including the presence of immorality in the congregation, so if I were going to hazard a guess, I’d be inclined to throw that one on the table. Yet the church is in the fledging stage everywhere, very vulnerable to persecution at any time, which could be described as a crisis. A bit later in this chapter Paul will mention that the whole world is messed up and this world will pass away (7:31): That could be what he means.

If Paul had written this letter to a modern-day church, I might suggest that the “crisis” is really all of the little crises we hear about every day! And that could also be what he means in the letter to Corinth.

What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away. (7:29-31)

This paragraph comes pretty close to advice for all time, for although he didn’t say it directly, Paul is advising the people to change their thinking away from their everyday living circumstances to a more heavenly perspective. Since we have the benefit of hindsight, we can see that people nearly 2,000 years ago were all caught up in the day-to-day things of this life: Status in the community, pleasures and delights of this world, getting everything right in doctrinal arguments, paying the bills, raising the children, having some good times, what is for dinner... and so on. As we look back across all of those centuries since then, it’s easy for us to say that none of that stuff was really so important, for they all left this earthly life so long ago; hopefully they took care to ensure their eternal futures.

While it’s easy to see that looking back 2,000 years, it is much harder to think that way in the moment, isn’t it? Paul’s message clears up as he completes this section in the remaining verses of the chapter...

The Section Concludes

1 Corinthians 7:32-40

I think it’s fair to say that Paul makes it very clear that he is expressing his personal opinion in these verses (7:25-40). I also think that it is fair to say that if everyone had taken his advice to remain single, the human race wouldn’t be here in the 21st century.

No one that I've ever heard of thinks that Paul wanted that to happen. For his part, Paul was interested primarily in the spread of the Gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the world, and he wanted every man and woman to play a role in the building up of the Church. His reasoning is clear and simple: Married couples have a much harder time devoting themselves to this cause, since they must be concerned with many other matters of this life on earth. Single people are free to concentrate 100 % on the things of God.

While no one can argue with that logic, it is also very clear that God did not intend for everyone to remain single and celibate; that is simply not the way He created things. Some are called to forgo married life to serve God, others are called to raise godly children, others to lead the church, others to serve and help those in need... and together we make up the many members of the Body of Christ. If you are called to the mission field, then you must forsake all else and go, but if you are not called in that way, then you haven't done anything wrong.

If we consider the totality of this section from 7:1-40, this seems to be Paul's clear message. He put this message into a context of sexuality, celibacy and marriage because these things, whether we like to think of it this way or not, comprise the fundamental realities of our everyday lives. They really encompass the range of choices that each person must make about his or her living situation. Each person must decide whether they will be sexually active or celibate, yet few actually make a conscious decision. Each person who decides to be sexually active must decide whether they will be married or single, and many just go with the flow, and never consider fully the consequences of their decisions. Each of these decisions set us on a path, and that path takes us to the point where we are in life at any given time.

The day comes for most people when they wake up and wonder how they got to the place they find themselves in and begin to have regrets of one sort or another, and then they say, "Gee, I wish I could go back and be 20 again, knowing all that I know at 50."

Sadly, we cannot do that.

Now that we have come all of the way through this chapter, it seems to me that Paul is trying to encourage the people in Corinth to start making intentional decisions about where their lives are headed in the Lord, and to act accordingly.

I would add to this that we should probably all do the same. I'd love to hear your thoughts...

Chapter 8

Idolatry, Eating and Love

1 Corinthians 8

Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that “We all possess knowledge.” But knowledge puffs up while love builds up. Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know. But whoever loves God is known by God. (8:1-3)

With these verses, Paul begins the next section of the letter, which runs through 11:1. For best results, we need to keep in mind as we go through the section that it is indeed three chapters in length with three subsections; more about that as we continue. Of course, we can easily see the shift in topic in verse 1, which will remind us of Paul’s structure as we have seen in multiple times before now.

He begins this section in an interesting way, with a contrast between “knowledge” and “love”: *But knowledge puffs up while love builds up (1n)*. This is the dominant thought of the chapter and is reinforced by verses 2-3.

Paul makes the point that an idol, representing a pagan god, is nothing other than a hunk of rock, for these are non-existent “gods”. There is only one God, the Father and one Lord Jesus Christ. These other so-called “gods” are nothing (8:4-6).

Yet in Corinth and other cities and towns of that era, there were still new Christians for whom that fact had not yet quite sunk in, and should they eat food that had been sacrificed to an idol, they would still think of it as something significant, and for them, eating such food would be highly problematic, even though there was no actual reality to the idol or the sacrifice (8:7-8).

If a Christian is clear about this, eating such food is not a problem, but in doing so, we must be careful, for if a brother or sister who doesn’t understand this yet should see us, they might be tempted to partake it thinking they are free to participate in pagan rituals, which would be a sin against Christ. For our parts, we too would be sinning, for in doing this, we will have caused our weaker brother or sister to fall back into the old ways– and we wouldn’t want to do that, would we (8:9-13)?

At this point, Paul’s dominant thought becomes crystal clear:

But knowledge puffs up while love builds up

The very idea that a hunk of rock is a god is silly, and so is the notion that there is there is even such a thing as a “sacrifice” to a god that doesn’t exist... Pure nonsense! I’m hungry, and that meat is perfectly good food and I’m going to eat some of it because I can, and it’s my right to do so. That is the “puffed up” part.

How often do we hear this kind of thing today: It’s my RIGHT to do this!

The way of love, however, is quite different. Love is willing to be inconvenienced for the sake of someone who understands less than we do; it’s a pity we don’t see more love in action today.

Chapter 9

I Have Rights!

1 Corinthians 9:1-18

Assuming that you have read these verses, I must begin by reminding you that we are still in a section about Idolatry, and food sacrificed to idols specifically, in this letter of correction and instruction to the church at Corinth.

