

Paul as a Pastoral Theologian in Corinithian Correspondence



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Title:	Paul as a Pastoral Theologian in Corinthian Correspondence
Published by:	The Director, Alpha Institute, Archdiocese of Tellicherry, Sandesa Bhavan, Tellicherry, 670 101, Kannur, Kerala Ph: 0490 - 2344727, 2343707
Published on:	2020 July 3 (St. Thomas Day)
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Design & Layout:	Midhun Thomas
Printing:	Vimala Offset Press, Thalassery
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Paul's Corinthian Correspondences

Paul's first epistle to the church at Corinth reads like a Christian website's FAQ page. In many ways, 1 Corinthians is the answers to some of Christianity's frequently asked questions. While reading the book, it appears that Paul is answering a series of questions. It's possible that Corinthian church had sent a list of questions to the man who had spent a year and a half planting and nurturing the new church.

The structure of 1 Corinthians moves systematically from one topic to the next. Paul answers each topic, sometimes with strong admonishment. He realizes there is some trouble within the church. So what were the problems in the Corinthian church? For the better understanding of the church at Corinth and the text of 1 Corinthians, it is good to know the context of the city and the people Paul was writing to. These people

had a lot of societal and cultural baggage into the church.

The Background of the Corinthian Church

The city was a cosmopolitan city. It sat on a small sliver of land between two bodies of water. People from all over the Mediterranean world converged in Corinth. Goods were brought into the city by ship. Sometimes the ships were pulled across the land to the other side where they would sail on. So there were all kinds of people in the city. They brought their own religious beliefs in the city of Corinthians. The religious background of Corinth was a mix of Greek, Roman, and Oriental cultures. There was very little understanding of the ways of this new religion in town, Christianity. The Christian teachings went against the grain of everything they knew of religion.

Corinth was the home of the temple of Aphrodite or Artemus. She was supposed to be the goddess of sensual love and pleasure. It's been said that one thousand temple prostitutes served at the temple. Even in the morally corrupt society of the Roman Empire, Corinth was known for its excessive moral decay. The word "Corinthian" was used by the Romans for someone who was immoral and excessive in immorality. Corinth was the sinful city, the "Las Vegas" of the Roman Empire. The shipping trade has made many people rich. But there were many more poor people in the city. There was a chasm between the two groups. These people did not socialize with one another. It was within this atmosphere and context the Corinthian church was born.

The date of Paul's visit to Corinth has been ascertained by an inscription of the Emperor Claudius found at Delphi, which dates the proconsulship of Gallio as beginning in July a.d. 51 through July, 52 (cf. Acts 18:12-17), which would make the date of Paul's arrival about a.d. 49-50. The date of Paul's letter would then be sometime in the mid-50's. He wrote it from Ephesus where he ministered between two years (cf. Acts 19:10) and three years (cf. Acts 20:31).

The recipients of the letter were the fledgling church made up mostly of mostly Gentiles. The population of Corinth was racially and culturally mixed. We know from archaeology and Scripture (cf. Acts 18:4-8) that there was a synagogue in Corinth. There were several retired Roman soldiers residing at Corinth after completing twenty years of military service. Corinth was a free city, a Roman colony, and capital of the Roman province of Achaia.

How Many Letters Did Paul Write to the Corinthians?

The question how many letters did Paul write to Corinth? This is a disputed topic among the scholars. The following are the various suggestions:

1. just two, I and II Corinthians
2. three, with one letter being lost (1 Cor 5:9)
3. four, with two letters being lost (the lost letter mentioned in 1 Cor 5:9 and the letter of tears)
4. some modern scholars find parts of the two lost letters in II Corinthians
 - ❖ previous letter (I Cor. 5:9) in II Cor. 6:14-17:1)
 - ❖ letter of tears (II Cor. 2:3-4,9; 7:8-12) in II Cor. 10-13)
5. five, with II Cor 10-13 being the fifth letter, sent after Titus' report relating the further bad news

Of the five theories mentioned above the third one seems to be most plausible one. According to this theory, the order of the letter could be traced as follows

1. Previous letter, lost (I Cor 5:9) – written around 50 AD
2. I Corinthians (Present Canonical text of I Corinthians) – written around 52 AD
3. Letter of Tears, lost (possibly part of which is recorded in II Cor 2:1-11; 7:8-12) - – written around 54-55 AD

4. II Corinthians (Present Canonical text of II Corinthians) --
written around 55-56 AD

The Primary Problem with the Corinthian Church

The church at Corinth had many problems. But all problems stemmed from one central problem. The people could not or would not detach themselves from the world they lived in. They were having problems, shaking off the ways they lived before they were introduced to Jesus Christ. They had brought the world into the church. Anytime you bring the world into the church you will bring the world's problems, too. We see this in 1 Corinthians. As we read the book, we soon realize the context and it bears similar overtones. The city, the people, and the problems the Corinthian church had are not unlike the problems in our world and in our churches today.

. Paul heard of the problems that had developed at Corinth from three sources

- ❖Chloe's people (1:11)
- ❖a letter from the church asking questions (7:1,25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1,12)
- ❖a personal visit from Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus (16:17)

It is interesting that Murry Harris has outlined the book of I Corinthians based on Paul's received information about the church.

- ❖oral report from members of Chloe's household, resulting in Paul writing chapters 1-4
- ❖oral report from church representatives (i.e., , Stephanus, Fortunatus, and Achaicus), resulting in chapters 5-6
- ❖written questions from the church, resulting in chapters 7-16

The Pastoral Problems

Looking at it from our perspective, the Corinthian church was a mess. There was quarreling, cliques forming, a man sleeping with

his father's wife (probably not his mother), wealthier people not eating with poor people, and spiritual gifts were being turned into acts of pride.

These were the problem which Paul had to address. Despite all of the surface issues, there seems to be an underlying problem that was plaguing this congregation. In their culture it was common to try and pursue a sense of goodness on an individual level. People would try their hardest to reach this standard of *good*. As people strived for this *good*, many would encounter Christianity and they would view it as a way in which to achieve this *good* standard. They simply began to view Christianity as the new vehicle for achieving this level of moral superiority.

As they progressed in their *goodness*, they begin to view themselves as above moral norms. The moral standards of the society (or even the church) became *below them*. In other words, they thought they had arrived and because of that they were no longer held to the same standard as the common folk. This desire for reaching *goodness* came from the Aristotelian ethics. The irony in all this is that as a person got closer to being the *good man*, their moral standard diminished. This is the same problem that occurs in churches today. In the pursuit of becoming *better Christians*, they begin to look down on others because they are not at the same level of *spirituality*. At the same time, they are, in fact, committing sin because of their pride.

1. Divisions in the Church: The church at Corinth was racked with divisions. These factions were a reflection of the different beliefs and backgrounds the people who holds their past faiths. Today, within our own churches, there is always the threat of clashes and divisions among our people. The Bible speaks frankly about divisions within the church.
2. Immorality: The church existed within a very immoral setting. There were some very immoral activities going on between people in the church. Activities that should make people blush.

But instead, some seemed to be proud. So Paul addresses immorality. What determines immorality and how immorality affects our churches.

3. Can a Christian eat the meat offered to the idols
4. Problems in Lord's Supper: The Corinthians were basically making a mockery of Communion. The Lord's Supper was affected by the divisions between rich and poor and an overall general misunderstanding. Paul gives the church a stern warning about their actions and directs them to participate in a proper way.
5. Tensions on Spiritual Gifts: The Corinthian church was confused with spiritual gifts. Some of those with more visible gifts began to think they were more valuable to God and the church than those with less visible gifts. Paul addresses spiritual gifts, their origins, and why they are all equally needed in a functional church.
6. Marriage Issues: The practice of marriage was another topic addressed in 1 Corinthians. Is it needed? What is its significance? This question speaks to the heart of many problems in our culture today. God answers these questions through Paul.
7. Questions on Resurrection: Someone dying and then living again didn't make sense in the Corinthian world. And it's rarely understood in our world today. What is the resurrection and why does there have to be a resurrection? How do we know that there was a resurrection? And what does it mean for us?

Divisions in the Church at Corinth

Disunity is a perennial ecclesial problem. There are few passages in Paul's epistles as relevant as the 1 Corinthians 1-4 to the church situation of disunity. The tension between Protestants and Catholics, orientals and occidental, orthodox and reformists, Charismatics and traditionalists etc are increasing or causing fragmentation within the church. Paul's teaching to the Corinthians about church unity is a real remedy for the Church of disunity.

The situation at Corinth

Factions had developed in the church who identified strongly with leading figures in Christianity. Paul wrote: *One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas";* Presumably a reaction to this there was another group, no better than the others, who said, *"I follow Christ"*

(1:12). To understand what was happening it is instructive to look at each faction separately.

1. The devotees of Paul: It is highly likely that Paul's approach and teaching appealed strongly to Gentile slaves. Chloe's household may well have been slaves who belonged to the Pauline party. Perhaps, they complained to Paul that there were others under the group names of Apollos and Peter. Paul's preaching was simple. This is how he described his policy: *When I came to you brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God* (1Cor 2:1). This clear, straightforward, intellectually undemanding ministry would appeal strongly to uneducated folk. Paul also made it very clear to the Gentile converts that they had been set free from the rules and regulations of Judaism. Paul's wonderful, liberating message was: *You are all Sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* (Gal 3:28). This would appeal to any who valued liberty above almost anything else.
2. The devotees of Apollos: We read about Apollos in Acts 18:24-25: *Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord and he spoke with great fervour and taught about Jesus accurately.* Furthermore we read that in Corinth: ... *he was a great help to those who by grace had believed. Acts 18v27.* Paul writes later in his letter to the Corinthians: *I planted the seed, Apollos watered it* (1 Cor 3:8). Apollos the scholar, orator and teacher from the great university city of Alexandria. With his deep knowledge of the Old Testament attracted intellectuals - or those who thought they were!
3. The devotees of Peter: Peter's strong personality and close relationship with Jesus during his earthly ministry gave him a

special status. He was also steeped in Judaism and cautious about abandoning the old customs. Peter was sympathetic to those concerned about losing their Jewishness. I can imagine him speaking out about eating food sacrificed to idols. Peter was a 'proper' apostle. His appeal was to conservative Jewish Christians and to Gentiles who were proselytes of Judaism before converting to Christianity.

4. The devotees of Christ: These believers seem to be on the right lines so it is a surprise that Paul includes them with the others as the people need to be corrected. It is possible that the Christians in this category felt no need of spiritual leaders. They had a hot line to Jesus and received their instruction directly from him. Such Christians are very superior indeed! Corinth was a 'charismatic' church. It contained many who claimed the gift of prophecy. Those that had a word from Christ were inclined to but in during church meetings. They couldn't wait! Jesus had spoken to them and his message must be heard - and not only heard, but also acted on without question.

As we observe from a pastoral point of view, all these four groups can often be found within our local church as was the case of Corinth.

- a. There are those who are content with a simple gospel message Sunday after Sunday. They love to hear of what Jesus has done for them but are less enthusiastic about being told what they should do for him. These Christians rejoice in their freedom and privileges but can overlook their obligations and duties. Much is made of the love of God but it is a love without discipline or obedience. They could be identified with the Pauline group of the Corinthian Church.
- b. Appollos' group symbolizes the intellectuals or the so-called aristocrat Christians. The church is not without its intellectuals who revel in 'deep' preaching. The emphasis with them is on the 'word' rather than 'works'. They despise the teacher who uses stories and illustrations. These Christians want to hear

something original, clever or profound. Nothing pleases them better than to hear the 'Doctrines of Grace' expounded.

- c. Petrine group may symbolize the traditionalist thinkers. Most denominations contain traditionalists. Amongst the Anglicans and Roman Catholics there are devotees of medieval vestments, ancient forms of service and age old ceremonies. Christianity without ritual would be like Christmas without the trappings - unappealing. They are determined not to *stumble in their ways from the ancient paths* (Jer18:15). These traditionalists view the hymnbook of their grandparents good enough for them. The order of service is set in stone and like one of the Ten Commandments cannot be broken.
- d. Finally there are the irritating charismatic Christians who have a hot line to Jesus. He tells them everything from whom their friends should marry to the colour of the shoes they should wear. They are not ready to accept any directives from the hierarchy. Of all groups in a church these can be the most disruptive! This is the faction most likely to leave and start up their own fellowship. It is significant that in AD 95 Clement of Rome indicates that the other three groups persisted in the Corinthian Church but not those who took orders directly from Jesus. They had doubtless gone elsewhere!

Reasons for the Division

Why did factions develop in the church at Corinth? There are at least five possible reasons:

(1) Partisanship is the way of the world: At one point of time Paul was writing many famous philosophers and public speakers visited Corinth. Large numbers of the townsmen would turn out to hear them. The visiting celebrities tried to win a following for their point of view. In this way different factions developed according to the supporters views to each different Guru. The itinerant philosophers were known as sophists, the derivation of our word, 'sophistication.'

The Corinthian Church members were aping the world of their favourite teacher or preacher. It hardly needs saying that partisanship exists today. Many Christians adopt the values of the world in desiring a single leader for their church - preferably one that is likeable, affable, approachable and multi-talented. This very strong desire for one man or woman to be in charge flies in the face of the model given us in the New Testament where several elders exercised a joint leadership.

(2) Factionalism makes life more interesting: The rival groups in the church at Corinth, based as they were on strong personalities, introduced a competitive spirit into the fellowship. Emerging differences led to lively debates and animated discussion. Effort was expended to recruit new members and to become the leading party in the church. There are undoubtedly some Christians who enjoy intrigue, church politics and power struggles. It is sad when Christians get bored with Jesus and serving him - when the effort that should be put into winning souls for Christ, but attempts were made in winning battles with fellow believers.

(3) Differences do exist between Christian leaders: It is true that there may be a difference of emphasis among the leaders. This is evident amongst the authors of the books in the New Testament. Paul stresses the importance of faith whereas James declares that faith without works is dead. Paul makes much of God's call and the security this gives for Christian. The writer to the Hebrews deals with the problem of genuine Jewish believers slipping back into Judaism. There are also dissimilarities of style, personality and conduct between Christian leaders. Paul was highly independent and would not accept hospitality. He insisted on paying his own way - except at Philippi. Peter was happy to receive hospitality and monetary gifts. It is inevitable that some leaders appeal more to one Christian than another.

This is how it should be in the church. It is just so easy to disparage a preacher or leader that you do not much like or in some way

disagree with. We should realise that the preacher that does so little for us may be a great blessing to someone else. Peter, Apollos, Paul, John and James complimented each other. Sometimes we need to be reminded of our security in God the Father who called us. On other occasions we need chivvying up and told to endure hardship as good soldiers of Jesus Christ. Every Christian teacher has something valuable to offer.

(4) The desire to be special leads to division: It was not enough for the Corinthians to be Christian; to be special they had to follow Paul, or Peter, or Apollos or Christ. This destructive tendency still exists. It is present in all denominations and many individual churches. There are believers, for whom it is not enough to be a Christian, or a Catholic, or a traditionalist Catholic, or even a Strict and Particular Catholic. These very peculiar people are immensely proud that they are so few in number! Their level of specialness is in inverse proportion to their numerical significance. We often forget the reality that we are special if we believe in Jesus and have received him. Our membership of God's family is all that matters.

(5) Belief in Jesus was not enough: The Corinthians fell into the trap that so many Christians still fall into. Belief in Jesus was in itself insufficient to be a Christian of the first rank. It had to be Jesus and something else:

- o For some it was the person that baptised them. The members at Corinth were taking pride in being baptised by Apollos or Peter or Paul. In the circumstances Paul was actually pleased that he baptised so few.
- o For others a spiritual gift made them special. It seems from what Paul wrote later in the epistle that a group of Christians were very proud of being able to speak in tongues.
- o A conservative faction adopted a legalistic attitude. The best of Christians were those who abstained from food sacrificed to

idols and were generally very particular what they ate. There are several modern day replica of this group.

Paul's Response to Divisions

Paul began his discussion of church leadership by strongly asserting that both he and Apollos (and all other leaders) were servants. Jesus said something similar when he insisted that the greatest in his kingdom must be the least (Matt. 18:1-4; 20:26-27; 23:10-12; Luke 22:26; Mark 9:35; 10:43-44). Unlike worldly leaders who seek positions of power so that they may be served, Christian leaders are the servants of all. As God's servants, church leaders serve their responsibilities as the Lord has assigned. Worldly leaders seek to force their own ways on others. Christian leaders should seek only to serve the will of God.

By identifying himself and Apollos as servants, Paul reminded his readers that Christ was the true Lord. To celebrate a mere servant rather than the Lord would be utter foolishness. The Corinthians should not have taken pride in their human leaders because their human leaders had no authority or power of their own (compare 1:13). The powerful gospel and preaching which had converted the Corinthians belonged to God alone (1:24; 2:4).

Employing an agricultural metaphor, Paul identified the services that he and Apollos had provided in the Corinthian church. Paul planted the seed by initially bringing the gospel to the believers in Corinth. Apollos, in turn, watered the seed that Paul had brought. Apollos evidently taught the Corinthians after Paul did. The reason for these analogies is evident: one cannot say that either Paul or Apollos was more important to the church at Corinth. Without a sower, there would have been nothing to water. Without someone to tend the growing seed, it may as well not have been planted.

Beyond this, Paul also designated God's role in the process. Paul and Apollos simply served the Lord (3:5) who made it grow, and their human leadership accomplished nothing apart from the

Spirit's power. Further, Paul and Apollos only planted and watered because God told them to do so (1:5). The blessings of salvation on the church at Corinth came through the power and will of God himself.

Paul was amazed on the divisions even though all the different factions still worshipped together. Although there had been no schism, he is unhappy with the divided ecclesial context. In his response to the Corinthian Christians, he makes three points in using strong sense of the terms:

(1) *Is Christ divided?* (1:13)

This could carry two different meanings:

- (a) Jesus Christ is one. He is not fragmented! Jesus was the most integrated of men. If Christ the head is one so, too, should be the body. Of what use if body is in little pieces. All Christians should realise that they are joined to the head and dependent upon one another.
- (b) There are not lots of different Jesus(es). There is no Roman Catholic Jesus, Anglican Jesus, a Brethren Jesus, an Assemblies of God Jesus or a Grace Baptist Jesus. There is only one Jesus. He is the living head of all the different groups and he wants those groups to be one as he and the Father are one. So, why the unfriendliness, suspicion and denigration? Why do we fight each other when we should be united against the common foe?

(2) *Was Paul crucified for you?* (1:14): All Christians, every single one without exception, owes their salvation to one person alone - Jesus. We are united in need. We have precisely the same need - to be saved. There is nothing we can do to save ourselves. There is only one Saviour, only one atoning work, only one way to benefit from it - total submission to him, reliance upon him and love for him. We should be united by our dependence upon Jesus and our total belief in him.

Communion should be the focus of our unity. We shouldn't argue that we will have communion with Christians from other traditions if only they abandon error and agree with us. All genuine Christians should be prepared, without preconditions, to take Communion together. There shouldn't be any barriers. We need to gather around the table to remember what we have in common: our sin, our Saviour, his sacrifice for sin and our so great salvation through faith in him. David Prior in his commentary on 1 Corinthians is absolutely right when he writes: Communion is where we begin to demonstrate that unity which is God's gift to us through the reconciling work of his Son.

(3) *Were you baptised into the name of Paul?* (1:13): It is irrelevant who baptises us. We are baptised in the name of *the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*. We are baptised on the authority of the triune God and, in being so, identified with Jesus and all those who belong to him. Very often believers quarrel over the jurisdictional authority of baptism. However, they appeared to forget the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch! The Ethiopian was baptised far from any church by a mere travelling evangelist in the name of the triune God. Paul counters factionalism by stressing the centrality of Jesus. He is the Christians all in all and were united in him.

The True Nature of the Church

Divisive loyalties to human leaders are not only contrary to the nature of leadership in the church but also contrary to the nature of the church. In this section, Paul demonstrated that the church of Christ is too wonderful to be satisfied with following human celebrities.

3: 16-17. Paul first pointed to the sanctity of the church. He wanted the Corinthians to understand how special they were in God's eyes, and how their status as the temple of God required a particular kind of leadership. Leaders must not serve the church with human wisdom, but with divine wisdom from the Spirit because the church is holy before God. Paul expected an affirmative answer to his

question: “Do you not know ... ?” Believers should recognize that they are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in them. Just as the Name of God dwelled in Solomon’s temple (1 Kgs. 8:29,44,48; 9:3; 2 Chr. 6:2,10,20; 7:16), the Holy Spirit lives in the New Testament temple which is the body of believers gathering in the name of Jesus (Matt. 18:20).

The sanctity of the Holy Spirit’s dwelling requires that the leaders of the church be very careful. In fact, if anyone destroys God’s temple, harming the church by leading through arrogance and human pretense, God will destroy him. Why do this judgment so severe? Because (for) the temple of God is sacred and the Corinthian church is that temple. The Corinthian leaders needed to preserve the unity of the temple, not to destroy it with divisions. Insofar as they divided the fellowship, they attacked God’s holy temple, his body (1 Cor. 12:27; Col. 1:18,24) and his bride (Eph. 5:23-27), thereby provoking God’s wrath.

3:18-20. The preceding reflections on leadership led Paul to draw out an implication for the Corinthians: they needed to be careful not to fool themselves. The Corinthian believers had fooled themselves into thinking they were doing the right thing by dividing the church and exalting human wisdom to support their contentions with others. In their culture such behavior seemed reasonable.

Paul insisted to the contrary. The wise by the standards of this age should take heed. Instead of pursuing the standards of the world, every believer must become a “fool” in the world’s estimation by following the wisdom that comes from the Spirit of God. In this way, the Corinthians would actually become wise.

Why must Christians become fools in order to be wise? Paul supported (for) his argument by pointing once again to the antithetical relationship between worldly wisdom and God’s wisdom. In God’s sight the wisdom held so strongly by this world is actually foolishness. Paul quoted two Old Testament passages to support his belief in this antithesis. First, he quoted Job 5:3 in which Eliphaz said that

God was like a hunter, catching Job as he catches the wise in their craftiness. Job was caught in the trap of depending on his own reasoning rather than accepting the wisdom of God (Job 42:3). Second, Paul paraphrased Psalm 94:11 which mocks those who think they are safe when they rebel against God, but whose thoughts are futile. These Old Testament citations demonstrate that people who exalt human wisdom in rebellion against God. This will find that God overcomes and destroys their efforts. Paul warned the Corinthians from these passages that their reliance on pretentious human wisdom would bring them under God's judgment. From these verses, the Corinthian leaders and laity should have determined to abandon the so-called wisdom that had led them into divisions.

3:21a. On the basis of what he had just said (3:18-20), the apostle drew a final conclusion (**so then**). The Corinthians were to cease **boasting about men**. Paul had warned them earlier to “boast in the Lord” (1:31). Here he focused on the negative side of the issue. The Corinthians needed to forsake the wisdom of this age that led them into factious exaltation of themselves and other human leaders. They needed to see their boasting for what it was: not boasting in higher theology or wisdom; not boasting in greater righteousness; but boasting in mere men.

3:21b-23. Paul gave one final reason for this rejection of human pride. He began with a comprehensive statement: “For all things are yours.” The language of this expression derives from Stoic philosophy. It originally described wisdom as mastery over all that one encounters in life. Paul used this Stoic saying to encourage the Corinthians to gain a proper, Christ-centered perspective on their lives. If they became people of spiritual wisdom, they would see that everything had been given to them in Christ.

All things are Christ's inheritance, and Christ shares that inheritance with all believers (Gal. 3:29; Eph. 1:10-14). The gifts the Corinthians received in Christ were boundless, and they included the blessing of the leadership of Paul, Apollos, and Cephas (the apostle Peter).

These men were gifts from God to the church, and should not have become sources for division. Moreover, the world, life, death, present, and future also belonged to the Corinthians. Christ controls all these things, and he will place them all under the feet of his faithful ones (Rom. 5:17; 6:23; 16:20; 1 Cor. 1:4-5; Gal. 3:14,26; Eph. 1:3,10; 2:6; 3:6). Because all believers share these blessings equally, including the leadership of the aforementioned men, the Corinthians had no basis for their divisions.

Beyond this, all believers are of Christ. No matter what happens, believers can rest assured of their eternal destiny because they belong to Christ (Rom. 14:8). Finally, Christ is of God; the Son belongs to the Father who rules over all (see 15:28). Believers' blessings in Christ are secure because Christ's place with the Father is secure.

Paul rehearsed these wonderful facts about the Christian life to inspire his readers to reconsider their actions. They divided the church at Corinth, struggling with each other and seeking to gain power through human means. But these actions were entirely out of accord with their identity in Christ. If they would submit to the wisdom of the Holy Spirit and see life rightly, they would have no need for these struggles. Instead, they would see that they had all been blessed beyond measure.

How Can the Unity Be Achieved?

There are two possible approaches:

- (a) We have to concentrate upon what unites us - the person, teaching and work of Jesus. When I read commentaries on the gospels by scholars who accept the inspiration of the Scriptures there is a very large measure of agreement among them notwithstanding the different denominations they belong to. The agreement is so great that it makes the existence of the separate denominations utterly pointless.
- (b) We should try to reach agreement where we differ. For this to happen there has to be:

- i. A recognition that differences between Christians should not exist.
- ii. An understanding of how the differences arose.
- iii. An acceptance that we could be wrong or, perhaps, partially right. There are some issues that are very complex and that are not addressed in a systematic way in the Bible such as the relationship between God's Sovereignty and man's responsibility.
- iv. A commitment to listen to those we disagree with.
- v. A steadfast resolve to reach agreement and not just to win the argument.
- vi. A willingness to change. There has to be changes where disagreements exist for Christians to end up *one in mind and thought*.
- vii. A much greater desire to arrive at the truth than to defend our status, reputation or authority.

Twenty-First Century Problems in a First Century Church (1 Corinthians 5-7)

Introduction

The book of 1 Corinthians, written in the middle of the first century, is amazingly relevant. From the standpoint of pastoral ministry it may be the most contemporary of Paul's letters. Many pastors only think they have a difficult church until they read 1 Corinthians. How could a church started by the apostle Paul be fractured by divisions, filled with arrogance, seemingly supportive of immorality, involved in litigation, and struggling over whether sexual relations are appropriate within the husband-wife relationship? These are just a few of the problems facing Paul as he seeks to deal with his spiritual children in Corinth (not to mention abuses of the Lord's Supper, the abuse of Christian freedom, and doctrinal controversies over such issues as spiritual gifts and the future bodily

resurrection of believers). The subjects Paul confronts are as relevant to the body of Christ today as when Paul wrote the letter. Although no church I know of is dealing with all of these problems simultaneously, every church faces similar difficulties. As the book is studied one observes how Paul—the consummate pastor and theologian—handles delicate issues with a spiritually immature people. He provides the contemporary church with a compass to guide her through the stormy seas of church discipline, internal conflict, and aberrant doctrine. What is clear throughout is that Paul loved the church and desired her to bring glory to God and be a source of light in the midst of a spiritually dark city.

The world is looking for authenticity. They want to see individual believers and churches that practice what they preach—purity of life, brotherly love, and healthy relationships in the home. Paul's first-century advice provides a healthy message to twenty-first-century churches.

The Setting of Chapters 5-6

In chapters 5-6 Paul deals with moral sins affecting the church. The sins Paul confronts are issues that were reported to him by Chloe's people (1:11). The church at Corinth struggled with problems stemming from spiritual immaturity, arrogance, and a lack of concern for corporate holiness. The shocking absence of corporate discipline in the church is seen by its apparent condoning of a case of incest (5:1-13). They manifested an attitude of arrogance in their handling, or more precisely, their lack of handling of this sin. This arrogant spirit was part of the reason for the factionalism manifested in the church (1:10-4:21). The church also failed to comprehend who they were in Christ and God's call for corporate holiness, as well as the dangerous consequences of not dealing with the fallen "brother." Paul directs the church to handle the situation by exercising corporate discipline for the purpose of restoration.

A failure to love one another and a lack of concern for the testimony of the church in the world is seen by the practice of believers

going to court against other believers, and this before the ungodly (6:1-11). It was serious enough to have significant disagreements in the church, but then to settle them by litigation in a civil setting compounded the problem. Paul advises those involved to be willing to lay down their rights for the sake of the gospel. The type of mindset reflecting concern about oneself regardless of the potential cost to the kingdom also manifests itself in sexual immorality (6:12-20). Paul argues for sexual purity because of the dignity and destiny of the body.

The Sin of Incest (1 Cor 5:1-13)

The particular problems Paul addresses and his proposed solution in this chapter are not hard to identify. Unraveling some of the details, however, is more problematic. Moreover, trying to understand how the passage applies to the contemporary church is even more difficult.

The chapter can be divided into three major sections. In the opening two verses Paul describes the situation. In the second section he recommends that the sinful man must be removed (vv. 3-8). In the chapter's final division he clarifies a matter he addressed in a prior letter to the Corinthians (vv. 9-13).

The Situation Confronted—A Case of Incest (5:1-2)

In reality there are two problems. The first problem is a report of “sexual immorality” (*porneia*). This word is a general term for sexual sin.¹ Paul makes it clear that the specific sin in this context is incest. Apparently the relationship was ongoing (“some-one has [*echein*] his father's wife”). It is not possible to determine from the context if the father is alive or dead. This type of incestuous relationship is forbidden in the Old Testament (Lev 18:18). Paul is also outraged at the haughty response of the church to the sin. Rather than mourning over such an egregious act, the church is “arrogant.”² The text is unclear about the relationship between the arrogance and the act. Suggestions usually go in one of two directions: either (1) some form of incipient Gnosticism that

emphasized a false dualism between the spirit and the body or (2) an extreme form of Christian liberty. In light of chapters eight through eleven the latter is to be preferred. Paul's solution to the sin of incest is to remove the man (apparently the woman was not a professing believer) from the fellowship.

The Action to Be Taken - "Clean Out the Old Leaven" (5:3-8)

In the center section of this chapter Paul expounds on the latter part of verse 2, "the one who has done this deed might be removed from your midst." While Paul may not be physically present with them, he is with them in spirit and his intentions are revealed in the letter. His use of the perfect tense verb translated, "pass judgment" (*kekrika*) communicates a sense of finality to his judgment. Commentators agree that Paul is commanding some form of discipline such as excommunication to take place. The specific nature of the discipline is more difficult to determine.

The major interpretative crux is what Paul means by "to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (v. 5). Most agree that Paul intends the handing over to Satan (cf. 1 Tim 1:20) to be understood to mean to put the culprit out of the church and back into the realm dominated by Satan.³ What is less clear is how one is to interpret the phrase "for (*eis*) the destruction of the flesh."

The phrase should probably be understood as a result clause and the final phrase, "so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus," as a purpose clause. This understanding of the grammar suggests that the handing over (being put out of the fellowship and back into Satan's domain) would result in the destruction of the flesh with the explicit aim of final redemption (that his spirit may be saved).⁴

What Paul means by "the destruction of the flesh" is debated. Many commentators understand Paul's reference to physical suffering and possibly even death.⁵ This interpretation takes the word

“destruction” (*olethron*) in its most regular meaning. Further support for this interpretation is found in 1 Corinthians 11:30 (“many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep” as a result of abuses at the Lord’s Table) and Acts 5:1-11 (Ananias and Sapphira).

Several arguments, however, can be put forth against the view that Paul is referring to the man’s physical death.⁶ First, nowhere else in the Pauline corpus does Paul use the phrase “the destruction of the flesh” as a reference to death. Second, the phrase stands in contrast to the following clause, “saving of the spirit.” When Paul contrasts flesh and spirit he is not referring to body versus soul, but rather to the old versus new nature of a believer.⁷ Third, in 1 Timothy 1:20, Paul describes handing two men over to Satan so that they may be taught not to blaspheme, so apparently he was not anticipating them dying immediately. Paul’s purpose in the action was corrective. Fourth, Paul further instructs them not to have close fellowship with the man after he is put out of the church, suggesting that an abrupt death is not in view.

The evidence supports the conclusion that Paul is not thinking of the man’s death. His objective was that the man be put out of the church, resulting in the destruction of his “fleshly” nature, in order that he might be saved eschatologically.⁸

In verses 6-8 Paul uses the imagery of Passover to underscore the exigency of removing the “leaven” from among them. Their arrogant response to the situation revealed their failure to see the gravity of the circumstances and the potential danger of this sin contaminating the entire body.

Straightening Out

a Misunderstanding (5:9-13)

The final verses of the chapter (vv. 9-13) are intended to clear up a misunderstanding from a “previous letter” by Paul to the Corinthians.⁹ The Corinthians thought he was instructing them in this earlier letter not to associate with immoral non-Christians (v. 9);

however, Paul's intention was that they do not associate closely (do "not even eat") with anyone who claims to be a believer but denies their relationship to Christ by their lifestyle (vv. 10-11). Paul concludes his discussion by getting back to the main point of putting the incestuous man out of the congregation (v. 13).

Church discipline is a foreign concept to the modern church. One of the reasons for this is past abuses. Another reason is a sincere hesitancy about being unduly judgmental. John 3:16 is no longer the best-known verse of our day. It has been replaced by Matthew 7:1, "Do not judge so that you will not be judged." This is not only to misunderstand what Jesus is saying (since he compared some people to pigs and dogs just in the few verses following!), but it is to ignore Paul's clear instruction that the church has a responsibility to judge those within (5:12). The judgmentalism Jesus condemned has to do with being nit-picky and unnecessarily critical (pointing out the speck in another's character). The discipline that Paul teaches here is for the purpose of restoration. It is not intended as a means of getting even or teaching someone a lesson. Rather, the practice of church discipline reveals the seriousness of sin and the consequences of rejecting God's standards. A multitude of questions arise when the topic of church discipline is mentioned such as, "Which sins are serious enough to merit it?" This topic is beyond the scope of this brief exegetical article. *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, however, devoted an entire issue to the topic and that would be a good place to start investigating the subject.¹⁰

The passage also teaches the inseparability of theology and ethics: who believers are in Christ is inseparable from how they should live. Their decision is not to deal with the "sinner" reflects their failure to see themselves as a "new lump." It is because the church is a holy people that individual believers are called to live holy lives and the church must hold each one accountable. The church has been purchased by the death of the Passover Lamb, Jesus Christ. Therefore, our lifestyle is to reflect his holy standards.

Litigation between Christians before Unbelievers— “What Are You Doing?” (6:1-11)

Chapters five and six are not as different as they first appear. Paul asserts in chapter five that the church has a duty to judge those within its membership, while it is God who judges those outside the church. He now rebukes the church for permitting two believers to submit personal grievances for judgment before the unconverted. The basis for Paul’s anger is twofold: first, the church again fails to understand who they are in Christ, seen in their permitting such an action to take place; and second, the litigation damages the community’s gospel witness.

A Rebuke—“How Could You?” (6:1-6)¹¹

Paul’s agitation with the Corinthians is revealed in the series of rhetorical questions put to them in the first five verses of the chapter. Paul’s point is not that believers would not receive a fair hearing before a civil magistrate, but that believers involved in litigation within the community have no business being there.¹² The church again failed to understand their identity in Christ. They are an eschatological community, indwelt by the Spirit and they should be capable of handling these matters by themselves.

Paul uses their eschatological destiny to demonstrate that they should be competent to handle matters related to this life. While in this life they are not to judge outsiders, at the end of the age they will be involved in the final judgment of unbelievers (v. 2). The possible background for this thought is Daniel 7:22, where judgment is given to the saints of the “Most High.”¹³ Paul strengthens his argument further by making reference to believers judging angels (v. 3). This concept is not found elsewhere in Scripture (it is possible that it came directly to Paul by a revelation from the Lord). His point, however, is that if they will one day judge beings as glorious as angels, they should be capable of handling everyday affairs—such as money, land, or business.

The NASB translation of verse 4 is to be preferred over the NIV translation.¹⁴ The ZIV translation interprets the verse to mean that the least capable Christian is preferable to a non-Christian to judge between the two involved in the litigation. A more likely interpretation, however, is that Paul has constructed an analogous question to verse 2b, in which he formulates an “if . . . then” clause concluding in a rhetorical question.¹⁵ Paul uses irony in verse 5 as an instrument to shame those in the church who were so proud of their wisdom (cf. 4:10).

A Radical Solution— Lay Down Your Rights! (6:7-8)

Paul concentrates in verses 7 and 8 on those involved in the court proceeding and suggests an alternative means of handling the dispute. They need to understand that a lawsuit between believers was already a defeat. Something is fundamentally wrong in the lives of those who allow an issue to reach this point; however, if it does reach this point a believer must be prepared to bear the wrong (Matt 5:39-42). Laying down one’s rights for the propagation of the gospel is as foreign to the contemporary church as it was to the church at Corinth. The two verbs Paul uses, “be wronged” (*adikeisthe*) and “be cheated” (*apostereisthe*), are in the middle/passive voice suggesting that it is better to bear injustice than to damage the witness of the gospel.¹⁶ The passage does not directly address the appropriateness of a believer entering into litigation with an unbeliever; however, in our litigious culture it should probably be considered only as a last resort. Fee suggests that it is justified only “if it is out of concern for the one defrauded and for all others who might be taken in.”¹⁷

A Warning— Beware of Self-Deception (6:9-11)

The connection between verses 1-8 and verses 9-11 is that the mindset that refuses to lay aside one’s rights for the gospel is similar to the mindset of those who commit the sins set forth in this vice list.¹⁸ The self-indulgence and self-centeredness of the sins

enumerated here are not unlike the disposition of those involved in the litigation. Paul's warning should be understood seriously; however, he is not referring to isolated and temporary acts, but rather a way of life that is the focus of one's attentions and affections. Paul's warning is analogous to those in Galatians 5:19-21 and Ephesians 5:3-7. Paul was concerned that those who profess to know Christ but practice wickedness should not be deceived into believing that they are Christians.