You will no doubt recall that in chapter 8 Paul essentially set forth a proposition that food sacrificed to idols can be eaten by those who understand that an idol is nothing more than a hunk of rock, and that there is no actual significance to a sacrifice to a hunk of rock. A person with such an understanding has a right to eat the food. However, many of our brethren do not have this understanding, and as a consequence, they would have their faith severely challenged by brothers and sisters participating in eating such food. Paul ended the chapter by saying that we should forgo our right to eat such food whenever it could adversely impact our “weaker” brother or sister.

Beginning in 9:1, Paul has undertaken to prove this assertion by pointing out all of the rights he has chosen not to exercise himself, for the sake of the gospel. In doing so, I think it is fair to say that he really shames people who complain and moan about being expected to make a sacrifice for the sake of other people, for he points out a wide range of sacrifices he has made personally *for their benefit*— can they not undergo such a small sacrifice for their brothers and sisters?

People are funny, aren't they? We all look around us and see everyone else having such an easy time. We struggle with finances, yet our neighbor has so many nice things. We have marriages with real challenges, but the guy next door has a beautiful wife who never complains, or an attractive husband who always finishes his “honey-do” list. Our boss has such an easy job and makes so much more than we do. The Smiths' children are so perfectly behaved... it goes on and on. The good folks in Corinth probably thought they'd be better apostles than Paul was. It never even crossed their minds that Paul was not only preaching and teaching day and night; he was also working to support himself.

I would like to think that anyone over the age of 40 has figured out that the grass on the other side of the hill isn't really any greener than it is right where we are standing, that everyone has their struggles and their problems to deal with; we all win a few and lose a few.

But them, sometimes we forget...

1 Corinthians 9:19-23

Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law (9:19-21)

In the previous section (9:1-19) Paul has moved into a proof for his teaching in chapter 8 that Christians need to be willing to sacrifice certain things that they may be entitled to as a matter of

“right” for the sake of other believers and for the gospel. In 9:1-19 he shamed the Corinthians a bit, reminding them of all of the “rights” he had sacrificed for their benefit. Here, he moves on to sum up this argument. He does so by once again using his own approach as an example to them.

In verses 19-21 we see a discussion of Paul’s behavior and “law”. He behaves as a Jew when he is dealing with Jews, as a follower of the law, when dealing with followers of the law. He behaves as a non-law follower when dealing with people who aren’t under the law. Yet in all things he is under the “law of Christ”, which is an interesting statement which involves a great deal of scholarly theorizing today. While Paul doesn’t really define this expression, he is demonstrating it in his teaching; that we should be willing to make sacrifices for the sake of others and for the gospel of Christ.

He continues:

To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. (9:22-23)

He moves from law as a model to weak and strong, or we might say, immature and mature. However he might describe the situation, the outcome is the same: We make personal sacrifices for the sake of others in the cause of Christ, for this is the way of love.

A bit of exhortation

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

As Paul so often does in his letters, he shifts to a sports metaphor to finalize his point. Remember, he’s been telling the people that they must be willing to make sacrifices for other people and for the sake of the gospel, and here he expresses the same thought in a different way. Likening Christians to an athlete in training, he uses the sacrifices great athletes make in training to living for Christ.

An athlete training for a big event will adhere to a strict training regimen that includes a strict diet. They will push themselves to the limit of their endurance to win the prize, and during their training, they will abstain from all kinds of things, because they want to win their event.

In the same way, we who are followers of Christ must be willing to do whatever it takes, to endure training, to make personal sacrifices, and to impose self-discipline, to share the gospel with those around us, and to help them through that growth process that we call “making disciples”.

While Paul has made this point, he still hasn't completed the section, for he isn't addressing problems of self-discipline and sacrifices; remember, this is a section about idolatry. As he continues in chapter 10, his discussion will focus more directly on the lesson he is teaching...

Chapter 10

Paul has some serious warnings

1 Corinthians 1-13

For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness. (10:1-5)

As we move into a new chapter, and because it begins with the word “for”, we need a reminder of what Paul has said previously, since Paul seems to be drawing a conclusion in these verses.

9:27... No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

10:1... For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea.

As chapter 9 was coming to an end, Paul was exhorting the people to take his teachings about self-sacrifice for the sake of others seriously, encouraging them to behave as athletes in training to set aside some of their freedom for the sake of Christ. He continues in this chapter with another example for their instruction, this time from Israel’s history, to make the same point.

This section, 10:1-13 is being used to show that the Israelites were God’s chosen, His elect, His beloved. They had been freed from captivity in Egypt by God’s mighty hand when He parted the waters of the Red Sea, when He provided them with manna, when He gave them water to drink from the rock, and as He led them through the Wilderness by cloud and by fire: If there ever were people who were favored by God, and who could literally see the works of His hands, these were those people.

Yet, in spite of all this, they succumbed to every kind of temptation, and came to ruin. Honestly, I cannot imagine that anyone, not even these proud and worldly Corinthians could miss the connection Paul was making between the Israelites, and the Corinthian Church. Taking no chances, Paul continued:

These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall! No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it. (10:11-13)

This paragraph, as it talks of temptation and holding firm, ties back to the end of chapter 9 and the sports training metaphor, and the idea that an athlete in training will push him or her self to attain the goal for which they train. Paul’s clear intention here is that we must push ourselves to overcome whatever temptation may come our way in order to attain our goal in Christ, and to avoid being pulled off in the direction of ruin.

Before we conclude for now, I must once again remind you that this passage is part of a three-chapter section on idolatry; food sacrificed to idols. In the next section, Paul returns to that topic, and begins to sum up the points he has made...

Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry. I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf. (10:14-17)

Paul does an interesting thing here; interesting and brilliant. Appealing to their reason, and asking them to judge the issue for themselves, he brings up communion, mentioning the cup and the loaf. When we all drink of the cup, we participate in Christ's blood; when we eat of the loaf, we participate in the body of Christ. We all partake of the same loaf, and we are one in the Body of Christ... Right?

Yes, excellent, that's right.

Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar? (10:18)

Why yes, they do participate in the altar.

Do I mean then that food sacrificed to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. (10:19-20)

BAM! See what Paul just did?