Paul concludes this section on a positive note. Some of the Corinthians had been guilty of these sins before they were converted. Verse 11 is one of Paul's more noteworthy theological statements in the book. The three verbs present a separate facet of salvation. "Washed" could refer to baptism,¹⁹ but more likely refers to the inward washing of the Holy Spirit that took place at regeneration (Titus 3:5).²⁰ He goes on to say that they were made holy ("sanctified") and declared righteous ("justified"). While these statements express the Pauline indicative, the Pauline imperative is clear by implication. They are not to live like those who do not know Christ (vv. 9-10). Their lives should reflect what God has done for them and in them. He has cleansed them from their past transgressions. He has begun the work of conforming them into the image of Jesus Christ. They now stand before God as forgiven and declared righteous.

While Paul was specifically addressing the issue of two believers going to court against one another, the implications for the twenty-first century are numerous. In a society that is becoming more and more prone to enter into litigation, a believer must take a sober look at Paul's instruction. Believers must seek some type of Christian arbitration rather than going to court against one another. Christians must also be willing to pray and think seriously about whether a suit against even an unbeliever may not do damage to the proclamation of the gospel. Furthermore, the contemporary "needs driven" church should once again live out Christ's radical call to discipleship, "If anyone wishes to come after me let him deny himself and take up his

cross daily and follow me.” This involves putting to death sin (vv. 9-10) and living a life that reflects what God has done inside each believer (v. 11). God’s call is for men and women who have trusted in Jesus Christ to live holy lives in an unholy world.

Christian Freedom Abused— “Glorify God with Your Bodies!” (6:12-20)

Paul warned the Corinthians in verse 9 against the danger of deception and then began to address the subject of impurity. Paul now addresses the issue of sexual immorality, even more pointedly, especially sexual intercourse with a prostitute. Apparently some men of the libertine branch of the Corinthian church were engaging in sexual relations with prostitutes. This was likely a common practice among many of the men before they were saved out of paganism. Paul quotes what appear to be slogans from this libertine segment of the church (vv. 12-13a). The quotations possibly originated with Paul, but the libertines were grossly misconstruing them. After stating the slogans Paul qualifies them significantly. It is difficult to be certain where the last slogan ends and Paul’s qualification begins. His point, however, is clear: the body is for the Lord’s service, which is demonstrated by our resurrection and the Lord’s (vv. 13b-14).

Paul’s argument in verses 15-17 is that the use of the body in sexual immorality takes it away from its rightful Lord. He constructs his argument on a theological foundation. The Corinthians did not comprehend that conversion to Christ means being united to Him (v. 17). They failed also to understand that sexual immorality is more than just a mere physical act, but involves the entire person (Gen 2:24). The conclusion is that it is abhorrent for a believer, who is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, to engage in sexual immorality.

Paul concludes his argument in verses 18-20 by giving them another command and the theological basis for obeying it. He commands them to “flee” sexual temptation (*porneia*).²¹ Paul knows that God has placed within people a sexual drive. The devil’s strategy is to get them to meet that God-given drive in a God forbidden way:

premarital, extramarital, or perverted sex.²² The theological foundation for the exhortation is in verses 19 and 20. Paul is essentially making a statement by his use of a rhetorical question in verse 19. Apparently they have once again forgotten who they are in Christ. Those indwelt by the Spirit of God have no business engaging in sexual relations with a prostitute (or for that matter anyone else outside of marriage). The blood of Jesus Christ has bought them and their lives, including their sex lives, are not their own.

Paul's words need to be heard afresh in a culture that has legitimized sexual promiscuity. In contrast to the contemporary mantra, "if it feels good do it," comes the wise words of the apostle Paul, "Flee immorality!" Jesus' counsel, although he was using hyperbole, is even more descriptive: "If your right eye causes you to stumble tear it out and throw it from you" (Matt 5:29a). Jesus' language is graphic and understandable. The believer must deal with the source of sexual temptation in a radical manner. Sexual immorality is dangerous: (1) it destroys families; (2) it erodes a person's ability to truly love another; (3) it degrades people and turns them into objects; and (4) it can become an obsessive addiction. As addiction to Internet pornography proliferates and premarital, extramarital, and perverted sex become increasingly the norm, the obvious application is for the believer to do whatever it takes to remain pure in mind and body. The greatest motivation to this purity is not first and foremost one's own well being, but to glorify the God who bought us.

This passage also sets forth one of the strongest arguments in the Pauline corpus for the dignity and destiny of the body. Paul makes five points in verses 13b-20 related to the body. (1) In v. 13b he states that the body is for the Lord's service. What we do with our bodies is not unimportant. Sexual promiscuity is inappropriate for one whose body is dedicated to the Lord for kingdom service. (2) Paul states in verse 14 that God has destined our bodies for resurrection. A body that is to be glorified by God should not be used for immorality. (3) His most developed argument is in verses 15-18. His main thought is that the believer's body is a member of

Christ's body. Believers must recognize their union with Christ and how shameful it would be to then be "joined" to a prostitute. (4) The most impressive argument is in verse 19—the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. This is why it is so important to flee sexual immorality. (5) The final thought on the dignity and destiny of the body is that the believer's body is to be an instrument for glorifying God.

Celibacy, Sexless Marriages, Divorce, Virgins, and Widows (7:1-40)

Chapter seven begins the second major section of 1 Corinthians. In the first section of the epistle Paul deals with the factionalism (1:10-4:21) and the serious moral problems endangering the church (5:1-6:20). He turns his attention now to issues that were addressed to him in a letter from the Corinthians. The first matter he takes up is a number of issues related to celibacy and marriage. Before one plunges into the particulars of the passage, there are a couple of points that need to be kept in mind. First, Paul was not writing a general treatise on marriage but dealing with specific issues relevant to the Corinthians. Some significant aspects of marriage that Paul considered important are not mentioned here because they were not germane to the Corinthian's situation (cf. Eph 5: 22-33). Second, we cannot always be sure of the exact question(s) being asked by the Corinthians. Studying this chapter is like listening to one side of a two-sided phone conversation. We hear only Paul's responses and can only guess as to what the specific question(s) might have been.

Celibacy versus Marriage (7:1-9)

The two main approaches to the interpretation of 7:1-9 are: (1) to understand Paul to be giving some general principles on marriage, or (2) to see him addressing the more specific issues of celibacy and sexual relations within marriage. The second approach seems preferable. Nevertheless, this does not mean that we cannot also discover in the passage some legitimate principles for the marriage

relationship. As the passage is studied one must keep in mind that the situation Paul confronts here is worlds apart from the modern mindset. Some in the church were confident that celibacy was more “spiritual” than being married. Indeed, they took it even further in suggesting that abstaining from sexual relations within marriage was more pleasing to God than engaging in sexual relations with one’s spouse. It is clear that, although Paul personally preferred singleness, he did not believe that to be married was a sin.²³

Scholars are divided on how 7:1b should be interpreted. The NIV, KJV, and RSV interpret it as a Pauline teaching; but in all probability it should be interpreted as either a Corinthian slogan or position advocating abstaining from sex within marriage or possibly even encouraging celibacy.²⁴ The verb translated “to touch” (*haptesthai*) is a euphemism for sexual intercourse. Paul’s qualification of “the slogan” in verses 2-5 is that marriage is to be a monogamous relationship (v. 2, “each man is to have his own wife and each woman her own husband”) that involves physical responsibilities on both parties (vv. 3-5). Any departure from normal sexual relations within marriage must be by mutual consent, for a limited time and a specific purpose. The “concession” Paul makes in v. 6 is to allow a couple to abstain from sexual relations for a limited time in order to devote themselves to prayer, but even that (abstaining from sexual relations for a brief season) is not a command.

Paul’s preference is for singleness (7:7-8, 26, 28, 32-35, 37-38, 40). This was an unusual position for a first century Jew. The more common view was that “it is not good for man to be alone” (Gen 2:18-25). Yet, Paul makes it clear that those who marry do not sin (7:7b, 9, 28, 36, 38-39). Paul indicates that both marriage and singleness are a “gift” from God (7:7a). One of the most important dynamics in determining whether to marry or not is to ask, “Will it encourage total devotion to the Lord?” (v. 35). Although this passage’s specific purpose is not to set forth general principles concerning marriage, Paul’s thoughts here do provide some helpful insights. First, marriage is to be a monogamous relationship between

one man and one woman (7:2). There is a spiritual, emotional, and physical exclusivity about marriage. Second, marriage requires each partner to meet selflessly the sexual needs of his or her mate. In the ancient world it was rare for one to emphasize that a mutuality of responsibility existed within marriage. Paul stresses that both the husband and the wife have a responsibility to meet the other's sexual needs (7:3-5). Third, in light of Paul's teaching in these opening verses, more needs to be done in premarital and marital counseling to communicate the significance of sexual relations within marriage. Studies continually reveal that one of the primary causes of divorce and dissatisfaction in marriage can be traced to this issue. Fourth, a decision about marriage should be made in light of one's gift from God (7:7-9). Therefore, those who are married should never look down on those who are single.

Remain Married or Divorce? (7:10-24)

As mentioned above, some in the church of Corinth were teaching that refraining from physical relations within marriage pleased God. It appears that some in the church took the next step, reasoning that divorcing their partner would bring more glory to God than remaining married. Those married to unbelievers may have been especially attracted to this reasoning. They may have been apprehensive that not only was their marriage dishonoring to God but that their unbelieving mate might defile them. This section falls into two parts: verses 10-11 deal with marriages in which both husband and wife are Christians and verses 12-16 deal with marriages where one partner is a believer and the other partner is unconverted.

Is Divorce Permissible in Marriages Where Both Partners Are Believers? (7:10-11)

It appears that a pro-celibacy group within the church advocated the dissolution of marriages in order to live a celibate life. The issue Paul deals with in these verses can be stated in the form of a question: Is divorce acceptable in a marriage where both partners are believers?²⁵ Paul reminds them of the Lord's instruction; however,

he does not specifically state it here. Paul's response is that if they do divorce their only options are to remain un-married or be reconciled to their estranged spouse.²⁶

Is Divorce Permissible in Marriages in Which One Partner Is a Believer and the Other an Unbeliever? (7:12-16)

This second situation Paul confronts is more complex. He addresses couples where one spouse is a Christian and the other a pagan. Possibly the ascetic wing (pro-celibacy) of the church warned those believers married to unbelievers of the "danger" (spiritual defilement) when having sexual relations with their unbelieving partner.

Paul first addresses the circumstance where a Christian is married to an unbeliever and the unbelieving spouse wants to continue in the marriage relationship. Paul's inspired council ("To the rest I say, not the Lord") is that the Christian is not to take the initiative in severing this union (vv. 12-13). Paul's rationale for this counsel is found in verse 14. Paul reassures them that Christians are not defiled by their marriage to a non-Christian ("For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified [*hēgiastai*] by the wife . . ."). His words have resulted in a bewildering number of interpretations as to how the unbelieving spouse could be sanctified. The more likely interpretation is that Paul is making reference to the marriage. The biblical principle that the two will become one flesh is true even in this type of marriage. Consequently the children that are the product of this one-flesh union are not unclean.²⁷

If the unbelieving spouse is truly determined to end the marriage, however, the believing partner should opt for peace and acquiesce. Paul gives three reasons why the believer is to consent to the divorce. First, the believer is not in bondage (v. 15a).²⁸ Second, in verse 15b God has called the believer "in peace" (to live in harmony with others). Third, an unhappy, strife-torn marriage is not likely to result in the conversion of the non-Christian partner.²⁹

Paul's Guiding Principle—"Remain as You Are" (7:17-24)

These verses are not a digression having to do with circumcision and slavery. Rather, they are closely related to Paul's overall discussion. The passage works like a bridge by providing the theological principle that has guided Paul's answers in verses 1-16 and that will be applied also in verses 25-40. The principle may be summed up in this way: Conversion to Christ results in an essential change in one's ethical and spiritual life, but it does not necessarily change one's earthly status. In fact, it is usually better "to remain as you are" (vv. 2, 8, 10, 11, 12-16, 26-27, 37, 40), that is, be content in your current status. If married, that relationship should not be ended. If single, one should not too quickly enter into marriage. Paul states this general principle in verses 17, 20, and 24 and then applies the principle in verses 18-19 (circumcision) and 21-23 (slavery).

To Marry or Not Marry? (7:25-40) At this point Paul begins to address again, in a more direct way, issues of marriage and sex in response to the ascetic (pro-celibacy) wing of the church. Paul's instructions are primarily directed to those who have never married, except for his comments to widows in verses 39-40.

Some Advantages to Singleness (7:25-35)

Paul sets forth the nature of his instruction in verse 25. His teaching on the following matter does not come as a direct word from the Lord (cf. 7:12). Nevertheless, he believes his advice to be trustworthy. Paul's reference to virgins (v. 25) should probably be understood as referring to young people of marriageable age.³⁰ His focus in this passage is on some advantages to singleness.³¹

The substance of Paul's advice is set forth in three thoughts in 7:26-35. Some believe that a current crisis in Corinth limits Paul's counsel to that particular setting (vv. 26b, 29a); however, it is better to understand Paul as referring to the difficulties of living a holy life in an evil age as one awaits Christ's second coming. In the light of this, Paul first recommends that they do not change their marital

status (vv. 26-27); however, in verse 28 he reminds them that whether they do marry or remain single they do not sin. Second, he advises them to live with a certain detachment from this world (vv. 29-31). All believers, married and single, must serve their Lord whole-heartedly. Those married must be careful that they do not use their families as an excuse not to serve the Lord. Paul gives another advantage to a life of singleness in verses 32-34. Those who are married find their attention divided between serving the Lord and caring for their family, but the one who is single is concerned only with service to the Lord. Paul again does not want to give the impression that he believes everyone should choose the path of singleness. The ultimate principle as to whether one should marry or remain single is whichever lifestyle enables one to serve the Lord most fully (v. 35).³²

Advice for Those Engaged to Marry (7:36-38)

The language in verses 36-38 is vague enough that it can be interpreted in several different ways. The most critical question involves the relationship between the “man” and the “virgin.” The least likely interpretation, advocated by the New English Bible, is that Paul is addressing couples living in a “spiritual marriage” (without physical relations). This interpretation understands Paul’s words as suggesting that if they consummate their marriage they will not have sinned. A major argument against this position is the fact that it contradicts Paul’s clear teaching in verse 5. Another argument against it is that there is no evidence of this practice (“spiritual marriages”) before the second century. A second interpretation is that Paul is advising Christian fathers about whether or not to allow their virgin daughters to marry (NASB). Paul’s language in verse 37 seems odd if he is addressing a father struggling over whether to give his daughter in marriage. The third view is preferable.

In this view, Paul is addressing a couple engaged to be married (NIV). In light of the teaching by ascetics in the church it is reasonable to assume that couples engaged to be married would wonder whether it might not be more spiritual not to marry. In the

light of the previous discussions Paul is advising them that if they marry they will not sin, but they might be happier if they remain single.

Advice to Widows: You Are Free to Remarry—If You Must (7:39-40)

Paul concludes this chapter with advice to widows (and widowers). He begins by affirming God's desire for marriage. It is to be a life-long commitment between a man and a woman (v. 39a). If one's mate dies, the surviving spouse is free to remarry in the Lord (cf. 1 Tim 5:14). Paul concludes by suggesting that the widow (or widower) might be happier, however, if she remains single.

Conclusion

In 1 Corinthians 5-7 Paul demonstrates tremendous pastoral wisdom and theological insights. His words to Corinth are an example of handling practical issues with theological conviction. Possibly even more helpful than the pastoral wisdom displayed in these chapters is the integration of theology and ethics established by Paul. The integration of theology (indicative) and ethics (imperative) is prominent throughout these chapters, but especially chapters five and six. The church must understand who they are (the indicative: "...so that you may be a new lump, just as you are unleavened"), the danger of doing nothing ("*Do you not know* that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?"), and the necessity of disciplining the incestuous man (the imperative: "Remove the wicked man...").

So while we might like to know more about the process of church discipline set forth in chapter five, Paul does provide a sure theological foundation for the practice of it.

The same blending of theology and ethics is true in chapter six with the matter of litigation between believers. Those involved in litigation must renounce their legal rights (the imperative: "Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded?") because they

are part of the family of God (the indicative: “and *brother* goes to law with *brother*... You do this even to your *brethren*”). Their eschatological destiny (indicative), as those who will one day judge unbelievers and angels, ought to inform them that they are capable of adjudicating among themselves (imperative). Furthermore, in 6:12-20 understanding what God has done for them in salvation (the indicative: washed, sanctified, justified [6:11], united with Christ, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and purchased by his blood [6:17, 19, 20]) is the greatest motivation to resisting the sins listed in 6:9-10 (the imperative).

The blending of ethics and theology is not quite as prominent in chapter seven as it is in chapters five and six; however, it is not completely absent either. The reason for a lesser emphasis in chapter seven probably has to do more with the specific questions Paul answers. One example of the binding together of the indicative and the imperative is in Paul’s admonitions in 7:1-7 concerning sexual obligations in the marriage relationship. The imperative is that the husband and wife have to make sure that they meet one another’s sexual needs. Paul’s reasoning is that the husband and wife do not have authority over their own body but their mate does. His logic is built on what he wrote earlier (6:16b), where he quoted Genesis 2:24, “The two shall become one flesh” (the indicative).

We see the apostle Paul at his best as a pastor and theologian in these chapters. He is helping the church to understand their true identity and how that understanding determines their behavior. The world is looking for authenticity, men and women who know what they believe and how those beliefs affect their choices. In these chapters, Paul provides a reliable guide for putting faith and practice into action.