Back in chapter 8, Paul agreed that an idol is nothing, and that the meat sacrificed to the idol is nothing; it's just meat. Now, as he sums his argument up, he completely turns it around; when you participate in the meat you know to have been sacrificed to an idol, you are participating in the sacrifice as well as in the meal, just as in the old Jewish system, and in our communion. So, even though the idol is nothing, and you don't mean anything by it, knowingly eating from the pagan sacrifice is an acknowledgement of the demon it was sacrificed to, and that we mustn't do.

You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons. Are we trying to arouse the Lord's jealousy? Are we stronger than he? (10:21-22)

Verse 21 is the bottom line in this controversy; there's no way around that. You might rightly ask, however, "Didn't he say eating that food was OK if you understood that an idol is just a hunk of rock, and that having been sacrificed to a non-existent god was meaningless back in chapter 8?"

Yes, he did. Lucky for us, we haven't quite finished the section yet...

A Conversation and a Conclusion

1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1

We have seen passages in which Paul is so blunt that his meaning is hard to miss, but from our perspective, this is not one of those. If we aren't careful, we can quote verses from this passage and use them to 'prove' both sides of the argument, not to mention things that aren't even being discussed. For me, the key to following this passage is to remember who Paul is writing to (the church in Corinth), and what he has said about them previously (that they favor the philosophies of men).

With this in mind, we can discern that in 10:23-30 there is a sort of conversation going on between Paul and his readers. At first, we can see slogans and responses, then questions and answers, and finally, beginning at 10:31 Paul's clear teaching.

"I have the right to do anything," you say—but not everything is beneficial. "I have the right to do anything"—but not everything is constructive. No one should seek their own good, but the good of others. (10:23-24)

"I have the right to do anything". There is a slogan we hear a lot in our day too, and Paul is using it to refer to an attitude held by many of his readers. Notice that each time it is used, it is followed by a reply from Paul: *but not everything is beneficial; but not everything is constructive* and then: *No one should seek their own good, but the good of others*. The slogan is not Paul's teaching, it is being refuted here.

Then Paul includes some questions that he is anticipating his readers would ask him as they might try to assert a right to something, in this case, to eat food sacrificed to idols...

For why is my freedom being judged by another's conscience?

If I take part in the meal with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of something I thank God for?

These questions do not represent Paul's teaching, but rejoinders his readers might throw back at him. When you see this, the rest is clear enough; we shouldn't go to the market, or go to someone's home looking for trouble, but if we are informed that a food was sacrificed to an idol, we should abstain, both for our sake and for the sake of the other, as a testimony to our belief in Christ.

Then Paul concludes the entire section with a clear principle:

So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God— even as I try to please everyone in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ. (10:31-11:1)

The section ends here, with these words summing up the entire discussion that began with 8:1. We might look at this and be tempted to conclude that it doesn't apply to us in the 21st century because we don't usually encounter meat sacrificed to idols these days... "but if I do, I'll keep it mind."

This, however, is a principle that should apply to most any set of circumstances, or most any controversial subject, and the funny thing is, we might be tempted to offer the same kinds of objections that the Corinthians did so very long ago, we might even say something like, "Those church people just want to control me."

Have you ever heard that one? Have you ever said it yourself?

I can honestly say “yes” to both questions... I have always found that such a statement is particularly effective when followed by a lengthy rant about how mature the speaker is, and how immature everyone else is. Maybe there’s a little bit of Corinth in all of us.

Chapter 11

Head Covering and Worship

1 Corinthians 11:2-16

We begin a new section in Paul's letter with 11:2, a section that continues through to the end of this chapter. Here, Paul deals with a couple of areas that involve worship, first head covering, and second, the Lord's Supper. I should point out that we have a departure from what we have seen in the previous sections thus far, because as you can see, Paul does not say, "Now about..." as we have seen before. Instead, he comes at the subject a little differently. This section has two subcategories, and the first begins in verse 2: *I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the traditions just as I passed them on to you.* The second begins at verse 17: *In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good.*

Most scholars seem to agree that unlike the "now about..." sections, this section is not an answer to a question as much as it is a response to a report that has come to Paul's attention.

As we consider this first section (11:2-16), we have a discussion from Paul that can give a great deal of difficulty to a modern Western reader, and to be sure, a great deal of ink has been spilled in recent decades about these verses, particularly by commentators who come at this passage from a feminist theological perspective. The debates can become quite heated, and tend to go on and on without anyone ever giving any ground, but what is gained by any of this?

After typing out the question I sit at my keyboard trying to think of something that can be gained, other than debating points and high blood pressure... and I haven't come up with much, other than discord and division.

Rather than putting ourselves through such an ordeal, let's simply ask ourselves who Paul is sending this to. As we know, Paul is sending this to the church in Corinth, a Roman Colony inhabited primarily by Roman Citizens, along with several other groups that include very few Jews; it was a Gentile assembly. He is writing to this congregation to address problems that they were experiencing in the church c. 55 AD. This is an entirely different place, time and culture than we find ourselves in anywhere today. Paul is writing to them to address a cultural issue: Head covering. Therefore, why would we be surprised that he would take positions that differ from our cultural perspectives today?

"OK Don, how do you know for sure that this is a cultural discussion and not a message from God that we must follow today?"

Boy, am I glad you asked that question! Here's how I know it:

Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering.
(11:14-15)

Remember who wrote this: Paul the Apostle, a Jew among Jews, and a Pharisee among Pharisees, right? Traditionally, Jewish men didn't shave their beards, and they wore their hair long. Who wore their hair short and usually shaved their beards? Greeks and Romans: Paul is making a cultural argument.

Although he doesn't say it here, he will in the next section: The worship assembly must not put off an outsider who comes as a seeker, open to hear the gospel message preached, thus we should conduct ourselves accordingly to save others... and that should sound familiar to you. In the case of Corinth, c. 55 AD, women should wear a head covering.

You see dear reader, there is nothing for us to fight about in these verses. Today, a woman is free to choose whether she wears something on her head or not. If she wants to: Great. If she doesn't: Great.

The Lord's Supper

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

In the first part of this section, Paul gave the Corinthians praise, followed by instruction. Here, as the second part begins there is no praise for him to give, for the Corinthians have gone very wrong on the Lord's Supper. It is certainly clear from the New Testament record as well as from the writings of the early church that in those days the Lord's Supper was celebrated each Lord's Day, but in Corinth, and quite possibly other locations as well, the large Gentile population incorporated some of their culture into the process.

In the Greco-Roman world, it was not unusual for large religious banquets and other meals to take place. First century AD philosopher and moralist Musorius Rufus noted that Greco-Roman meals offered many opportunities for sins to take place; it would appear that many in Corinth saw the Lord's Supper as such an occasion. People appear to have seen the Lord's Supper as a big mealtime, bringing in their own food and drink, not to be shared with everyone, but to be consumed to excess by their own party in church, often resulting in drunkenness, while others who had a better understanding the Lord's Supper had nothing.

Paul doesn't appear to have been amused by this. Yet his reaction to it was to provide instruction as to what the Lord's Supper was all about to clear up any confusion...

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (11:23-26)

The Lord's Supper is not a banquet, it is a proclamation of the Lord's death until He returns, a recommitment to following Him... not a party.

So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. (11:27-29)

He continues in 11:30-32 to say that behavior such as theirs could very likely result in discipline from God and suggests that some in Corinth have died as a result. Was that hyperbole or was it literally true? I can't say for certain, but it is clear that Paul was not messing around when he gave this corrective instruction; the Lord's Supper, Communion, is not to be taken lightly. He

added that those who have received such “discipline” have received it so that they might still be saved when the Lord returns...

Chapter 12

Now, about the gifts of the Spirit

Now about the gifts of the Spirit, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols. Therefore I want you to know that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus be cursed,” and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit.

1 Corinthians 12:1-3

As we have seen before, Paul begins a new topic with “now about...”. This is the beginning of a section that he wrote to clear up misunderstandings about spiritual gifts, that begins at 12:1 and runs through chapter 14. In my experience, sad to say, it isn’t easy to find people who come to this section hoping to clear up their misunderstandings about spiritual gifts, because most of us either skip the section entirely, or come to it to find ammunition to use in an argument.

Of course, there is one exception to that observation, and that is reading the first part of chapter 13, the great “love chapter”. The only problem is, that if we concern ourselves with trivial things like context, chapter 13 is about *spiritual gifts*. If we are really looking for a “love chapter”, we might have a look at 1 John 4 instead.

Full disclosure: Yes, yes, I use 1 Corinthians 13 in weddings like everyone else...

I should point out that since this is a study of 1 Corinthians and not one of spiritual gifts per se, I will be following the text of Paul’s letter, and his reply to the question the Corinthians asked him to answer. Thus, this isn’t a complete spiritual gifts study. If you are interested in such a study, please see the “Publications” page on my website, where you will find one.

As Paul opens his discussion of spiritual gifts, he first sets out the idea that there are spiritual forces at work in our lives that we may not be aware of. Notice that he suggests that in their previous lives pagans have been influenced to worship idols that are actually pieces of stone. We might see a cultural component to that; everyone else worshipped the idol, so why not go along with the flow? Yet, unless we stop thinking at that point, we must realize that a rock isn’t even a living thing, much less a god, so how does it make sense to venerate a hunk of rock?

Paul implies there is something else at work.

The Corinthians were moved to leave the worship of rocks to worship an unseen God. Their friends may have told them that they were crazy for doing so; how did such a thing happen?

Paul suggests that there was another force at work in this too: To accept Jesus Christ requires the influence of the Holy Spirit. So, when we reach this point, Paul has really set forth a dilemma: Which spirit will we listen to?

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1 Corinthians 12:4-11

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. (12:4-6)

It may strike us as interesting that Paul gets started discussing misunderstandings about spiritual gifts the way he does in these verses. Keeping in mind the context of the letter as a whole, we will quickly discern that these comments refer back to the fragmentation and disunity that has plagued the congregation in Corinth. We know from what we have read already that they were divided along social and class lines, and that different groups within the church had identified with different leaders; Apollos and Paul were mentioned, for example. We might infer from this passage that people were in danger of fragmenting along the lines of spiritual gifts as well. As we would expect, Paul will have none of that, and tells them three different ways that there is one God, one Lord, and one purpose for spiritual gifts.

This theme continues in the next paragraph, and to see it clearly, let's look at it in a slightly different way than we usually do:

Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good... All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines. (12:7, 11)

I've broken the first and last sentences out of the paragraph (12:7-11) because they are unity statements. Manifestations of the Spirit are given to individuals not for their own amusement, pleasure or enrichment, but for the common good of the entire Body of believers. These are manifestations of the Holy Spirit within each person, and while the Spirit may choose to manifest Himself differently in different people, He is still one Spirit within all of them, and he distributes His various manifestations according to His sole discretion and purpose.

At this point, it is essential that we recognize that what we commonly call "spiritual gifts" are actually "manifestations" of the Holy Spirit within us, and through us to those around us, to enrich and build the Body of Christ. Technically speaking, the actual "gift" is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in each of us.

In verses 8-10 Paul mentions 8 manifestations of the Spirit: Wisdom and knowledge in 12:8, faith and healing in 12:9, and miracles, prophecy, discernment and tongues (languages) in 12:10. In mentioning these, Paul said that they were by the "same Spirit" three more times making obvious his concern that this subject would be a potentially divisive one.

We should not be surprised that Paul would be concerned about division surrounding the whole subject of spiritual gifts, since it has caused divisions within the Body of Christ for centuries, and still do so today. Yet ironically, the gifts or manifestations themselves are not at all divisive— *they should actually unite us all together*. Here's what I mean:

If you take an honest look at the larger Body of Christ, which is to say at groups you don't worship with, you will see manifestations of the Spirit in the Methodist church, and in the Southern Baptist church, and in the Pentecostal church and in the Church of Christ and in the Missionary Baptist church and in the Lutheran church and in the Catholic church... We may not always agree on teaching or customs or traditions, but where the Spirit is present, so are our brothers and sisters in Christ, for we all have the same indwelling Holy Spirit.