ENDNOTES

- 1 W. Bauer, W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) 854.
- 2 For the view that that Paul is using the Hebrew concept of “corporate responsibility” and calling the church to repent as if they had committed the sinful act, see Brian Rosner, “*OUCHI MALLON EPENTHEZATE*: Corporate Responsibility in 1 Corinthians 5,” *New Testament Studies* 38 (1992) 472.
- 3 Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 209.
- 4 Ibid. See also James T. South, “A Critique of the ‘Curse/Death’ Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 5:1-8,” *New Testament Studies* 39 (1993) 539-561.
- 5 Leon Morris, *The Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (Tyndale New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 88-89; death is the only option given in BDAG, 702; Schneider, “*olethros*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967) 5:169.
- 6 For a more thorough explanation of the arguments against the “death” view see Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 210-213.
- 7 See the helpful article by Anthony C. Thiselton, “The Meaning of *SARX* in 1 Corinthians 5:5: A Fresh Approach in Light of Logical and Semantic Factors,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 26 (1973) 204-228.
- 8 Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 212.
- 9 This letter has not been preserved for posterity.
- 10 *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4 no. 4 (Winter 2000). See also J. Laney, *A Guide to Church Discipline* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1985).

- 11 See H. Wayne House, "Reconciling Dis-putes among Christians," in *Christian Ministries and the Law: What Church and Para-Church Leaders Should Know*, ed. H. Wayne House (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992) 79-88.
- 12 For a discussion on the possible social factors involved in this passage see Alan C. Mitchell, "Rich and Poor in the Courts of Corinth: Litigiousness and Status in 1 Corinthians 6:1-11," *New Testament Studies* 39 (1993) 562-586.
- 13 Other related texts include: A statement found in the "Q" material, Matt 19:28/ Luke 22:30; Rev 20:4; 1 QpHab V, 4; Wis 3:7-8; 1 Enoch 1:9.
- 14 6:4a is a conditional sentence with *ean* plus the subjunctive in the protasis. The NIV reads, "Therefore, if you have dis-putes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church!" The NASB reads, "So if you have law courts dealing with matters of this life, do you appoint them as judges who are of no account in the church?"
- 15 C. Blomberg, *1 Corinthians* (The NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 117.
- 16 The two verbs are either a permissive middle or a causative/ permissive passive. For a discussion of the two options see Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 427, 440.
- 17 Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 238.
- 18 See C. G. Kruse, "Virtues and Vices," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald Hawthorne, Ralph Martin, and Daniel Reid (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993) 962-963.
- 19 George R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963) 162-167.

- 20 See discussion in Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 246-248. Another possibility is that it is not an “either-or” but rather a “both-and” situation as presented by Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002) 374.
- 21 Paul gives the same advice about fleeing in regards to idolatry (1 Cor 10:14), materialism (1 Tim 6:11), and youthful lusts (2 Tim 2:22). Joseph is an example of one who fled when sexually tempted (Gen 39:10) and David is an example of one who failed to flee (2 Sam 11:2-4).
- 22 For the difficult phrase, “sins against his own body” see the article by Brendan Byrne, “Sinning Against One’s Own Body: Paul’s Understanding of the Sexual Relationship in 1 Corinthians 6:18,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 45 (1983)613. F. F. Bruce, quoting D. S. Bailey, notes, “[Paul] displays a psychological insight into human sexual-ity which is altogether exceptional by first-century standards. . .he insists that it is an act which, by rea-son of its very nature, engages and expresses the whole personality in such a way as to constitute an uni-que mode of self-disclosure and self-commitment” (*1 and 2 Corin-thians* [New Century Bible; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980] 64).
- 23 We have no way of ascertaining if Paul was ever married. Three dif-ferent suggestions have been made concerning his marital status: (1) that he had been married but his wife left him after his conversion; (2) that he was a widower; and (3) that he never married.
- 24 Gordon D. Fee, “1 Corinthians 7:1 in the NIV,” *Journal of the Evangeli-cal Theological Society* 23 (1980) 307-314; see also Fee’s discussion in *1 Corinthians*, 266-357 and David Gar-land, “The Christian Posture toward Marriage and Celibacy: 1 Corin-thians 7,” *Review and Expositor* 80 (1983) 351.
- 25 Other passages in both testaments would need to be considered for a more complete understanding of the issue of divorce and

remarriage. For an up-to-date discussion of the issue of divorce and remarriage, see William A. Heth, "Jesus on Divorce: How My Mind Has Changed," and Gordon Wenham, "Does the New Testament Approve Remarriage after Divorce?," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 6 no. 1 (Spring 2002) 4-29, and 30-45.

26 It is unusual that Paul mentions first the situation of a woman divorcing her husband. It may be that it was primarily women who were initiating these actions or who were raising questions as to the appropriateness of the divorce in this circumstance. It seems likely that Paul is making reference here to a spouse divorcing her mate without justification (i.e., adultery).

27 Garland, 355-356. Another possibility suggested by Blomberg (135) is that Paul is referring to spiritual blessings that come to the family because of the presence of a Christian partner and parent in the home.

28 See the articles by Heth and Wenham mentioned above on whether Paul permits remarriage or not to the believing partner. Also see Schreiner, 426-431.

29 Sake Kubo, "1 Corinthians VII.16: Optimistic or Pessimistic?" *New Testament Studies* 24 (1978) 539-544. Verse 16 can be interpreted in the opposite manner. I understand the passage to express doubt about the possibility of the non-Christian spouse's conversion. Others interpret it optimistically and suggest that it is giving hope that they will be converted. Those who interpret it optimistically understand verse 15a to be a parenthetical comment and verse 15b as giving further support for verses 12-14.

30 Blomberg, 151.

31 One might conclude from what Paul writes in this chapter that he is an ascetic and is against marriage unless one cannot control his or her sexual drive. This is a clear misreading of Paul. Celibacy and asceticism should not be equated. Asceticism, in part, is an attempt to gain the pleasure of God by denying oneself the pleasures of life, which are given by God for his children to enjoy. Paul himself renounces those who forbid marriage (1 Tim 4:3-5).

Importance of Marriage Pauline Pastoral Approaches

Introduction

One searches in vain for a focused study of 1 Corinthians 7:1-40 by an evangelical addressing Paul's extensive call for mutuality in marriage and singleness as it relates to the contemporary gender debate.¹ Instead, individual sections of this passage are referenced on occasion by both sides, usually in isolation from their larger context, and generally as peripheral to the debate.²

Evangelicals have wrongly neglected this text on many counts. First, Paul's words here are three times longer than any gender passage in his other letters - in fact, slightly longer than all of his other comments on the subject taken together.³ Second, he addresses no less than twelve related, yet distinct, issues regarding marriage and singleness - again, more than in any other text.⁴ Third, his rhetoric is explicitly, consistently, and intentionally gender inclusive - while at the same time

reflecting a carefully balanced sense of mutuality.⁵ Fourth, written about the time of Galatians (a.d. 49-55), 1 Corinthians 7 applies to marriage when he makes declaration that race, class, and gender are irrelevant for both status in Christ (Gal. 3:28) and relationships in the church community (Gal. 3:3; 5:1, 7, 16, 25).

Thus, 1 Corinthians 7 should be considered as a point of reference for later gender texts (1 Cor. 11, 14, Eph. 5, Col. 3, 1 Pet. 3, 1 Tim. 3, Titus 2) as a more comprehensive statement against which these should be interpreted. It is a collection of “seed ideas”⁶ leading to Paul’s larger theology of gender. Though this chapter should not be used to nullify or diminish the clear teachings of other texts, it must be afforded its own voice in the evangelical dialogue. Paul’s twelve principles of mutuality in response to an earlier letter from the Corinthian church, Paul writes to confront a distorted view of spirituality, marriage, and the end of the age.⁷ He advises his readers to remain as they were when called to Christ, because being single or married is irrelevant for personal spirituality and devotion to ministry. But, Paul also appends to this advice twelve marriage-related principles for practical living, by which it becomes clear that the occasion of his remarks is not fully the same as his purpose. More specifically, it is Paul’s way of framing these twelve principles that catches the eye of the careful reader. Here, he does not address men as “heads” of the Roman household (as he does in 1 Cor. 11:3 and Eph. 5:23). Nor does he only refer to believers in the generic masculine (e.g., 1 Cor. 7:24, 29, and many other instances) - though both were common conventions of his day. Instead, his rhetoric is at the same time gender specific and gender-inclusive. Such an emphasis on mutuality is striking, given the general assumptions toward patriarchy in both the Greco-Roman and Jewish traditions at that time.

1. Fidelity in marriage

... each man should have sexual relations with his own wife and each woman with her own husband. (7:2b).¹⁰ Although sexual

immorality is the stated occasion for Paul's first principle, he says, it is necessary to address more than this concern. With explicit and precisely mirrored language, he addresses the husband and wife individually. Though he later addresses male overseers alone regarding this matter (1 Tim. 3:2), his commitment to mutual fidelity in marriage remains the comprehensive principle. By calling each man to be faithful to his own wife and each woman to her own husband, Paul condemns in principle a wide range of "unsanctioned sexual intercourse,"¹¹ such as fornication, adultery, homosexuality - and, by extension, polygamy.¹² Though men have more commonly perpetuated such behaviors throughout human history, Paul remains committed here to addressing men and women in a mutual way.

2. Spousal rights

The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. (7:3) Paul's concern with sexual immorality continues as he calls believers to offer to their spouses what is rightfully theirs: regular and voluntary sexual intimacy. They are to give generously, not depriving each other. The longer statement addresses the husband first,¹³ then comes a shorter statement to the wife - but the inclusive, compound conjunction "and likewise also" makes it clear that the same obligation evenhandedly applies to both. More importantly, the main verb is literally "to give up or yield." Regarding the most intimate rights in marriage, the emphasis is not on exercising or asserting those rights. In this case, the husband - the one with greater power and status - is called upon first to yield by giving what rightfully belongs to his wife. Then, to be complete, the wife is told the same obligation applies to her. Such mutuality regarding "marriage rights" is remarkable in a predominantly patriarchal world. And, by extension, it seems reasonable to apply this principle to other aspects of marriage.

3. Yielding authority

The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority

over his own body but yields it to his wife (7:4). Much debate has occurred in the last few decades regarding the notion of male authority over women in the society, church and home¹⁴ - even including a proposed model of permanent “authority/subordination” within the Trinity that human “male authority” supposedly is meant to reflect.¹⁵ In this context, it is imperative to realize that 1 Corinthians 7:4 is the only biblical text that clearly and explicitly addresses the question of authority in marriage - and here it is clearly mutual.¹⁶ Paul first balances personal rights with a model of giving what is due the recipient: sexual intimacy (v. 3). Then, he broadens this call to include the principle of yielding the presumed “authority” of “marriage partner” rather than exercising it (v. 4). Like his call for fidelity in verse 2, the dual commands here are set in explicitly mirrored language. By doing so, Paul goes out of his way to be gender inclusive. The uniqueness, content, and tone of this verse make it more important in the gender debate than most have been inclined to acknowledge. Paul’s point is that neither spouse should claim authority over his or her own body. Instead, each should yield that authority to the other. This is the way of servanthood modeled by Jesus, who enjoys equal power and authority within the Triune Godhead, yet chooses the path of sacrificial service (Matt. 23:8-12, Phil. 2:5-8). In the same way, Paul calls for mutual yielding of authority among human beings - especially Christian marriage partners. One might say that he stands the traditional notion of male headship on its head (as he is inclined to do elsewhere; cf. 1 Cor. 11 and Eph. 5). Just as Jesus chooses to yield his rights, so both men and women should do the same.

Such a radical call to yield authority in marital intimacy should serve as a paradigm for yielding authority in other areas of marriage. In fact, the very notion of a husband exercising authority over his wife runs counter to the force of this statement. But, many still reject this idea based on two texts where the metaphorical use of “head” (kephalē) appears regarding husbands.

First, Paul uses the same noun for authority (exousia) in 1 Corinthians 11:10, where he declares, “a woman ought to have

authority over her own head” while praying or prophesying. However, it is not clear there whether he is referring to the abstract idea of authority (the woman choosing how she might cover her head) or a tangible symbol of authority (some kind of head covering). Nor is it clear whether the woman’s authority should be over her literal head (topmost part of her body) or over her figurative head (her husband, who is called her “head” in 11:2). In addition, the term translated “head” can denote “authority over,” but also can carry the ideas of “topmost, preeminence, point of origin, or source of provision.”¹⁷ In contrast to this maze of interpretive difficulties, the command to yield authority over one’s body in 1 Corinthians 7:4 is relatively simple and straightforward. Such clarity should help us to avoid the mistake of reading the unbiblical notion of the husband’s authority over his wife into other texts.

Second, though he does not explicitly mention “authority” in Ephesians 5, Paul tells the wife to “submit herself “ to her husband (who was culturally the “head” of the Roman household) as part of his principle of “submitting to one another” in the church (Eph. 5:21-22, 24). Though “headship” in the head/body metaphor can connote “authority over” or “source of provision” in the larger context of Ephesians (1:20-23, 4:15-16),¹⁸ Paul only reinforces the idea of “source of provision” for husbands to wives. Moreover, he calls husbands to sacrifice lovingly for their wives as Christ did for the church (5:25-30) - again, standing “headship” on its “head.”¹⁹ Though head of his wife, the husband is commanded to love her, not to exercise authority over her.

In the end, 1 Corinthians 7:4 remains the only clear and explicit statement in Scripture about authority within marriage - and here both husband and wife are called to yield it to the other in the deeply personal context of marital intimacy. Again, as Paul’s earliest statement about marriage relations, this text should serve as a reference point for later texts - not to nullify those that are equally clear, but to help in clarifying those that are not.

4. Consent for abstinence

“Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again. . . .” (7:5). On one occasion, personal devotion to extended times of fasting, study, and prayer can interfere with marital intimacy. When this happens, Paul insists that mutual consent be reached first with one’s spouse. Though his “one another” language²⁰ here is more concise than before, he once again emphasizes mutual yielding rather than the notion that either spouse should presume a leadership role. This undermines the dysfunctional behavior in many patriarchal marriages where the husband exercises authority over his wife who counters with more subtle forms of control like withholding sexual intimacy.

Taken together, 1 Corinthians 7:3-5 presents mutual partnership as a model for marriage relationships - one that includes, among other things, mutual consent in processing marital decisions. At the same time, it militates against the longstanding and culturally endorsed notion that Paul’s call for the wife to submit to her husband in Ephesians 5:22-24 somehow may be translated into the privilege or responsibility for a husband to exercise authority as head over his wife.²¹ Whereas Paul clearly calls for voluntary and mutual submission in marriage - including that of the wife - he nowhere instructs a husband to exercise authority over his wife, however benevolent.²²

5. Loss of a spouse through death

Now to the widowers²³ and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do²⁴ But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry. . . . (7:8-9) The terms for “widowed” men and women differ slightly, yet are virtually synonymous in this context - implying that the same principle of “remain as you were when called” applies to both. At the same time, the variance reveals a contrast in the persistent cultural reality for men and women who have lost spouses to death. The change for women has generally been much more dramatic throughout history, while that for men has

been relatively minimal. However, though Paul certainly recognizes these differences, his advice is the same to both regardless of gender.

6. Initiating divorce with a believer

A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife. (7:10b-11)

Here, the wife is addressed first, more extensively, and with slightly different language. She should not “separate from” her husband, whereas he is not to “send away or divorce” his wife. Yet again, the variance may reflect the reality of Paul’s day: A man usually had greater power to bring about a divorce than a woman. But, the difference is not substantive, as evidenced by Paul’s inclusive use of the stronger term for divorce for both marriage partners in verses 12-13. In the end, the actions he prohibits, left unchecked with either spouse, could lead to the dissolution of her or his marriage.

In addition, Paul tells the wife that, if she leaves her husband, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled. Yet, given the larger context of this chapter, the wife’s call to reconciliation should be understood to apply equally to the husband. Though Paul’s reason for addressing the wife first and more extensively is not clear, it continues to serve his apparent interests in constructing a balanced theology of gender. By doing so, Paul empowers the woman in the relationship as she is called to exercise her will in the matter. In contrast, there is no greater responsibility or burden directed to the man. Instead, in the most stressful of times, wives and husbands must share together the challenge of staying together.

7. Initiating divorce with an unbeliever

If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. (7:12-13)

Paul continues his emphasis on mutuality in sustaining and nurturing a marriage, though here he addresses the problem of existing marriages with unbelievers. Once again, his language of “brother” versus “woman/wife” varies slightly, yet the difference remains insignificant, as the woman being addressed is clearly a sister in Christ. Scripture makes it clear that God opposes a believer marrying outside of the faith,²⁵ as well as initiating divorce with one’s spouse (1 Cor. 7:10-13)²⁶ - though the latter is permitted in extreme circumstances.²⁷ With this larger backdrop in mind, Paul calls the believing spouse (husband or wife) to extend grace to the one who does not yet believe. Again, the decision is not presented as the primary responsibility of the husband, but that of the believer. This is similar to Paul’s principle that spiritually mature believers are to help restore those who have sinned (Gal. 6:1).

8. Sanctification of an unbelieving spouse

For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy (7:14).²⁸

It falls outside the scope of this article to speculate on all that Paul means by the “sanctification” of spouses and children.²⁹ At the very least, an unbelieving spouse remaining with a believer sets himself or herself aside (along with their children) for holy purposes. That is to say, they remain under the sanctifying influence of the believing spouse - regardless of gender. Moreover, it is clear that to whatever extent one can be sanctified through one’s spouse, such sanctification is mutual.

Further, this text must be allowed to inform our interpretation of Paul’s instructions to husbands to love their wives “just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy . . .” (Eph. 5:25-27). Paul seems to imply that husbands can have a sanctifying influence on their wives. However, such gender-specific language should not be read as gender exclusive.³⁰ On the contrary,

1 Corinthians 7:14 makes it clear with explicit, gender-inclusive language that spiritual benefit to an unbelieving spouse can come from the wife to the husband as well. Keeping both texts in conversation can bring greater clarity to this aspect of the gender debate.

9. Responsibility when an unbelieving spouse leaves

But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. (7:15)

Paul's admonitions above regarding separation and divorce are now softened to words of grace as he addresses believing spouses in mixed marriages as "brothers" and "sisters." Such gender inclusive language also clarifies the broader range of meaning in the generic masculine "unbeliever" at the beginning of the verse. Each of the eight principles discussed above have reflected the idea of mutual responsibility of a spouse to his or her partner, whereas this verse makes it clear that neither is responsible for the other. When an unbeliever chooses to leave, believers who have tried their best to keep the marriage together are under no further obligation, for "God has called us to live in peace." This could mean the peace to remain within a mixed marriage³¹ or the peace to let go of the relationship.³² The context seems to suggest the latter.³³

10. Salvation of an unbelieving spouse

How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? (7:16)

Keeping in mind the principle of "responsible to, but not for," Paul asks a rhetorical question with the same perfectly mirrored language of mutuality employed at the beginning of this chapter. In this way, he explores the possibility that the marital commitment of a believer (male or female) to an unbeliever might lead to that person's salvation.