Not surprisingly, Paul will continue this theme in the rest of this section.

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

As we continue Paul's discussion about misunderstandings of spiritual gifts, Paul has taken great care to emphasize that the manifestations of the Spirit within us are to be a unifying force, not a source of division. He continues this discussion through 12:12-26 with a lengthy analogy in which he uses the human body as an example to illustrate how manifestations of the Spirit work in the Body of Christ. Just as each body part in the human body is necessary for the well being of the entire body, so also is each manifestation of the Spirit in the Body of Christ. Thus, each brother and sister in the Body has his or her own role to play, according to God's plan and provision, and no one is more important than the rest.

That is such a simple lesson, you would think we'd learn it some day!

He sums this up at the end of the chapter:

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? Now eagerly desire the greater gifts.

And yet I will show you the most excellent way.

1 Corinthians 12:27-31

We cannot choose our spiritual gifts, for as we have seen, they are distributed by the Holy Spirit according to His good pleasure. Yet we can desire greater gifts, and as we grow in maturity in the Lord, we may come to receive some of the more mature ones. Should we desire one of these "greater gifts" it will help us if we bear in mind that jealousy and envy, not to mention anger and resentment, will not likely hasten the day along to a greater gift.

Unity again!

Paul has a better way for members of the Body of Christ to orient themselves as they follow the Lord Jesus Christ through this life: The way of love.

Chapter 13

Spiritual Gifts and Love

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

1 Corinthians 13:1-3

This is the beginning of what so many people call “the love chapter”. It is comprised of some of the most beautiful prose ever written, it is quoted in most weddings, so many people say it is their very favorite of all Bible passages, but it is really about spiritual gifts, more than it is about love. Remember that we are in the middle of a three-chapter section in this letter in which Paul is dealing with misunderstandings about spiritual gifts, and love is not a spiritual gift.

No sir, love is a commandment:

“The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

Mark 12:29-31

In our three verses, Paul mentions love 3 times, but in those same verses, he mentions 5 spiritual gifts, and his very obvious point in writing is that it is more important to have love than any manifestation of the Spirit. The real question we should be asking ourselves is why did he feel it necessary to make this point?

If we have been reading through this letter, we already know the answer: There was division in the Corinthian church along socio-economic lines. The people were proud and liked to show off their lofty positions. They also enjoyed showing off their intellectual sophistication. Of course, they would prize spiritual gifts that tended to place them in “the front of the room” as they taught in strange tongues, showed off their great knowledge, wisdom and discernment, or while they spoke prophetically.

Yet while they may have been quite gifted, they appear to have lacked one of the very fundamentals of the faith, for they lacked love. That lack has been on display for us in each of the sections we have covered thus far.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Looking at these verses, we see a whole list of attributes that the people in Corinth had in abundance, but that are not a part of the way of love. Sad to say, the attributes that Paul

mentions here are all too common in human society, but to follow Jesus Christ is not to follow the ways of men, it is to follow the way of love.

1 Corinthians 13:8-13

Paul continues his discussion of spiritual gifts and love in this section, telling us that the gifts will one day pass away, but that love will remain. It is evident fairly quickly that what Paul has in mind here is that this age will pass away when the Lord returns, and after that time, the gifts of the Spirit as we now understand them, will pass away, for they will no longer be required to build the Kingdom of God. Remember, the gifts or manifestations of the Spirit are not given to puff up their recipients, but for the common good to build up the Body of Christ.

When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

1 Corinthians 13:11-12

Using childhood as an analogy, Paul points out that when the completion comes, the things we now see from the incomplete vantage point of this world will change, and we will then see things as they truly are, from a heavenly point of view. When this happens, the manifestations given to us for this time will no longer be necessary, but love remains always, for the way of love is the way of God.

I would imagine that this point was as difficult for the Corinthians to accept as it is for most of us today. We read things like this and respond with a certain amount of skepticism in our earthly perspective. It sounds to many of us like just another academic abstraction, a nice concept, but totally unrealistic in the real world we live in.

Who can argue that point?

Maybe we should consider the possibility that this world of ours isn't actually the "real" world at all, for this world has been corrupted by evil, and it is not at all the world God created and placed humanity into at the beginning. Maybe the fact that human nature contains a generous portion of evil desire is not the "norm" and maybe love is.

Oh yes, to have a heavenly point of view is counter-intuitive in the extreme!

I'll leave you with a thought:

Before God created the physical universe that we know, He lived in eternity past, with no time or space as we understand them. Then He created our universe and added humanity to mix to fulfill His purpose in the Creation. After doing so, a period of time elapsed before humans were corrupted by sin in Genesis 3. Maybe that period was days or weeks, and maybe it was centuries; no one knows. We also cannot know how many years have passed since then, but it has been quite a few. Jesus is set to return to do away with evil entirely in the Final Judgment, and then we will spend eternity with Him. Notice that "eternity" is on both sides of "time".

From an earthly time and space point of view, there is only time, for we have no frame of reference from which to comprehend eternity. Yet from God's perspective, "time" is but a blip on the radar, so vast is eternity.

This concept isn't easy to wrap our brains around; it may not even be possible to do so. Yet we can be sure that love endures through all of this... And that dear reader, is precisely the point that Paul is making in this chapter.

Chapter 14

The Role of Spiritual Gifts

1 Corinthians 14:1-25

All too often we study this section without taking its context into account. As a result, many of us use this passage as a source of proof texts to back up one position or another regarding speaking in tongues. This is troubling on several levels, not the least of which is the fact that we tend to use the same passage to prove conflicting positions.

As you might suspect, when this happens, context is being ignored in favor of winning an argument. In this particular case, we are engaged in an argument that we shouldn't even be participating in, no matter which side of it you are on.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this section, this is a study of 1 Corinthians, it is not a study of spiritual gifts as such. If you are interested in a study of spiritual gifts please see *Your Spiritual Gifts Revealed* which is available for free download on my website.

Let's remember that chapter 14 is the third chapter in a section of the letter to Corinth that is discussing misunderstandings about spiritual gifts. It follows along from the previous chapter's discussion of love as a contrast to the gifts themselves, as something that is eternal, while spiritual gifts are not. Paul has moved into a discussion here of the gifts in the context of the church assembly, and his overall point is that speaking in tongues really isn't something that belongs in the worship assembly. He doesn't say that because there is anything wrong with speaking in tongues; he says he himself speaks in tongues. Rather, his point is that it simply doesn't edify the Body of Christ.

I realize that many would jump in here and assert that there is no longer any such thing as speaking in tongues... or prophecy, for that matter. I know this because that's the way I learned it myself. If that happens to be your view, I would only say that Paul's discussion here is in answer to an inquiry from the church in Corinth c. 55 AD: Context again!

I would also point out the lack of evidence from the New Testament for such an assertion.

Paul's use of the contrast between speaking in tongues and prophecy is an interesting one, and it may be a bit confusing for some of us. That confusion would arise from a misunderstanding of what prophecy actually is. So often in our time prophecy is spoken of as though it was foretelling the future and nothing more. Yet this understanding is a mistake, for a prophet is one who brings a message from God to His people. Quite often in Scripture this message is one of correction in which God is telling His people that action is needed to correct an error of one kind or another. Certainly, that is case for most of the Major and Minor prophets of the Old Testament.

With this in mind, the contrast between speaking in tongues that we cannot understand is in sharp contrast with someone who brings a clear message from God to His people, and thus, Paul's point is clearly made in these verses.

Notice that Paul wraps up his point by pointing out that should an unsaved person visit the worship assembly and be confronted by people who speak in an unintelligible manner, they would conclude that Christians were crazy, but if they heard a clear message from God they might well be brought to repentance and relationship with Christ.

That is the case Paul is making in this passage. It applies just as much today as it did then, and we will miss that critical point if we indulge ourselves by mining the text for ammunition to use in an unnecessary argument.

1 Corinthians 14:26-40

Some of the new translations place a subheading between this section and the last, and while that may be a convenient way to break up the chapter, it gives the impression that the subject has changed, but actually it would appear that Paul is winding up the whole discussion from 12:1-14:25... *What then shall we say, brothers and sisters? (14:26a)*

In 14:26b-28 Paul indicates that whatever kind of message, whether a hymn, instruction, a revelation or something in a tongue, they must be presented in an orderly and clearly understandable fashion for the edification and building up of the entire Body of Christ. If someone is going to speak to the assembly in a tongue, there must be an interpreter, or else the person must hold their tongue. Again, this is for the sake of edification of the entire assembly.

In the next paragraph, Paul gives essentially the same word for any prophets or prophetic messages. In 14:34-35, he indicates that the women should remain quiet in the assembly and address any questions or comments to their husbands at home, and then...

Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached? If anyone thinks they are a prophet or otherwise gifted by the Spirit, let them acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command. But if anyone ignores this, they will themselves be ignored. (14:36-38)

If you just read through this passage, Paul was moving right along giving instructions... no big deal, just take notes and make necessary corrections to improve the flow of your worship time. Then suddenly, he changes the tone entirely, which seems to me to indicate that there were three groups in the Corinthian assembly who tended to insist of causing confusion or disruption in their worship services: People speaking in tongues, people bringing prophecy, and... women.

The modern eye skips right to the last one and jumps to the conclusion that Paul has just uttered a shocking, terrible and sexist bit of instruction. I wouldn't be too quick to jump to conclusions if I were you...

Paul is writing this in response to an inquiry made in a letter from Corinth about a situation they were experiencing there c. 55 AD. We can only infer from the answer Paul has given what the exact issue was, since sadly, their letter is not available to us. In any case, the culture and circumstances of mid first century Corinth were quite different from anything we are likely to experience today. Secondly, and this is my guess, it may have been that the people speaking in tongues and prophesying were predominantly female. If that guess is correct, then Paul's quiet comment would have been directed more in the direction of the women who insisted on speaking in tongues and giving prophecy in a disorganized fashion, then on women generally, and then there are Paul's final words on the subject:

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way. (14:39-40)

Paul's conclusion of the section (chs. 12-14) is an inclusive one. All should be eager to prophesy, none should forbid tongues, and all should conduct themselves in an orderly manner in the assembly. This is why I see Paul's comments in 14:34-35 as actually intended for those who are causing disruption rather than at women as a class of humans. Sadly, many over the years have not seen it this way.

Chapter 16

Misunderstandings about Resurrection

Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

1 Corinthians 15:1-2

Paul begins a new section about resurrection with these verses. It would appear that this was not a question they asked in their letter to Paul but reflects an issue that Paul has heard about that was troubling the congregation. It would seem that then, as now, certain elements within the church were challenging the resurrection.

These two verses give us the introduction for what will follow in this chapter. Once again, Paul is using a persuasive outline; this is his thesis statement in which he points out that our entire faith is based upon the proposition that Jesus was raised bodily from the grave.

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

1 Corinthians 15:3-8

His first point is that Jesus has been seen by hundreds of people post resurrection—there are many eye witnesses who can still tell you that they saw Him. In the old Law, truth was established on the testimony of 2 or 3 witnesses—Paul has hundreds of witnesses... and oh yes, he was also a witness. You might also note that he twice said “according to the Scriptures” in this paragraph. It should not have surprised anyone that Jesus died, was buried, and rose again on the third day since this had all be foretold in the Scriptures.

This is actually a very compelling argument because it might be possible to get a few people to conspire together to perpetrate a fraud, but the more people who participate in a lie, the higher the likelihood that someone will recant their story under pressure, and many of these had been under pressure. In fact, many had been pressured by Paul himself...

For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. Whether, then, it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed.