Surely, the spiritual benefit one human being can give to another can only go so far. It certainly falls short of Christ's effective benefit to save and sanctify the church. Yet, this passage suggests that we can make partnership with Christ as we aid unbelievers in the salvation and sanctification processes. But, at the same time, Paul makes it clear that neither of these potential benefits is limited to a husband or wife based on gender. On the contrary, with his consistent and explicitly inclusive language, Paul insists that these are mutually beneficial influences that either Christian spouse may have toward a partner who does not yet believe.

11. Change of status

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. (7:26-28a)³⁴

This section may be addressing those men and women who have never been married, those who are already engaged, or both.³⁵ Consistent with one of his recurring themes in this chapter, Paul admonishes believers not to make a radical change in status because of the coming of the end of the age. Whether a man or woman is single, engaged, or married is irrelevant for functioning as a productive member of the New Covenant community.

In contrast to the word order of Paul's statements above about initiating divorce, here he addresses the men first and more extensively. We cannot be sure if this reflects a greater concern for men than women on this matter. At the least it serves once more to contribute to the diverse picture of gender mutuality that Paul paints across these twelve principles.

12. Devotion to ministry

Those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you. . . . The unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's

affairs - how he can please the Lord. . . . The unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. (7:28b, 32-34)

It is ironic - though not entirely surprising - that Paul ends his larger discussion of gender mutuality in marriage with a statement regarding singleness. He has woven the thread of his preference for celibate singleness throughout the chapter with the purpose of serving Christ more efficiently (vv. 1, 6-8, 26, 29-35, 38b). But, our focus in this article has not been on marriage versus singleness (though equally an important topic). Rather, the issue, at hand, has been the remarkable, gender-inclusive way that Paul has gone about his task. His closing statements remind the reader that ministerial priorities apply equally to both men and women, whether devotion to prayer that distracts from sexual intimacy (v. 5) or devotion to ministry that avoids the distractions of marriage altogether (v. 28).

One last time, Paul addresses women shoulder to shoulder alongside men, making it clear that either may choose devotion to ministry instead of marriage. This runs contrary to the cultural tradition that a young woman should have as her goal in life to find a good husband who will lead and care for her. Whether it concerns the question of marriage or faithful service to Christ and the church, one of Paul's purposes in this chapter is to promote a Christian model of gender mutuality.

Conclusions

This exploratory survey of 1 Corinthians 7 is intended to begin a dialogue that will reframe the discussion of this important yet neglected text. Perhaps it will provide some fresh thinking toward a different approach to this passage in the context of the evangelical gender debate. Hopefully, a more extensive study of this chapter with a focus on its relevance for the gender debate will emerge in the near future. Until then, there are a few tentative conclusions that can be drawn.

First, both celibate singleness and faithful marriage have legitimate places in our churches. Paul's argument is: "If you're not ready to embrace a godly and mutual marriage relationship, perhaps you should stay single. And, if you're not ready to embrace godly celibate singleness, perhaps you should consider marriage. But remember, godly devotion to Christ is more important than either!"

Second, writing 1 Corinthians 7 around the same time as his letter to the Galatians, Paul's language of evenhanded gender mutuality contrasts sharply with what one might expect from a first-century writer. Yet, it "coheres with" the cryptic - though more famous - declaration in Galatians 3:28,36 being most likely his first expansion on the new creation model of radical oneness in Christ. Though his words do not address every aspect of marriage, this twelve-point statement is the most comprehensive made on the subject in Scripture - and, as such, it deserves much more attention in the contemporary evangelical dialogue on gender.

Third, as an early point of reference, this text shines the positive light of gender-inclusive mutuality on other statements in later gender texts (1 Cor. 11, 14; Eph. 5; Col. 3; 1 Pet. 3; 1 Tim. 3; Titus 2). By doing so, it helps to clarify important issues in the gender debate - such as yielding of authority (otherwise referred to by Paul in Eph. 5:21 as "submitting to one another") and spiritual benefits (sanctification and salvation) that a believer may give to her or his spouse in marriage. First Corinthians 7 neither silences nor renders neutral the clear teachings of other texts, though it must be allowed to shed greater light on those that are not so clear.

Ronald W. Pierce

Can the Christians Eat Food Sacrificed to Idols (1 Cor 8:1–11:1)

An insistence on exclusive loyalty to a religion was something uncommon in the great religious melting pot of the Hellenistic world. Tolerance and syncretism reflected the spirit of the times. People were accustomed to joining in the sacrificial meals of various deities, and none required an exclusive relationship.¹ The prohibitions against idol food in Acts 15:20, 29 (cf. also Rev 2:14-17, 2:20) and Paul's long discussion in 1 Cor 8:1-11:1 suggest that the problem of food dedicated to an idol was not easily solved.²² Converts who turned from the worship of many gods and lords in their sundry guises were not so sure where to draw the line or if it was even necessary to draw the line when it came to food that had been sacrificed to idols

as they tried to balance their identity as Christians with their assimilation to the highly competitive, pagan Corinthian culture. Dissociating themselves from all overtly idolatrous celebrations demanded of them an uncompromising devotion that could only invite ostracism from their unbelieving family and associates and lead to shame and material loss. The pressures have not changed for new Christians today living in cultures where food is regularly offered to one god or another.

Occasions for Eating Idol Food

The celebrations of many cults were closely bound up with civic and social life since religion and politics were indivisible in ancient Hellenistic city life. If Christians took part in civic life, they would have been compelled to share the meal of the people of other faith.

The issue Paul addresses in chapters 8-10 involves three different types of situations: (1) eating food sacrificed to an idol at the temple of an idol (8:7-13; 10:1-22); (2) eating food of unknown history that is bought in the market (10:23-27); and (3) eating food in the private homes of unbelievers (10:28-31).³

Joining in meals was extremely important in the ancient world because they served as markers of socio-economic class divisions, as opportunities to converse and build friendships, and as a means to fulfill socio-political obligations. Anyone desisting from public sacrificial events was unfit for political functions.⁴ To shun gatherings that lubricated social and economic relations would make Christians conspicuous outcasts who held outlandish, anti-social, perverse religious beliefs.⁵ More prominent Corinthian Christians would have been reluctant to draw hard and fast lines that would alienate such important persons in their lives and exclude them from society.^{6,59} Willis thinks it is most probable that ‘those who ate simply were unwilling to remove themselves from normal social life.’⁷

In these chapters, Paul responds to the Corinthians’ resistance. He is fully aware of the intense pressure to join in the hale-fellow-well-met conviviality, but he maintains that no temptation has

overtaken them that is not common to humans (10:13). He insists that God is faithful and will not allow them to be tempted beyond what they can withstand.

A major error of the traditional view is the weight it places on Paul's warning about the potential harm that eating idol food might cause a Christian with a weak conscience. It assumes that this was Paul's only problem with eating idol food. The subtle nuances of Paul's argumentation contribute to this misunderstanding. Understanding chapters 8-10 as Paul's reaction to a previous protest from the Corinthians helps shed light on why his arguments may seem to be so complex and circuitous to modern readers.⁸ The confusion may be caused by the fact that he did not start his argument by condemning outright behavior as presumably he had done in his previous discussion on this issue. Paul was interested in persuasion, not coercion. He did not pass off eating of idol food, with full awareness of its idolatrous connections, as a matter of indifference. It is a dangerous, sinful act since Paul explicitly links idol food to idolatry in 10:19-20 and never says, 'Eat idol food as long as the weak are not caused to stumble.' He allows one to eat any food bought in the market or offered in another's home without asking its origins or history. If one somehow were informed that the food was idol food, then Paul insists that one must abstain.

Because the Corinthians did not yield to Paul's prior objection to idol food, he recognizes that a lengthier, more subtle approach is demanded. Yeo is correct that Paul did not attempt to give an easy answer of 'yes' or 'no' in 1 Cor 8 and that he did not resort 'to absolute prohibitions concerning idol meat eating.' But he does not understand why this is the case. It was not because the situation was too complex for a simple solution. Paul adopts this tack because he intends, as he does throughout the letter, to exercise love in directing them. He wants them to flee from idols (10:14), but he also wants them to see the theological implications of their behavior and the necessity of the norm of love for guiding all their behavior. Consequently, he employs indirect means.

How Paul's Argument Against Idol Food Works:

I. Introduction and Refutation of Their Practice Because of its Danger to Fellow Christians (8:1-13)

Wright correctly recognizes that the 'major issues at stake were monotheism, idolatry, election, holiness and how these issues interacted.'⁹ Paul begins his counter-argument in 8:1-6 by going back to first principles, 'the reassertion of Jewish-style monotheism,' something the Corinthians would readily accept. He does not draw out, however, the full implications of what their monotheistic confession and allegiance to one God entail until 10:1-22. He introduces the dispute over idol-food by establishing common ground: We Christians know that God is one and that idols have no existence despite their many adherents. He builds on this consensus about the non-existence of idols to introduce two key principles that will inform his argument. First, Christian love is to override knowledge that feeds arrogance. Second, Christian monotheism defines who the people of God are as distinct from those who worship many gods and lords.

The second principle undergirds all that Paul says against eating idol food, but he develops the first principle in this unit. Mentioning Christ in the confession in 8:6 recalls God's supreme act of love that made Christians a unique people. Christ died for them (8:11). This act of love that brought them into God's family requires that they respond to others in the family with love – putting others' needs and interests ahead of their own. In 8:7-13, Paul explores the potential effect of the 'knowers' eating idol food on a fellow believer who may not have the same level of theological sophistication to rationalize such behavior or to apprehend its theological consequences. He assumes that as Christians they have a loving concern for others and do not wish to lead them into sin. His first argument against eating idol food is his assertion that their actions are not neutral but may cause another Christian to stumble and fall.

He presents the hypothetical example. The emphasis is on 'if' – if a fellow Christian observes another Christian, esteemed as a person

of knowledge, eating food in an idol setting (8:10). The other Christian is identified as programmed by habituation to think in certain ways about sacrificed food and as having a 'weak conscience.' The conscience is not 'the inner voice which warns us that someone may be looking,' as the American humorist journalist H. L. Mencken defines it. Paul uses the term to refer to that faculty of moral evaluation that adjudicates whether an individual's actions are right or wrong and directs behavior according to recognized norms. It is a moral compass. A panel from the American cartoon *Dennis the Menace* unexpectedly captures what Paul means. Consigned to sit in a corner as punishment for some misbehavior, he reflects: 'I got some bad advice from my conscience.' The conscience comprises the depository of an individual's moral beliefs and principles that makes judgments about what is right and wrong.¹⁰ A 'weak' conscience is one that is unable to make appropriate moral judgments because of a lack of proper edification. Eriksson points out that 'weakness' was used in the philosophical schools for 'the moral sickness suffered by those recent converts who were not yet able to make correct moral judgments' (cf. Epictetus, *Diatr.* 2.15.20). A 'weak' conscience is prone to give assent to false judgments and to sanction actions based on faulty criteria, particularly when it has been defiled. It is untrustworthy because it does not possess the necessary knowledge.

The Christian with a weak conscience does not have the knowledge to make correct moral judgments. Paul worries that this person might follow the example of those presumed to have knowledge but eat idol food as truly offered to an idol, that is, as a sacrificial act. He will be led astray in his moral judgment to think that it is permissible for Christians to pay homage to both Christ and pagan deities. His conscience is then 'defiled' through idolatry (cf. Rev 3:4), which is akin to a compass becoming demagnetized so that it no longer points to true north.

Paul is anxious that the Christian in this example will be sucked back into the vortex of idolatry and face spiritual ruination. He

concludes with a hyperbolic example of what he would do to avert such a catastrophe. He would abstain from eating meat altogether (8:13). Love may require giving up things that one regards as a right for the sake of preventing other Christians from falling. But this principle is not Paul's final word on the matter. It is simply his opening salvo that asks the Corinthians to consider aspects of the problem they had overlooked.

II. Paul's Own Example to Undergird His Counsel (9:1-27)

The choppy transition from the discussion of idol food in chapter 8 to the right of an apostle to receive aid from a congregation has caused some to suspect that the section beginning in 8:13 or 9:1 represents an interpolation or an unconnected digression. Most now recognize that this section is integral to Paul's argument about idol food and takes it a step further. In 9:1-27, Paul develops the example of his own behavior. Everything he does, including not exercising his rights as an apostle, is aimed at winning others to the gospel and avoiding anything that might needlessly hinder another from coming to faith.

Some contend that Paul is defending himself against the winds of criticism shaking the Corinthians' confidence in his apostleship, something that surfaces in 2 Corinthians. His exclamatory question, 'Am I not an apostle?' (9:1), sounds defensive; and his statement, 'This is my defense (*apologia*) to those who would examine me' (9:3, NRSV), seems plain enough to support this view. It may seem that Paul unleashes a torrent of rhetorical questions that vigorously defend his apostolic right to receive support in response to his detractors who suggested that he did not have that right. He then offers his rationale for having waived that right. Rhetorical questions, however, do not indicate that the writer has adopted a defensive mode. They simply invite the audience to give its opinion. They are part of Paul's style in this portion of the letter; six occur in 10:14-22 (cf. also 8:10, 10:30).

It is unlikely that Paul is on the defensive in this unit. First, the notion of his apostleship only appears in 9:1-2 in which he establishes his right to earn material support. These remarks are too brief for a substantive defense. The rest of his argument appeals to the everyday examples of the soldier, farmer, and shepherd (9:7), the plowman and thresher (9:10), and the priest (9:13). These illustrations simply point to ‘the universal norm that every person ought to profit from his labour.’¹¹⁷⁷ The authority of the law (9:8-10a; Deut 25:4), the precedent of others who already have received benefactions from the Corinthians (9:12a), and the command of Jesus (9:14) further buttress the right of an apostle who labors in the gospel to earn his living from the gospel. These arguments do not furnish support for Paul’s apostolic standing but simply remind readers what everybody knows and establish the point that apostles have the right to be supported.

Second, rhetorical questions that could just as easily be answered negatively would hardly win the day in a defense. Apparently, Paul did not expect the Corinthians to contest the points because he phrased the first four questions in 9:1 to expect an affirmative answer. The question, ‘Am I not an apostle?’ does not challenge any misgivings about his apostolic rank but instead establishes at the outset the premise of his discussion. He is entitled as an apostle to receive support, as they must admit, but they know he has waived those rights. He is not asserting rights in this section but hammering home his renunciation of them! His statement in 9:15 that he does not write to secure his due rights for financial backing assumes that they would pay him if he would accept it.

Third, if the Corinthians did not regard him to be a true apostle, he wastes his time describing at length his refusal to use his rights as an apostle. The key assertion comes in 9:19 where he maintains that he is free from all men (cf. 9:1) – not that he is an apostle.

Fourth, Kistemaker inadvertently highlights a problem with the view that Paul is on the defensive with these comments: ‘We would

have expected Paul to provide further details [about the opponents] (compare, e.g., Gal 1:6-7; 5:10), but conclusive evidence is lacking.' 'We lack sufficient information about specific charges Paul's opponents are leveling against him.'¹² The most obvious reason for the paucity of details is that there were none to give. No one in Corinth was raising charges against him related to his refusal to receive support.

Fifth, the focus of this section falls on rights and the waiving of rights (9:4, 5, 6, 12, 18; 9:15). It develops the issue of *exousia* (right or power) raised in 8:9. Paul's development of the theme in 9:19-23 further explains that he sets aside his own advantages for the sake of others. The argument in this section establishes his high status to set the stage for his willing acceptance of low status. Martin comments, 'Low-status persons, the weak, by definition have no *exousia* to surrender.' The things connected with high status, rights and freedom, are the very things that those who have been recoiling at surrendering. This is Paul's point. The overall argument is intended to promote a certain kind of demeanor and conduct. Having established his rights, he can then feature his refusal to profit from them.

Finally, it is a strange defense of his apostleship for Paul to point out several respects in which he has not acted like an apostle. Why cite a command of the Lord (9:14) that seems to undermine his position? If the problem is that some have disparaged him for failing to live according to the standard ordained by Jesus, Paul says nothing to offset this perception. The best answer to these questions is that Paul is not on the defense and not insisting on his apostolic rights. Instead, he insists that renouncing these apostolic rights is the right thing to do for one captured by Christ. He is controlled by necessity to win others to Christ that his calling as an apostle imposes upon him, not by any selfish desire to promote his own advantage or to indulge his own fancy. He cites his own practice as an example of the attitude he wants them to adopt. The task of advancing the gospel totally dominates his life, inspiring his willingness to make

any sacrifice to win others. He wishes that this attitude was more evident in their lives.

That Paul intends in this section to offer himself as a model of one who voluntarily relinquishes his rights is confirmed by the athletic metaphor that spotlights his own conduct (9:24-27) and the concluding admonition to imitate him as he imitates Christ (11:1). He uses autobiographical information to establish ethos to persuade. Holladay notes that using ethical paradigms was typical of Greco-Roman moralists who believed that 'example was far superior to precept and logical analysis as a mean of illustrating and reinforcing appeals to pursue a particular mode of life, normally the life of a)reth/ (virtue).'¹³ They would present themselves as paradigms for their audience to follow. Paul's personal example as an apostle, who unselfishly sacrifices for others in his missionary service, is particularly appropriate for the Corinthians who have demonstrated a tendency to seek their personal gain. By contrast, the Corinthians appear to insist on a right that might cause the weak to stumble. Paul purposefully surrenders a right and adapts himself to the weak (9:22) and to others to win them. The implication is that those with knowledge should follow his example by abdicating their so-called right to eat idol food (8:9) so that they would avoid any possibility of causing others without their endowment of knowledge from falling back into idolatry. The issue of food appears in 9:4, 7, 9, 10, 13 and reveals that he does not ask them to give up anything more than he himself has given up. Knowledge (8:1), rights (8:9), and freedom (9:1) must be directed by love and concern for the spiritual well-being of others.

The sports analogy in 9:24-27 makes the point that the Christian life requires effort and the suppression of appetites and longings. It allows him to play on the Corinthians' craving for honor and to contrast the ephemeral reward bestowed on the winner of an athletic contest with the eternal prize that God will award the Christian victor. The prolonged, rigorous training required for success in athletic competition was a well-known image in the ancient world, and it

sheds light on his own voluntary restraint in his refusing to exercise his apostolic rights so that he might successfully attain his goal of saving others. The metaphorical language may cloak how it applies to the Corinthian situation, but it is all part of his argument that 'believers should abstain from sacrificial meals.' The images of an athletic competitor enduring a rigorous training regimen, running determinedly, and bruising the body to bring it under rein disclose that Paul is not asking the Corinthians 'knowers' to try to be more discreet when they join in any festivities on an idol's grounds to protect the weak brother. He expects them to abandon any and all such participation. Paul cites the catchphrase 'Everything is permitted' in 10:23 (cf. 6:12), but he first emphasizes that everything is not permitted for the athlete who hopes to win. Christian life 'involves the limitation as well as the enjoyment of freedom.'

The athletic simile also serves as a transition to the warning example of Israel in the next section (10:1-13). It warns that anyone who fails to exercise self-restraint when it comes to the delights of this world may be disqualified from the ultimate race directed by God. It is more than a general warning against complacency. It reminds Corinthians of the difficulties of living out their Christian commitment. Entry into the contest does not guarantee a prize, and they cannot repose in the illusion that they are safe from failure.

III. Refutation of Their Practice from the Negative Example of the History of Israel in the Wilderness (10:1-13)

In 10:1-13, Paul turns up the heat of his argument against idol food by appealing to a negative example from Israel's history. The move from personal example to extended biblical exposition again makes 10:1-13 appear to be a digression, but it fits perfectly his purpose. Israel's demise in the Wilderness is directly applicable to Christians in Corinth. The 'fathers' horrifying end in the desert highlights the peril of the Corinthians risk by consorting with idols. Violating their covenant obligations and putting the Lord to the test is suicidal. Though the 'fathers' experienced divine provisions, the

presence of Christ, and a prefigurement of baptism and the Lord's Supper, they failed to enter the promised land because of their idolatry. Their fall is a direct warning to the Corinthians since Paul underscores that the Scriptures directly apply to them (10:11).

Of the four warnings from the wilderness experience adduced in this section, Paul quotes only one passage (10:7): 'The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play' (Exod 32:6b). He features this one verse because it ties into the theme of eating and drinking that reverberates throughout chapters 8-10. It is suggestive that he does not cite a verse emphasizing their worship and sacrifice before the calf, for example, Exod 32:6a, 8, 31, 35, but chooses instead to cite their eating, drinking and playing that followed their sacrifices. Fee comments that the text specifically indicates that the people ate in the presence of the golden calf. He infers from this that idolatry for Paul is 'a matter of eating cultic meals in the idol's presence.'¹⁴⁸⁸ While Paul's concern is not limited only to Christians eating in an idol setting, this connection reveals that he certainly regarded eating in the presence of an idol as idolatry.

The point should be clear to the Corinthians. If they dally at pagan feasts, they can expect the same fate as Israel in the wilderness. They are not to be cravers of evil (10:6) or idolaters (10:7-8) and are not to put the Lord to the test (10:9) or grumble (10:10) if they expect their relationship to God to remain secure. The bold Corinthians may not fear the power of idols, but they should fear the wrath of God. They cannot grouse that being forbidden from participating in idol feasts places them in an untenable position. If they are faithful exclusively to God, they will never be in a situation too difficult for God to sustain them and to empower them to endure (10:13).

IV. Refutation of Their Practice from the Example of the Lord's Supper (10:14-22)

In this unit, Paul strikes directly by commanding them to flee idolatry (10:14) and connecting idol food to demons. He refutes

their practice by appealing to the example of the Lord's Supper and the danger of 'serial fellowships.' As the Lord's Supper is a sacred meal that represents and creates a fellowship of believers in the worship of Christ who is considered to be present, so pagan meals represent and create a fellowship of worshipers of pagan deities who are also considered to be present. Idols, however, represent the realm of the demonic. Participating in the one meal precludes participating in the other. Believers should not fool themselves into thinking that they are strong enough to try to merge the two meals, to affiliate with Christ and demons. To attempt to do so only kindles the jealousy and judgment of God.

V. Practical Advice for Dealing with the Issue of Idol Food in Pagan Settings (10:23-11:1)

The question of temple dining and eating food sacrificed to idols is now left aside as Paul addresses the question of food of questionable origins – food that may have been sacrificed to idols before it comes into the hands of a believer. To answer the question how a Christian can act with integrity in a world brimming with idols, he moves from an absolute prohibition based on general arguments about the dangers of associating with anything idolatrous to conditional liberty based on the biblical tenet that the earth is the Lord's and everything in it (10:26; Ps 24:1). He gives the go-ahead on everything that is beyond an idol's orbit. It is not permanently poisoned.

Paul clarifies that food is food and permissible to eat unless it is specifically identified as idol food, which puts it in a special category that is always forbidden to Christians. They need not abstain from all food on the chance that it may have been sacrificed to idols. He basically says, 'Of course, you can buy food in the provision market' (10:25). 'Of course, you can dine with friends' (10:27). His prohibition of idol food does not mean that they must retreat to the seclusion of a gloomy ghetto. Nevertheless, he anticipates potential problems presented by food that a Christian might purchase from

the market or food that a Christian might eat in the home of an unbeliever who might have offered it to idols. Smit contends that Paul's shift in 10:23-11:1 from his discussion about the idol offerings to an adjacent issue transgresses an important rhetorical rule. The transition may have made his prohibitions 'easier to digest,' but he does not go unpunished by the misunderstanding of his later interpreters who think that 10:23-11:1 refers to the idol offerings mentioned in 8:1. This shift has also led interpreters to suggest that Paul contradicts himself or to conjecture that the confusion is created by a later interpolation.

Many mistakenly assume that in this section Paul encourages the 'weak' to ease up on their criticism of the so-called 'strong.' Hall states, 'He now asks the weak to do something for the strong – namely, to begin to free themselves for their tyrannical scruples?' Nowhere does Paul mention the weak in this section or talk about scruples, let alone 'tyrannical scruples'! The maxim, 'All things are permissible,' which Paul amends with an emphasis on what is beneficial and builds up, hardly seems appropriate for launching a response to the so-called 'weak.' Hall wrongly claims that Paul 'belongs to the strong, and in his abrupt challenge to the weak he speaks not only for himself but also for those who see themselves as the strong in Corinth.' He has just declared that he identifies with the weak (9:22), not the so-called strong! Even if the argument is that the person with a weak conscience is a hypothetical construct were incorrect, how could Paul encourage them to take a more relaxed view toward food when he expresses concern that they are extremely vulnerable to reverting to their former idolatrous practices (8:10)? This section is directed to the whole church, but if Paul were addressing a particular group, it would be the 'knowers.' They are most likely to seek their own advantage, to be invited to a banquet in an unbeliever's home, and to object to another's conscience constricting their liberty.

Paul permits buying food in the market-place that may or may not have been sacrificed in a pagan temple. But if its history was

disclosed and it was announced to be idol food, then he forbids eating it. He permits dining with friends who may be worshipers of idols, but if the food is announced to be idol food, then he forbids eating it. Christians may not participate in any function that overtly smacks of idolatry.

He basically 'defines what is idol food in doubtful cases' – when it is not specified as idol food. All food outside of the idol's orbit is permitted, so he gives them leave to eat anything sold in the public market without investigating its history to certify that it is free from any idolatrous contamination. Christ has not called them to be meat inspectors. Outside of its idolatrous context, idol food becomes simply food and belongs to the one God (Rom 14:14). This ruling is far more liberal than one found in the Mishna that states: 'Flesh that is entering in unto an idol is permitted, but what comes forth is forbidden' (*m. Abod. Zar. 2:3*).

When giving his advice about buying food in the provisions market or dining at a private gathering, Paul again mentions the conscience: buy or eat 'without inquiring [about its history] because of conscience' (10:25, 27). In the first case, it is not clear whose conscience is in view, the purchaser's or an observer's. Many conclude that he has in mind the 'bad feelings' of the weak who might spot a fellow Christian in a compromising position. In this scenario Paul's advises them to ignore the weak Christian's misgivings. This interpretation mistakenly reads into the text the presumed conflict between the so-called 'strong' and the 'weak.' Paul is not mediating this imagined conflict but offering general advice to all Christians about buying and eating food sold in the provision market. He recognizes that perceptions about idols are real. In the immediate context, Paul has raised their consciousness that idol food is hazardous material by linking it to demons. This new consciousness of the danger attached to idol food may encumber their decisions about purchasing food in the market that might have come from temple sacrifices, and he counsels them not to brood on that decision. He counsels them to buy and eat whatever you like and can afford. Idol food is not

dangerous outside of its overtly idolatrous context. To ask questions about the food's history in the open market would unnecessarily burden their conscience. In this case, ignorance is bliss. It is not simply that 'what you don't know won't hurt you,' but why worry needlessly about something that is clearly a matter of indifference? In the same way that they need not worry that marriage to an unbeliever might somehow contaminate the believer (7:13-14), they need not worry that they will be contaminated by food that may have pagan antecedents.

The premise behind this instruction comes from Ps 24:1 (cf. 50:12; 89:11), which, in Judaism, shaped the prayer voiced before a meal (b. Šabb. 119a). It affirms that God is sovereign over all things (8:6) and that everything created by God is good (cf. 1 Tim 4:4). The whole creation belongs to God, not part to God and part to idols. Idol food therefore loses its character as idol food as soon as it leaves the idol's arena and the idolater's purposes. Paul does not complete the thought with a conclusion from the biblical citation, but it is implicit: 'Nothing is unclean in itself' (Rom 14:14; cf. Acts 10:15). If it can be eaten in honor of the Lord (Rom 14:7), it is permitted. What Paul finds sinful is eating idol food in any setting that might give others the slightest hint that Christians sanctioned idolatry, no matter how attenuated the religious aspects attached to the meal or the place might be.

In the second scene, Paul adds a caveat, 'If someone should say to you, 'This food is sacrificed to the gods,' do not eat, out of concern for the one who informed you and because of conscience.' He identifies the conscience as belonging to one who makes the declaration but only gives sketchy details about the informant, who it is, why he speaks, or how his conscience would be jeopardized. It is most likely from what follows that Paul envisions a pagan making the announcement. Ultimately, it makes no difference; the result is the same. The case is hypothetical offering instruction on how a Christian should respond in pagan surroundings, and there is no need to identify or to untangle the motives of the informer. Most

likely the host proclaims his intentions about the food, but it could be ‘anyone’ who makes any such announcement. The declaration makes clear that the meal’s atmosphere is distinguished by an act of idolatrous piety.

Paul instructs them not to eat because of the one who makes the disclosure and because of the conscience (*suneidesis*). He clarifies in 10:29a that he refers to the conscience of the one who made the announcement, not the believer who accepted the invitation. What does the word conscience mean here? It is a slippery word whose meaning was in flux. Many assume that it must refer back to the weak conscience of the fellow believer in 8:7, 10, 12. But Paul says nothing about the conscience being weak or in danger of being wounded (8:12). It may simply mean that the person who makes the announcement is conscious that the food is religiously significant.

Paul formulates a key hermeneutical principle underlying his advice. The food’s past history only matters when it matters to someone else who considers it sacred. Christians may know that idols do not exist, that there is no God but one, and that all food belongs ultimately to God. In this sticky situation, however, it is not their consciousness that counts, but that of the other. His approach to this issue is very close to that of rabbis. Tomson concludes (from *t. Hull.* 2:18; *m. Hul.* 2:8; *m. Zeb.* 1:1):

The Rabbinic view of idolatry is not so much concerned with material objects or actions as with the spiritual attitude with which these are approached by the gentiles. Correspondingly, the essence of idolatry is a ceremonial act of consecration, most typically expressed in slaughtering ‘in the name of the deity.’

The rabbis absolutely forbade direct or indirect contact with pagan rites, but they ruled that Jews could intermingle with Gentiles unless it became clear that they were engaged in some religious activity. They assumed that individuals could discern when the Gentile was engaged in idolatrous practices. Paul takes a far more liberal view in doubtful cases. Christians may assume that all is well and need

not become sleuths trying to detect if the food has idolatrous connections. Instead, they may depend on the pagan's own pronouncement, 'This is sacred food.' When Christians find themselves in this situation, then they must abstain from eating lest they be drawn into idolatry.

Paul is not concerned here that they might endanger another Christian with a weak conscience. Their willing consumption of what has been announced as food sacrificed to idols would do three things:

- (1) It would compromise 'their confession of the One God' with a tacit recognition of the sanctity of pagan gods.
- (2) It would confirm, rather than challenge, the unbeliever's idolatrous convictions and would not lead the unbeliever away from the worship of false gods. If a Christian were to eat what a pagan acquaintance regards as an offering to a deity, it signals the Christian's tacit endorsement of idolatry.
- (3) It would disable the basic Christian censure of pagan gods as false gods that embody something demonic and make that censure appear seem hypocritical.

In this counsel, Paul exhibits his concern about the Christian's witness to the unbeliever. The announcement presents an opportunity to expound one's faith in the one God and one Lord.

Conclusion

Meeks observes that 'to go the whole way, to 'turn from idols to serve the living God' . . . was an act that entailed a profound resocialization, a change of identity and primary allegiance.'¹⁵ Paul expected Christians who turned from idols to create boundaries where there were none before. The pressure on Christians to conform to cultural norms, however, was enormous. When clever converts could construct abstract theological arguments that would make such costly dis-assimilation seem unnecessary, Paul has his work cut out for him to convince them otherwise. It explains why

his argument starts by trying to find common ground with their perspective and is seemingly so round about. His expectations demanded of converts something that no other religion except Judaism required – avoiding anything that might hint that Christians sanctioned idolatry. Failure to repudiate all idolatrous associations, he maintains, would have dire spiritual consequences.

How does this apply to contemporary missions? If this exegesis is correct and if Paul is to be followed as a model, the belief in one God cannot be compromised. Becoming Christian means to turn away from idols. Anything that smacks of syncretism, no matter how it might be rationalized, is to be rejected. Paul is fully aware that living out this hard-line position in a world of idols is likely to provoke alienation, resentment, and abuse. That is why he offers the heartening words of 10:13. This instruction is easier said – particularly by one who lives in the buckle of the American Bible belt – than done. Many today are concerned not to cause offense, and toleration of other faiths has become the watchword. Paul is politically incorrect (quite literally, since he would oppose all participation, for example, in the imperial cult). He is more concerned about offending a jealous God who claims sovereignty over all aspects of life, including the individual Christian's life, than offending those who honor competing gods. He is also more concerned about the wrong message that unreflective tolerance might convey to those who are not followers of Christ. It would serve to confirm them in their unbelief and communicate unintentionally that Christ is simply another god in the pantheon of gods whose favor they might need to curry if it suited them and it offered advantages. Paul would sacrifice anything to break down boundaries that might hinder his efforts to win others to Christ. But one also had to maintain or build boundaries that could not be crossed. Since he opposes offering even a smidgen of religious esteem to other gods (including the Western god of materialism and its consort, standard of living), Christians can never be fully integrated into society. This stance sparked much of Paul's dispute with the Corinthians and was at the root of his grievances

against the Corinthians. Barclay's incisive essay comparing the Thessalonian correspondence with the Corinthian correspondence draws this conclusion:

The church is not a cohesive community but a club, whose meetings provide important moments of spiritual insight and exaltation, but do not have global implications of moral and social change. The Corinthians could gladly participate in this church as one segment of their lives. But the segment, however important, is not the whole and the centre. Their perception of their church and of the significance of their faith could correlate well with a life-style which remained fully integrated in Corinthian society.¹⁰⁰

I would argue that Paul believes that the key implication of their new found faith in Christ as one Lord is their rejection of any semblance of allegiance to other lords and gods.

Endnotes

- 1 Cf. N. Walter, 'Christusglaube und Heidnische Religiosität in Paulinischen Gemeinden,' *NTS* 25 (1979): 429-30; W. L. Willis, *Idol Meat in Corinth. The Pauline Argument in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10* (SBLDS 68; Chico: Scholars Press, 1995), 213; and J. F. M. Smit, "Do not be Idolaters': Paul's Rhetoric in First Corinthians 10:1-22,' *NovT* 39 (1997): 48.
- 2 Cf. A. T. Cheung, *Idol Food in Corinth: Jewish Background and Pauline Legacy* (*JSNTSup* 76; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 165-284, for a discussion of the issue among Christians after Paul.
- 3 Willis (*Idol Meat*, 244) oversimplifies the situation Paul addresses by breaking it down into only two: (1) Eating at the table of demons and becoming a partner of demons (10:14-21), which Paul absolutely forbids; and (2) Eating that is permissible but qualified by consideration of the other person who may be offended (10:31-32).

- 4 Smit, '1 Corinthians 8,1-6,' 582.
- 5 Borgen ("Yes,' 'No,' 'How Far?'" 35) cites the case of the Ionians' insistence that if Jews were to be their fellows, they should worship Ionian gods.
- 6 Willis, *Idol Meat*, 266.
- 7 Cf. Fee, *First Corinthians*, 474; J. Murphy-O'Connor, 'Food and Spiritual Gifts in 1 Cor 8:8,' CBQ 41 (1979): 292.
- 8 Cf. Fee, *First Corinthians*, 474; J. Murphy-O'Connor, 'Food and Spiritual Gifts in 1 Cor 8:8,' CBQ 41 (1979): 292.
- 9 Wright, 'Monotheism, Christology and Ethics,' 122.
- 10 Dawes, 'The Danger of Idolatry,' 96. Cf. H.-J. Eckstein, *Der Begriff Syneidesis bei Paulus* (WUNT 2/10; Tübingen: Mohr, 1983), 56, 287-300.
- 11 T. B. Savage, *Power through weakness: Paul's understanding of the Christian ministry in 2 Corinthians* (SNTSMS 86; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 9.
- 12 S. J. Kistemaker, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 287.
- 13 C. R. Holladay, '1 Corinthians 13: Paul as Apostolic Paradigm,' in *Greeks, Romans, and Christians: Essays in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe* (ed. D. L. Balch, et al; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1990), 84.
- 14 Fee, *First Corinthians*, 454.
- 15 W. A. Meeks, 'Corinthian Christians as Artificial Alien,' in *Paul Beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide* (ed. T. Engberg-Pedersen; Louisville: WJK, 2001), 134.

Problems Related to the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:17 – 34)

Come to the Lord's Supper often with love for others, remembrance of the Lord, and examination of yourself.

The Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:20) , along with baptism, is one of two ordinances or sacraments that Jesus commanded His church to observe. It is probably also called, "the breaking of bread." We get the name "communion" from 1 Cor 10:16 ("sharing" is the Greek word, *koinonea*, which means "fellowship" or "communion"). It's also called "the table of the Lord" (1 Cor 10:21) and the Eucharist, from the Greek word for "thanksgiving."

The original Lord's Supper was a Passover meal, where Jesus adapted and applied the meaning of that Jewish feast to Himself. The idea is that just as Israel was delivered from the death of their firstborn and from

slavery to Pharaoh through the blood of the Passover lamb, so you are spared from God's judgment and slavery to sin by the death of the Lamb of God.¹ In order to rectify the issues related to the Lord's supper, Paul gives four ways that one should come to the Lord's Supper:

1. Come to the Lord's Supper often (1 Cor. 11:25-26)

Paul cites Jesus' words (1 Cor 11:25), "do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." He adds (v. 26), "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes." If "the breaking of bread" in Acts refers to the Lord's Supper, then at first in the early church, they seemed to have celebrated the Lord's Supper daily. Later, it became a weekly occurrence that took place on "the first day of the week" (or Saturday night). Now the Sunday celebration is obligatory in the Apostolic churches.