1 Corinthians 15:9-11

Paul himself had persecuted the Church, had put serious physical pressure on people to renounce their faith, even to deny that they had seen the risen Christ, I would suspect. Yet they did not do so. Then he had been approached on that Damascus road by none other than the risen Christ Himself, and somehow, by God’s amazing grace, Paul had been not only saved from his egregious sins, but he became the Apostle to the Gentiles: He has given reliable

testimony to the Corinthians about the resurrection of Christ, and it is because of the resurrection of Christ that they have a foundation of faith.

From here, Paul takes an unusual approach as he continues his case for the resurrection...

1 Corinthians 15:12-19

As Paul continues to make his case for the resurrection, he makes a point that should be self-evident: If Christ rose from the dead, then a Christian cannot say there is no resurrection of the dead, because if they do, they negate their own faith in Christ. It would appear from 15:12 that certain elements in the congregation were saying just that:

But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. (15:12-16)

Yes, it should be self-evident that there either is resurrection or there is not; there is no cherry picking in the matter of resurrection. He continues...

And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. (15:17-19)

To put it in its simplest form, you can't really be a Christian and deny the resurrection, for denying resurrection of the dead entirely negates being a Christian.

1 Corinthians 15:20-28

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. (15:20)

If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then the gospel would be a lie; but He *did* rise from the dead!

In these verses, Paul gives a gospel “refresher course” to the Corinthians, reminding them that Jesus has risen, and that in due course, so will we. He was the first, having risen to reign over the kingdom of God. He reigns today as well, in anticipation of that Great Day when He will return at the consummation of the kingdom, to put an end to all evil on the earth and to raise all who have “fallen asleep” over the centuries (15:20-25).

The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he “has put everything under his feet.” Now when it says that “everything” has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all. (15:26-28)

God has put every enemy under Christ's feet; He will be the one to judge evil and death, and when this has been accomplished, God will reign over the consummated kingdom forever.

This short summary of the end of this world wasn't placed in this chapter so that we might indulge in speculation about the details of The End. Rather, it is the conclusion of Paul's point in the prior passage (15:12-19) in which he made the point that if there is no resurrection, our hope is all in vain. Remember, he is correcting misunderstandings about the issue of the resurrection of the dead, as well as any contentions about the resurrection of Christ.

Before we continue, I wonder how we react when people speculate in our midst about such things. To be clear, I am not referring to unbelievers, I mean people who say they follow Christ. Quite a few Christians question whether or not Jesus actually rose from the grave in bodily form, suggesting that His resurrection was more a spiritual thing, something mystical perhaps, but not physical. Even worse, some even suggest that the whole resurrection is sort of a myth, an oral tradition... or maybe something figurative.

How would we respond to that?

Paul's reaction is found here in chapter 15- and he isn't quite finished yet.

Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for them? And as for us, why do we endanger ourselves every hour? I face death every day—yes, just as surely as I boast about you in Christ Jesus our Lord. If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus with no more than human hopes, what have I gained? If the dead are not raised,

*“Let us eat and drink,
for tomorrow we die.”*

Do not be misled: “Bad company corrupts good character.” Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God—I say this to your shame.

1 Corinthians 15:29-34

Reading this passage, one might have the impression that Paul is going for the kill in dealing with the issues relating to the resurrection that he has been discussing in this section. We might even detect the presence of a bit of *ad hominem* here. An argument is said to be *ad hominem* when a person attacks another person in stead of that person's position on an issue. In our time, we should be quite familiar with *ad hominem* attacks, for the entire political world is engaged in such tactics. Just turn on any cable news station this afternoon, and you will see examples of this. If someone attacks you for your faith, saying you are “deluded, deranged and dangerous”, you have just received an *ad hominem* attack.

An *ad hominem* argument is a logical fallacy, and if this paragraph was all that Paul wrote on the issue in 1 Corinthians, it would've been a fallacious argument. However, in this case, after having addressed the actual issue very thoroughly, Paul is really using it as a sort of wake-up call for any remaining holdouts to really consider how poor their arguments against the resurrection are.

He begins with a practice of being baptized for the dead. Read his words carefully and ask yourself if he was endorsing the practice.

Hardly!

We might even infer that whoever was doing this was also promoting the no resurrection point of view: It sounds an awful lot like ridicule to me.

Look at vv. 30-32 in which Paul puts forth a comparison and contrast between his constant danger of being arrested and/or killed for preaching the gospel, and the whole notion of “eat, drink and be merry”. If there were no hope of a resurrection, why would he and those with him expose themselves to such danger? If there is no resurrection, there could be no judgement or eternity, and if that were true, why not eat, drink and be merry?

He winds up this part of the discussion by calling on everyone to set aside such nonsense and to be sensible on the subject. Instead of spreading such ridiculous thinking, they should be spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ, and just to be clear about everything, yes, he was trying to shame them.

I can't help but wonder how our reactions to such teaching would compare to Paul's.

The Resurrected Body

1 Corinthians 15:35-44a

But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?” How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body. (15:35-38)

Having covered the issue of whether or not there is a resurrection, Paul now moves on to a related resurrection issue; will we be resurrected just as we are, or will we be different? In these verses, Paul is making the point that there are many different kinds of bodies, which although obvious, isn't really something we usually think about. He begins his discussion with a metaphor, this time of a seed. You plant a seed and God causes the seed to grow into whichever kind of plant the seed came from; each type is different. Yet, you don't plant the plant, you plant its seed.

When we die, our mortal remains are like the seed of a plant; what comes forth from the grave is like the plant itself. It came from what was “planted” but is much grander than the seed it came from.

In 15:39-41 he mentions that there are different kinds of bodies. There are human bodies, animal bodies, fish and birds; they are all different. There are also earthly bodies and heavenly bodies, each of which has its own kind of “splendor”, just as the sun and the moon each has its own kind of splendor.

Paul is ready to zero in on his point...

So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. (12:42-44a)

When we are raised from the dead, we will be different, and just as a plant is more grand than its seed, so our resurrection bodies will be grander than our earthly bodies– that much is easy enough to understand, but what exactly is a “spiritual body”?

Hold on... isn't “spiritual body” an oxymoron?