However often you come to the Lord's Supper, the complaint often arises that it just becomes an empty ritual. How should we deal with that problem? Anything that you do often can become an empty ritual. Reading your Bible every morning can become something that you just check off your "to do" list. Or, you can truly seek the Lord through His Word, asking Him to apply it to your heart. Prayer can become an empty ritual, where you just run through your prayer list. Or, you can really make contact with the Lord. Singing during worship can be a mindless ritual. Or, you can think about the words and worship God in spirit and in truth. So, come to the Lord's Supper often, communing with the Lord in a meaningful way.

2. Come to the Lord's Supper with love for others (11:17-22, 33-34)

Before and after Paul gave instructions about how to come to the Lord's Table (1 Cor 11:23-32), he confronted the problem of divisions and strife in the church. He has already dealt extensively

with this problem in this letter, but he's still shocked at their display of factionalism at such a sacred occasion as the Lord's Supper. In 1Cor 10:17, he wrote, "Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread." Apparently, they passed around a common loaf of bread and each person broke off a part as they observed the Lord's Supper. That one loaf pictures the fact that we are one body in Christ. But the divisions among the Corinthians contradicted the reality of the one body of Christ. Thus he writes (1Cor 11:18-9): For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part I believe it. For there must also be factions among you, so that those who are approved may become evident among you.

Verse 19 is difficult to understand. Most commentators understand Paul to be saying that God works good even out of a bad situation. He permits the factions in a church to reveal who the truly spiritually mature ones are. But even though I'm going against the majority of scholars, I side here with *The New Living Translation* and J. B. Phillips' paraphrase, both of which understand Paul to be using sarcasm. The NLT [Tyndale] puts it, "But, of course, there must be divisions among you so that those of you who are right will be recognized!" I would paraphrase, "Of course you must have your factions, so that your favorite leaders can be in the spotlight!" Paul says that it would be better not to come together as a church at all than to come together with this sort of rivalry (1Cor 11:17).

Then (1Cor 11:20-22) Paul confronts the selfishness and gluttony of those who were stuffing themselves and even getting drunk at the common meal before coming to the Lord's Supper. They were not considerate of the slaves and other poor who were a part of the church. When he says (1Cor 11:20), "when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper," he means that their selfish approach nullified the very meaning of the remembrance of the self-sacrifice of our Savior. Their selfish gluttony and drunkenness despised the church of God and shamed the poor (1Cor 11:22). Paul was shocked by their selfish behavior!

Paul says it in a negative way, but stated positively the point is that we have to come to the Lord's Supper with genuine love for one another. The Lord's Supper is one spiritual activity that you do not practice alone. You can and should pray and read the Bible by yourself. Much of the spiritual life is hidden. But the Lord's Supper is to be celebrated with the Lord's people. So to come to it rightly, you have to deal with damaged relationships as best as you can. Our common participation in the symbols of the body and blood of our Lord should demonstrate the self-sacrificing love of the one who gave Himself up to die on our behalf.

Some relational conflicts take time to be resolve and some are never fully resolved. As Paul says (Rm 12:18), 'If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.' But to the best of our ability, we should seek to be right with others before we come to the Lord's Supper. As Jesus taught in a Jewish context (Mt 5:23-24), "Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering." God wants us to be reconciled with one another before we worship Him. Otherwise, we become religious hypocrites.

We need to ask forgiveness of one another and affirm their love for one another before they take communion on Sunday. The Lord's Supper should display the truth that we are one body in Christ. Before we partake, we should clear up all relational conflicts to the best of our ability. Coming often to the Table means that we need to deal often with relational issues.

3. Come to the Lord's Supper with remembrance of the Lord (11:23-26)

Since Paul wrote 1 Corinthians before Matthew, Mark, and Luke were written, we have here the earliest recorded words of Jesus and the earliest account of the first Lord's Supper. Scholars differ over whether Paul means (v. 23) that he received this as a direct

revelation from Christ or whether he received it from the Lord through the other apostles. I think that the Lord directly revealed this account of the first Lord's Supper to Paul (see Gl 1:11-12). Remember four things:

A. Remember the Lord Himself: Maybe you're thinking, "Wait a minute! I'm a Christian! How could I forget the Lord?" But the reality is, we get busy with all sorts of things, even with serving the Lord, and we easily forget the Lord Himself. In the Lord's Supper, Jesus left us a picture of Himself for us to remember Him by. We should pause and look at it often. When we do, it should remind us of His great love for us as shown supremely on the cross. It should fill our hearts with the desire to see Him when He comes again. It should make us look to ourselves to ask, "Is there anything in my life that needs to be dealt with before I meet my Bridegroom face to face?" It should touch our hearts and make us say, "Thank God for what He has given us in Christ!" The Lord's Supper is a time to remember our beloved Savior.

B. Remember the Lord's substitutionary sacrifice for you: Jesus took the bread, broke it, gave thanks, and said (1Cor 11:24), "This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me." This fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah 53 that Jesus, the spotless Lamb of God, would die for our sins. Our guilt was placed on Him. The guilt-ridden deacon in my opening story should realize when he comes to the Lord's Supper that Jesus died in his place and bore all his guilt. Now, by faith in Christ, he can live guilt-free.

Christians have been divided over the meaning of Jesus' words, "This is my body." Without any ambiguity Jesus was speaking literally: Jesus' body and blood, which was shed for us. He is personally present with us when we celebrate the Lord's Supper. So when you come to the Lord's Supper, by faith remember Jesus' suffering and death on the cross for you. As 1 Pt 2:24 puts it, "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed."

C. Remember your complete forgiveness through the new covenant: The old covenant sacrifices could not take away sins permanently (Hb 10:11). But Jesus said (1Cor 11:25), “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.” The “new covenant” refers to the Lord’s promise (Jr 31:34), “For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.” We should remember that the Lord forgets! Of course, He is omniscient, so forgives our sins and saves us from the judgment against us through his death for us on the cross.

D. Remember that Jesus is coming again: 1Cor 11:26: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.” The Greek verb translated “proclaim” is used elsewhere of proclaiming the gospel (1Cor 9:14). The Lord’s Supper is a proclamation of Jesus’ death *and resurrection*, because He couldn’t come again if He were not raised from the dead. Each time we partake of the Lord’s Supper could be the last. The trumpet may sound, the dead in Christ will rise, and we shall be caught up to meet the Lord in the air (1Thes 4:16-17)! The Lord’s Supper reminds us to be ready for that day! But, Paul goes on to give a sober warning:

4. Come to the Lord’s Supper with examination of yourself (11:27-34).

Paul says that many of the Corinthians were suffering sickness and even death because they were coming to the Lord’s Supper in the relationally unloving, irreverent, self-centered manner that he has described. He clarifies (1Cor 11:32) that this judgment does not mean eternal condemnation, but rather divine discipline. To avoid such discipline, he gives the prerequisite for coming to the Lord’s Supper (1Cor 11:28): “But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup.” By judging the body rightly (v. 29), I understand Paul to be referring to the body and blood of the Lord (v. 27). He means that we should not partake of communion flippantly or irreverently, but worshipfully and thankfully.

By examining ourselves, Paul means that we should do a private, mental inventory of our relationship with Christ (2Cor 13:5). Am I truly trusting in Him alone for salvation? Am I sinfully at odds with anyone else? Is there any sin that I have not confessed and turned from? The Lord's Supper is not for the sinless, but for those who are dealing with their sin on the heart level as they are walking with Christ.

It's encouraging to remember that at the first Lord's Supper, the disciples were arguing about which of them was the greatest. Jesus predicted Peter's threefold denial of Him that very night. A short time later, the disciples couldn't stay awake to watch and pray with Jesus in the Garden. So the Lord's Supper is not for perfect saints, but rather for those who struggle with the shortcomings and sins that are common to us all. But, we should not shrug off any known sin or excuse it by saying, "It's just my weakness." As Paul rhetorically asks (Rm 6:1-2), "Are we to continue in sin that grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?" The Lord's Supper gives us a frequent reminder that we need to deal with our sins on the heart level before God.

Concluding Pastoral Remarks

Based on 1Cor 11:17-34, the primary biblical text on the nature and meaning of the Lord's Supper/Table and Communion we can formulate 10 pastoral principles:

1. The Lord's Supper is primarily (but not exclusively) designed to elicit or to stimulate in our hearts *remembrance* of the person and work of Jesus: "Do this in remembrance of me" (1Cor 11:25).
2. This remembrance is *commanded*. Participation at the Lord's Table is not an option. Prolonged absence from it is spiritually unhealthy and willful neglect of it may be grounds for church discipline.

3. This remembrance entails the use of *tangible elements*: bread and wine. It isn't enough simply to say, "Remember!" The elements of bread and wine are given to stir our minds and hearts. The physical action of eating and drinking is designed to remind us that we spiritually "ingest" and depend upon Jesus and the saving benefits of his life, death, and resurrection. Just as food and drink are essential to sustain physical existence, so also the blessings and benefits that come to us through the body and blood of Christ are paramount to our spiritual flourishing.
4. It is a *personal* remembrance. We are to remember Jesus. The focus isn't on Abraham or Moses or Isaiah. The focus is no longer on the Jewish Passover or the night of his betrayal or anything else. The focus is Jesus. "Do this in remembrance of me" (1Cor 11:25).
5. In this remembering there is also *confession*. In partaking of the elements we declare: "Christ gave his body and blood for me. He died for me." This is one among many reasons why I reject the practice of paedocommunion (the giving of the elements of the Table to infants). If one cannot and does not personally and consciously confess that the bread and wine symbolize the body and blood of Jesus sacrificed for sinners, he/she should not, indeed must not, partake of them.
6. In this remembering we also *proclaim* the Lord's death till he comes. This, then, is not merely an ordinance that looks to the past. It is an ordinance of hope that points to the future.
7. To partake of the Lord's Table in an *unworthy* manner (v. 27) is to take it without regard to its true worth, not yours. To partake unworthily is to come complacently, light-heartedly, giving no thought to that which the elements signify. I. H. Marshall explains: "In some Christian circles today the fear of partaking unworthily in the Supper leads to believers of otherwise excellent character refraining from coming to the table of the Lord. When this happens, Paul's warning is being

misunderstood. The Lord's Supper is the place where the forgiveness of sin is proclaimed and offered to all who would receive it. Paul's warning was not to those who were leading unworthy lives and longed for forgiveness but to those who were making a mockery of that which should have been most sacred and solemn by their behaviour at the meal" (116). To partake in an "unworthy manner" thus entails at least three things: (a) calloused disregard for others in the body of Christ (see vv. 20-22); (b) an attempt to combine participation at pagan (demonic) feasts with participation at the Lord's; and (c) flippant disregard for what the elements represent (vv. 23-26).

8. To be "guilty of the body and blood of the Lord" (v. 27) is to treat as *common* or *profane* something which is *sacred*. The Lord's Supper is not just another meal.
9. Hence, we are to "*examine ourselves*" (v. 28). We are to test our motives and attitudes as we approach the table to be certain we are partaking for the right reasons and with the right understanding of what the elements represent. This is yet another argument against paedocommunion. If one cannot obey this Pauline command one is not prepared or qualified to partake of the elements.
10. Finally, failure to do so may lead to *divine discipline* (1Cor 11:29-34). Such chastisement from the Father is in order that believers may be spared the condemnation that comes to the unbelieving world. Some in Corinth had already suffered the discipline of God ("weak and sick"); some had even died physically ("sleep"). And this was an expression of God's gracious commitment to preserve his people "so that we may not be condemned along with the world" (1Cor 11:32b).

Endnotes

- 1 see *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* [Zondervan], 3:380-381.

Pastoral Interpretation of Spiritual Gifts

Paul's most detailed discussion of spiritual gifts is a response to questions addressed to him in a letter from members of the Corinthian church (12:1; cf. 7:1; 8:1). The exact nature of these questions is not known, but it can be reasonably inferred that, among other things, they raised a question about speaking in tongues (*glossolalia*). Evidently some members of the congregation who experienced this gift made exaggerated claims for it. It seems to have been regarded as the gift *par excellence*, the indisputable evidence of possession of the Spirit, the authentic mark of superior spirituality. Bruce observes that the Corinthians' question "had been framed in such a way as to imply that the surest sign of the presence and power of the Spirit was *glossolalia*."¹ Similarly, Hurd remarks:

They had maintained that glossolalia is the main (or only) evidence of possession by the Spirit. If an apostle, for example, speaks in tongues, then he can be known to be spiritual. In general, only those Christians who have this gift are to be classed as spiritual.²

The structure of Paul's argument seems to support this assessment. After analyzing chaps. 12-14, Fee concludes:

Similar to the long arguments of chs. 1-4 and 8-10, where Paul begins by addressing the larger theological issue raised by the Corinthian position before he moves to a specific response to the problem at hand, so here, chs. 12-13 in a more general and theological way lead to the correctives of ch. 14. These correctives, with their running contrast between tongues and prophecy and the concomitant plea for intelligibility for the sake of edification, followed in turn by the concern for the ordering of spiritual gifts in the assembly, especially tongues, make it clear that this gift is the culprit.³

A further insight into the nature of the problem, as well as Paul's method of dealing with it, may be seen in the use of the term *pneumatikon* in 12:1. In this context the word can mean either spiritual gifts or spiritual persons (cf. 14: 1, 37). The difference is minimal since spiritual persons are those who have received certain spiritual gifts (especially *glossolalia*). It is possible that this term was used by the Corinthians to indicate their superior spiritual status. As spiritual persons (*pneumatic-koz*) they vaunted their possession of the Spirit (*pneuma*).⁴

Paul does not reject *pneumatika* as a term for spiritual gifts. But his own preferred designation is *charismata*. Spiritual gifts are to be understood as gifts of God's grace, not evidences of man's achievement. They are expressions of God's grace and power, and they witness to the supreme gift (*charisma*), the gift of life in Christ (1:4-7; cf. Rom. 5:15f., 6:23). By placing them in the category of *charismata*, Paul sought to put the question of spiritual gifts in a wider context, to ground it in a theology of grace, and thereby to correct inadequate notions of spirituality.

The Spirit and Christ's Lordship (12:1-8)

These verses form the foundation for Paul's more detailed discussion of gifts in the rest of the chapter. He begins by reminding the Corinthians of their pagan past when they were used to being "led astray to dumb idols" (v. 2). The point of the reference is that it is not the fact of inspiration or ecstasy that is important, but the content of the utterance it produces. There are inspired utterances other than those produced by the Holy Spirit. Ecstatic utterances can come from many stimuli, but "the character of the stimulus must be inferred from the substance of the utterance."⁵ Certainly, the Spirit of God could never inspire the cry "Jesus be cursed."⁶

The basic criterion for discerning the presence and work of the Holy Spirit is the simple and intelligible confession "Jesus is Lord" (v. 3). It is only through the activity of the Spirit that one can speak genuinely of Christ's lordship. By this confession a person is identified as a Christian, and by it the earliest Christians distinguished themselves from both pagans and unbelieving Jews. The significance of this confession for Paul's discussion of spiritual gifts has been stated by Barrett:

The true Christian watchword is, *Jesus is Lord*. . . . It is true not because it is the right orthodox formula but because it expresses the proper relation with Jesus: the speaker accepts his authority, and proclaims himself to be the servant of him whom he confesses as Lord. . . . It is this relation . . . with which Paul is concerned here: inspiration as a religious phenomenon is in itself indifferent, and gains significance only in the context of Christian obedience.⁷

It is essential to note the close relationship which is implied here between the lordship of Christ and the Spirit. Paul's statement is that "no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit" (v. 3). If it is the Spirit alone who can create in a person a genuine response to Christ as Lord, then the Spirit belongs to the essence of Christian experience. For Paul this means that no Christian can be

without the Spirit (Rom. 8, 9, 14). In this fundamental sense every Christian is a spiritual person (*pneumatikos*).

The Nature and Source of Spiritual Gifts (12:4-6)

Three items call for attention in these verses. First, there is the threefold repetition of the word “varieties.” Against the tendency to overvalue one spiritual manifestation, Paul emphasizes the diversity of the Spirit’s endowments. The rich variety of spiritual gifts should preclude exclusive preoccupation with any one of them. No single endowment should be designated as the gift.

Second, there are three terms used to describe the Spirit’s gifts. They are *charismata* (v. 4), *diakonai* (v. 5), and *energemata* (v. 6). These are not separate categories; rather, each term illuminates the others.

- *Charismata* is from the same root as the Greek word for grace (*charis*). The term designates “that which is bestowed by God’s favor, freely and graciously given.”⁸ The gracious activity of the Spirit contradicts any attitude of superiority.
- *Diakonai* means “services” or “ministries.” As “services” spiritual gifts involve responsibility for the edification of others. They are designed for ministry, not for indulgence. Kasemann argues that the real test for the genuineness of spiritual gifts is “not in the fact that something supernatural occurs, but in the use which is made of it. No spiritual endowment has value or rights or privileges on its own account. It is validated by the service it renders.”⁹
- *Energemata* means “workings” or “energies.” The thought is that of God’s power in action or “ways in which the divine power is applied.” Thus, a charisma which is given for the purpose of service or ministry can be further described as a manifestation of divine power.

Third, the word “same” is used three times. The diversity of the gifts is contrasted with their one source. Paul attributes *charismata* to the Spirit, *diakonai* to the Lord, and *energemata* to God. However, the fact that he can attribute all these gifts to the Spirit (12:11) or to God (12:28), shows that the trinitarian pattern is a way of stressing the divine origin of the gifts.

The divine origin of the gifts and the fact that they are manifestations of divine power raises the question of their relation to the natural order. What is the relation of divine gift and natural talent? How miraculous are the gifts? It is by no means certain that Paul would agree with the distinctions implied by these questions. The sharp dichotomy between natural and supernatural which characterizes modern thought is largely the product of the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and should not be read uncritically into Paul’s thought. Nevertheless, the fact that some spiritual gifts seem more unusual or miraculous while others are comparatively mundane makes the question worthwhile.

Bittlinger contends that Paul makes no distinction between natural and supernatural gifts. Rather, the apostle sees all of a Christian’s activities as “saturated with the Spirit.” For Bittlinger, therefore, a *charisma* means that “a gift is manifested when being set free by the Holy Spirit, my natural endowments blossom forth glorifying Christ and building up His church.”¹⁰ “It seems to allow no *specific* moments for acknowledging the Spirit’s presence. Probably the apostle would say that while a believer’s entire life – apart from lapses into rebellion against God. – may be construed as charismatic, some moments are more charismatic than others.” (See his *Charismata: God’s Gifts for God’s People*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), p. 106).