That's a fair question. To find an answer to the question, we do have an example to examine, and as usual, our example is found in Christ Himself. Jesus has already been raised up from the dead; He is the firstfruit of the Resurrection.

Did He rise from the grave imperishable? Yes.

Did He rise from the grave in glory? Yes.

Did He rise from the grave in power? Yes.

Did He rise from the grave in a spiritual body? We could put this a different way, couldn't we? We could say “Therefore, He rose from the grave in a spiritual body” instead, but I haven't put it that way because there is additional evidence to consider.

We know that Jesus had a physical body after the resurrection because good old “doubting Thomas” wanted to touch it before he was convinced that Jesus actually rose from the grave, and that is exactly what he did. We also know that Jesus had a physical body because up there in Galilee He not only cooked fish, but he ate them; you need a physical body for both of those activities, don't you? So, let's think about the resurrection story some more...

When the women first went to the tomb early in the morning, they saw the stone rolled away, but they didn't see Jesus... and then He was there. The followers of Jesus were together in a locked room... and then Jesus was there. Two disciples were walking along the road alone, and then Jesus was there. The disciples were talking with Jesus, and suddenly He began to rise up into heaven.

Physical bodies as we understand them cannot do any of these things, can they? Jesus arose from the dead in bodily form, but He had a different kind of a body, just as Paul has been saying in this passage. Yes, it was a spiritual body, and I don't know about you, but I am really looking forward to that particular upgrade!

If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. So it is written: “The first man Adam became a living being”; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit. The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual. The first man was of the dust of the earth; the second man is of heaven. As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the heavenly man, so also are those who are of heaven. And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man.

1 Corinthians 15:44b-49

With this paragraph, Paul expands on his message to the Corinthians about our resurrection spiritual bodies. In doing so, he has moved beyond seeds and plants, and people and other

creatures, for now he is explaining how we will be able to move entirely beyond the earthly into the heavenly, thanks to what Jesus has done on the cross. Oh yes dear reader, you've heard me correctly.

You will recall Paul's discussion of the gospel earlier in this chapter, and how it centered around the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We as Christians often speak of grace and the forgiveness of sins, and often in doing so we can go on and on for quite some time. Yet in these few verses, Paul has taken us far beyond the building block of forgiveness and God's grace, and into our ultimate futures which is glorious beyond measure, and reading this passage, we have a little introduction to something that glory has in store for us that isn't often talked about.

1 Corinthians 15:50-59

Paul completes the section on resurrection in these 10 verses with what is essentially a recap of the entire section. Verse 50 is the transition:

I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

Read this slowly! Only the "imperishable" can *inherit* the Kingdom of God. Notice that he did not say that only the imperishable can *enter* the Kingdom; that is a point that has caused just a bit of confusion and argument over the years to be sure. We enter the Kingdom as mortal humans by receiving God's awesome grace and entering into relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. And so, we live today as citizens of His Kingdom on the earth. As such we are destined for much greater things in Christ upon His return: We live today as His co-heirs, but we haven't yet inherited everything. That will occur upon His return. When He returns...

Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed— in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."

*"Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?"*

1 Corinthians 15:51-55 cf. Hosea 16:14

Upon Jesus' return the dead are raised imperishable, and those alive are transformed... Simple.

Well, maybe not as simple as it should have been; Paul will need to correct a whole new batch of misunderstandings in due course. He went on to explain, in verses 56-57 that the sting of death is sin, and sin's power comes from the law, but that has been dealt with by Christ. Finally, Paul concludes:

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. (15:59)

It was as though he were simply telling them that since they have such an amazing future to look forward to, they should stand firmly together and dedicate themselves to the Lord's work, secure in the knowledge that whatever this life might throw at them, their work in the Lord had a great purpose, and their labors would not be in vain. I would suggest to you, that the message for us is exactly the same.

Chapter 16

Some Final Words from Paul

There is a great deal of historical information in chapter 16, and I would encourage everyone to read it. Yet, for all intents and purposes, the letter was completed in 15:59. I'm saying that based upon its context of being a letter of instruction and correction relating to the specific problems and challenges of the Corinthian church that Paul was sending them.

Yet there is one thing about this last chapter that I want to point out to you in this study:

*Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. Do everything in love.
(16:14-15)*

This just about sums up Paul's entire purpose in writing to Corinth. I would imagine that if Paul could send us a text today, this would be it. We might at first find it curious that he has combined on guard, firm courageous and strong with love in this, since we seldom use the first four with the fifth, but maybe we need to rethink the way we look at love.

In this old world we live in today, we have become a little bit jaded, don't you think? We might assume, probably correctly, that being on guard must be against evil. We might assume that standing firm in our faith can refer only to some kind of temptation, and that would probably be correct. We would also probably assume that being courageous would refer to some inherent danger all around us, and that would probably go for being strong as well. Isn't it odd that Paul would follow these admonitions with "Do everything in love"?

The more I think about it, the less it seems odd to me; maybe Paul has hit upon something we usually miss.

How would it strike you if I suggested that each of those admonitions was entirely in reference to love? Try these on for size...

Be on your guard lest you should do things that are not out of love.

Stand firm in the faith, lest you should lose your love.

Be courageous and love even when you'd rather not.

Be strong, for the way of love is never easy in this world.

Yep, the more I think about it, the more I think this is exactly what Paul was trying to tell them... and us too.

Oh yes, I can hear it now: *Don, why didn't you mention verses 22: "If anyone does not love the Lord, let that person be cursed!" That doesn't sound like love to me!"*

In reply, I would say, "Paul didn't tell the Corinthians to curse anybody, he just told them to leave such a person alone. Such a person has made their choice, a choice which will not be a blessing to them; we don't need to point our fingers at them and add to the misery they've brought upon themselves. Let them be, and let's pray that the circumstances they have chosen will conspire to change their minds so that they will, in the end, be saved." Come to think of it, hasn't Paul already said something like this in the letter?

Yes, in fact, he has.

So, we have come back to the way of love; the most excellent way. May we always remain faithful to its path.