Stott takes a similar approach. He does not deny the obviously supernatural nature of some gifts. But he believes that “the same God is God of creation and new creation, working through both his perfect will.”¹¹ Because of this, spiritual gifts can in some instances

“dovetail with natural endowments.”¹² In such instances the nature of the gifts is to be discerned “in the heightening the intensification, the ‘Christianizing’ of a natural endowment already present, or at least latent.”¹³

A warning against confusing *charismata* with natural ability is issued by Dunn. He argues that “nowhere does charisma have the sense of a human capacity heightened, developed or transformed.”¹⁴ He believes that Paul thought of all the gifts as supernatural. “The character of transcendent otherness lies at the heart of the Pauline concept of charisma.”¹⁵ Dunn acknowledges, however, that *charisma* may make use of natural abilities. “But the charisma itself can properly be exercised only when it is recognized as the action of the Spirit. . . .”¹⁶

While recognizing the validity of the question, Koenig warns against pursuing it too rigorously. He concludes that Paul “does not seem to care whether we label a given event, act or talent natural or supernatural. He is far more concerned about whether the Spirit’s working can be recognized in it and acknowledged.”¹⁷

The Variety of the Spirit’s Gifts (12:7-11)

Before illustrating the diversity of the Spirit’s endowments Paul makes it clear that each person in the congregation is equipped to ministries in some meaningful way. “To each is given some manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (v. 7). Every Christian is a recipient of God’s grace (*charis*) and is given some spiritual gift. No one is excluded. In this fundamental sense all Christians are charismatic. The significance of each person is thereby affirmed. But if the importance of the individual is stressed, it is not at the expense of the community. To the gifted members of the Corinthian church who felt superior to their fellow believers Paul emphasizes that gifts are bestowed “for the common good.”

The choice of gifts listed in vv. 8-10 may have been determined by the actual situation in Corinth. It is not presented as an exhaustive

list nor as a model list for all churches. When it is compared with similar lists in the New Testament its representative nature becomes clear (cf. Rom. 12:3-8; Eph. 4:7-12; I Pet. 4:10-11). After comparing I Cor. 12:8-10 with Rom. 12:6-8, Dunn concludes that

The variety of terminology and the overlap between different gifts (prophecy and exhortation; service, helpful deeds, sharing, caring, and giving; utterance of wisdom, utterance of knowledge, and teaching) makes it clear that Paul has in mind a wide range of charismatic phenomena and that these lists are *only a selection* of typical and often not very clearly circumscribed manifestations of grace.¹⁸

It is possible that some gifts might appear in one church and not in another, and new gifts might be given as different forms of ministry are required to meet new and changing situations. Given the creativity of God and the dynamic human situation, rigorous uniformity of endowment and experience is not to be expected. It is enough to know that whatever the gifts, they “are inspired by the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills” (v. 11).

Spiritual Gifts and the Body of Christ (12:12-31)

Membership in the Body (12:12-13)

The exercise of the various gifts by members of the church is compared to the functioning of different parts of the body. A variety of limbs and organs does not endanger the unity of the body. But no one bodily function can be regarded as the only legitimate expression of the body’s life. The same is true of the church. Diversity is essential, but no one gift or ministry can be regarded as the sole evidence of the Spirit’s work.

All Christians are members of Christ’s body and recipients of the Spirit because “by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body . . . and all were made to drink of one Spirit” (v. 13). One becomes a member of the body of Christ through faith-union with Christ, a union effected through the Holy Spirit. Baptism is the public witness

to this reality. Paul's reference here is to the experience of becoming a Christian, at which time one receives the Spirit. The phrase "made to drink of one Spirit" refers to the same experience using a different figure. The point is that the Spirit is received when one becomes a Christian.

Unity and Diversity in the Body (12:14-26)

The figure of the body with its different members is applied here in a practical way. The emphasis is that every part of the body has its unique contribution to make to the whole. Discord among the members leads to anarchy.

Verses 14-17 may reflect a sense of inferiority which "lower" parts of the body could feel in relation to "higher" parts. Likewise, v. 21 may point to an attitude of superiority displayed by the more prominent members. Paul insists, however, that there is no place for inferiority or arrogance. Every member needs every other member. This is so because "God has arranged the organs in the body, each one of them, as he chose" (v. 18). Thus, true unity is possible only as a result of diversity. As Kasemann writes: "For while like entities can only cancel each other out and render each other superfluous, unlike entities can perform mutual service and in this service of *agape* can become one."¹⁹ Therefore, no member—should depreciate another because "God has so adjusted the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior part, that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another" (vv. 24-25).

Gifts and Ministries in the Body (12:27-31)

In a second list of gifts or ministries the most important ones are designated by numerical order: "first apostles, second prophets, third teachers" (v. 28). Barrett contends that this threefold ministry is the most important for Paul because by it "the church is founded, and built up."²⁰ The other gifts are not numbered "possibly because, though Paul can place all the remaining gifts on a lower level . . . he

does not feel that he must, or wishes to distinguish narrowly between the lower gifts.”²¹

Seven questions, amounting to a third list of gifts, follow in vv. 29-30. Each question is preceded in Greek with the negative particle *me*, indicating that the answer “No” is expected. The questions begin with “Are all apostles?” and end with “Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?” By the use of these rhetorical questions Paul drives home the fact of diversity in unity in the church and explodes the notion that all “spiritual” persons must manifest one particular gift.

Given the situation in Corinth it is probably no accident that speaking in tongues appears last in the three gift lists in chap. 12 (vv. 8-10, 28, 29-30). Against an exaggerated emphasis on this one gift, Paul demonstrates the rich variety of the Spirit’s endowments. Is it accidental that the gifts which head each of the lists are those which emphasize the intelligible proclamation of the gospel? Not likely! MacGorman has aptly summarized Paul’s thrust:

All parts of the body are authentic but not all have equal value functionally. Similarly all spiritual gifts are valid but not all contribute equally to the essential life and mission of the church. For this reason Paul consistently magnified the charismatic gifts and ministries related to the proclamation and teaching of the gospel: apostles, prophets, and teachers. Also for this reason he just as consistently minimized the gifts of ecstasy.²² Hence, Paul’s advice: “But earnestly desire the higher gifts”(v. 31).²³

Love: The Medium for Expressing the Gifts (13:1-18)

Chapter 13 has sometimes been regarded as a digression from the main argument.²⁴ Because it seems to be a self-contained unit, Barrett believes that “it may have been composed separately and polished, and inserted at this point.”²⁵ He explains however, that “this does not mean that the chapter was not written by Paul, or that it was not intended by him to stand at this place.”²⁶ Bruce admits that it may have been an independent composition, but he stresses

that it is so integral to the course of Paul's argument that "had it not lain already to hand, he must have composed something along the same lines to complete his demonstration that love surpasses the richest spiritual endowments."²⁷ Certainly, no serious interpretation of this chapter can overlook its centrality to the discussion of spiritual gifts in the Corinthian church. It is not to be interpreted as praise of an aesthetic ideal but a pastoral exhortation aimed at changing the reader's conduct. As such it forms the essential bridge between chaps. 12 and 13.²⁸

It is significant that Paul does not regard love as one of the *charismata*. This does not mean that it is an abstract idea. Like the other spiritual gifts, love is the result of the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit. It is "the love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us" (Rom. 5:5). Love is an essential part of the "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal. 5:22f.) which enables a Christian to live effectively as a member of the body of Christ. Dunn observes that while it is impossible to experience love without *charisma*, "it is only too possible to experience charisma without love. Only when charisma is manifested as the expression of love will it benefit the individual or the community."²⁹

Life Without Love (13:1-3)

These verses illustrate concretely that love is the indispensable medium for the exercise of the Spirit's gifts. Paul begins with the gift valued so highly by the Corinthians. The "tongues of men" is a reference to ordinary human speech, but the phrase "and of angels" probably points to glossolalia. Paul is comparing the loveless exercise of this gift to the meaningless sounds produced by a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal (instruments used to excite worshipers in some pagan cults).

"Prophecy," "knowledge," and "faith" (v. 2) may stand higher in Paul's view than speaking with tongues, but even they can become empty displays of egotism unless they are guided by love into serving others.

In v. 3 Paul exposes the vanity of every form of self-sacrifice which stops short of love. If one gives away all of his possessions, but lacks love, there is no advantage. Even the act of giving one's body to be burned is of no spiritual value if it is oriented to self rather than to God.³⁰

There is a progression in these verses ranging from speaking in tongues, to martyrdom. Together they underline Paul's central thrust: no activity, however splendid, is genuinely Christian unless it is rooted in love.

The Characteristics of Love (13:4-7)

Paul describes the nature of love in these verses. He does this by citing fifteen characteristics of love: eight negative and seven positive. The description is by way of contrast to the manner in which the Corinthians exercised their spiritual gifts. As Brown states, "These verses are at once both a portrayal of what Christian love is and what the Corinthians are not."³¹

Barr agrees that verses 4-7 speak to the situation created by the misuse of spiritual gifts. But he also perceives their wider relevance to the situation of the church as a whole. His comment is worth quoting in full:

The references to envy, pride, and irritability recall numerous strictures of these Corinthian failings in the course of the Epistle and gather meaning as we think of the party strife and social divisions that were disrupting the Corinthian community (e.g. 1.11 f., 3.1ff., 11.17ff.). And consider the words 'doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own. There is surely here a reference to the improprieties and disorder prevalent at Corinth. Christian was haling Christian before the heathen magistrates (6:1ff.); the women were causing scandal through lack of self-restraint and disregard of generally accepted standards of propriety (11.1ff.). And there were the disgraceful scenes when the Corinthians gathered together for the Lord's Supper (11.17ff.) and the confusion when the whole

church came together and all spoke with tongues (14.23) The root of all these disorders is lack of *Agape*, the loving consideration of Christian for Christian.³²

The Permanence of Love (13:8-13)

The eschatological emphasis of these verses is unmistakable. Paul's contrast between the permanence of love and the transitory nature of *charismata* must be interpreted in terms of the "already" and the "not yet" of eschatology. "Love never ends" (v. 8) because it is grounded in God, and God is love. But the same cannot be said of prophecy, tongues, and knowledge. These gifts, which enable the church to fulfill its mission between Christ's resurrection and his return, will come to an end. There will be no need for them in the presence of God.

In this present age prophecy and knowledge are partial and imperfect (v. 9). This does not mean that what is known of God is untrue, only that it is incomplete. But "when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away" (v. 10) The reference is to the *parousia* of Christ. The Spirit is the "guarantee" of the Christian's future inheritance (Eph. 1:13-14), and the gifts he bestows belong to this present era. They will not be necessary in the age to come.³³

Two illustrations are used to contrast the present and future. The first illustration is the experience of growing from childhood to maturity (v. 11). Paul's purpose is to emphasize the discontinuity between the child and the mature person. The attitudes and actions which often characterize children are not appropriate to adult life. Adults must give up their immature ways. Paul is not suggesting that he is now mature enough to dispense with the Spirit's gifts (cf. Phil. 3:12). He is urging the Corinthians to see things in proper perspective, i.e., not to overvalue things which are transient and undervalue that which is eternal.

The second illustration contrasts seeing "in a mirror dimly" with seeing "face to face" (v. 12). The mirror further emphasizes the

incompleteness of present knowledge of God. However, the limited vision of the present will give way to a complete vision in the future. Understanding of God will be direct, i.e., “face to face” (cf. Rev. 22:4). The final sentence of v. 12 reinforces the contrast. “Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have fully understood.” The change from “know” to “understand” represents a change in the Greek text from the simple verb *ginoskein* to *epiginoskein* which in this context, is intensive in force “denoting the fullness of knowledge which comes from the unimpeded knowledge of God.”³⁴

Paul concludes by singling out “faith, hope, and love” as the three enduring gifts. Faith here denotes trust, confidence; hope emphasizes the continuing nature of that confidence. But the greatest of these is “love” because God is love, and the manifestation of divine love in Christ is the foundation of faith and hope.³⁵

Spiritual Gifts and the Edification of the Church (14:1-46)

In this chapter Paul applies the insights he has developed in the previous two chapters. In chap. 12 he indicated that the basic evidence of the Spirit’s activity was the confession “Jesus is Lord.” He then explained the nature and function of spiritual gifts. In chap. 13 Paul demonstrated that love is the essential medium for the expression of these gifts. In chap. 14 he provides directions for the use of gifts in the worship service. The discussion focuses on glossolalia and prophecy.

The Priority of Prophecy (14:1-25)

The opening statement, “Make love your aim and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts. . . .” (v. 1), sums up the exhortation to love in chap. 13 and resumes the discussion of 12:31a (“earnestly desire the higher gifts”). Among the gifts to be sought Paul gives priority to prophecy.

Paul’s preference for prophecy is due to the nature of the gift itself. Prophecy is the Spirit-inspired proclamation of the will of God

to a particular situation. As a manifestation of the divine will, prophecy is intrinsically related to revelation (cf. vv. 26-30). As a word of revelation, prophecy “would shed new light on the salvation event of Jesus Christ, or on the relation between the exalted Lord and his community . . . or would reveal some practical course of action for an individual or group.”³⁶

The value of prophecy is further enhanced by its intelligibility and its power to edify the congregation. Prophecy is addressed to the human understanding (“he who prophesies speaks to men,” v. 3). The prophet “edifies the church” (v. 4). Paul uses the terms “edify” and “edification” numerous times in this chapter (vv. 3, 4, 5, 12, 17, 16). This is a strong reminder that spiritual endowments are “for the common good” (12:7). Such an emphasis indicates that edification of the congregation functions along with Christ’s lordship (12:3) and love (chap. 13) as one of the basic criteria for distinguishing the genuine exercise of the *charismata*.

In contrast to prophecy, glossolalia is addressed “to God” (v. 2). The speaker “utters mysteries in the Spirit” (v. 2). This speaking is unintelligible and is not understood by the congregation (v. 3). Edification is primarily for the one who speaks, not for the church (v. 4). This description suggests that glossolalia functions primarily as a form of praying. As Spirit-inspired prayer it could be expressed as singing (v. 15), blessing (v. 16), or giving thanks (v. 17). Because of its essentially personal nature, speaking with tongues does not edify the congregation “unless someone interprets” (v. 5; cf. vv. 15, 27).

Because of their exaggerated esteem for this gift, Paul asks the Corinthians *to* judge what benefit they would receive if he came to them speaking only in tongues (v. 6). The answer is obvious. He could help them only if he spoke a message they could understand (“some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching”).

The need for intelligibility is reinforced by three illustrations. (1) If the harp or lyre do not produce distinct sounds there will be no

recognizable melody (v. 7). (2) If the bugle, does not clearly communicate the appropriate signal, the lives of the troops may be placed in jeopardy. (3) If one does not understand the language of another person, there can be no communication (vv. 10-11). If one utters sounds with no meaning, he will merely be “speaking into the air” (v. 9). The point is that since the Corinthians “are eager for manifestations of the Spirit” (lit. “zealots for spirits”), they should “strive to excel in building up the church” (v. 12). Thus if one does speak in tongues in the worship service he should pray for the ability to interpret (v. 13).

The contrast between “mind” and “spirit” in vv. 14-19 further clarifies the need for intelligibility in worship. “Mind” is a reference to the intelligence, understanding, the faculty of rational discrimination. The meaning of “spirit” in this context is more difficult. The RSV renders “spirit” with a small “s.” Thus, the reference to “my spirit” could be understood as a non-rational dimension of the personality set over against the rational. This interpretation does not correspond to Paul’s normal understanding of the term. Usually, “spirit” refers to man’s capacity for self-awareness which includes the mind (cf. 2: 10-16; Rom. 8:15f.). Bruce interprets the term here *to mean* “whatever part of me that exercises this spiritual gift.”³⁷ The NEB translates, “the Spirit in me prays” indicating that it is the Holy Spirit praying through the individual.

Barrett’s view is more complex, but is worthy of consideration. He believes that Paul’s language is imprecise here because he is compressing into a few words three thoughts:

1. the Holy Spirit is at work inspiring worship and prayer;
2. the Spirit’s work is crystallized into a specific gift; and
3. “this gift is given in such personal terms to *me* that I can speak of it as *mine-in* short as *my spirit*, which, being what it is, operates through appropriate psychological channels independently of *my mind*.”³⁸

If the exact reference of “spirit” is obscure, the point of the contrast is clear. Paul is describing an activity that excludes the understanding. Therefore, the sounds that are produced are unintelligible. As a result, they do not edify.

The purpose of this discussion is made clear in v. 15: “What am I *to* do? I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also; I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also.” In this way, the whole personality is involved in worship. Spiritual gifts are no less spiritual because they involve the understanding. Otherwise, “how can anyone in the position of an outsider say the ‘Amen’ to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying?” (v. 16). Paul indicates that in the ability to speak in tongues, he surpasses all the Corinthians. But in the strongest terms he discourages their use in congregational worship: “. . . in church I would rather speak five words with my mind, in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue” (v. 19).

In the following paragraph (vv. 20-25) Paul urges the Corinthians to consider the possible effects of *glossolalia* and prophecy on the outsider or unbeliever. If such a person enters the assembly and everyone is speaking in tongues, “will he not say that you are mad?” (v. 23). Glossolalic worship may be meaningful to the participant, but it is likely to make the unbeliever contemptuous. If, on the other hand, the unbeliever enters and the congregation is prophesying, “he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you” (vv. 24-25). In this way the evangelistic efficacy of prophecy is highlighted vis-a-vis *glossolalia*.

The difficult part of the passage is found in vv. 21-22. Paul quotes a version of Isa. 28:10-11 in which God says *to* Israel, “By men of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, . . .” In this context this passage refers to rebellious Israelites who had refused to obey

the intelligible words of the prophet. God sent “men of strange tongues,” i.e., the Assyrians, as judgment on his people. Still they refused to obey. “Thus,” Paul concludes, “tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is not for unbelievers but for believers.” The question is, In what sense is *glossolalia* a sign for unbelievers and prophecy a sign for believers? The logic of Paul’s argument is difficult to follow, but it seems best to understand vv. 21-22 in light of the effects described in vv. 23-25. If glossolalia makes the unbeliever contemptuous of what is happening in the congregation, then its effect as a sign would be negative. It leaves him in his unbelief. If, on the other hand, one is converted as a result of prophecy, it is for believers in the sense that it is the instrument that leads one from unbelief *to* faith. Stendahl remarks that, Paul’s point is that the church owes the outsiders and unbelievers more than a mere negative sign toward their judgment. It owes them the full opportunity of repentance and the chance to recognize fully that God is truly in the midst of the assembly.³⁹

In spite of all that Paul says about the superiority of prophecy, however, he can still write, “Now I want you all to speak in tongues . . .” (v. 5) and “I thank God that I speak in tongues more than you all . . .” (v. 18). The appearance of this positive assessment of glossolalia in a chapter devoted to the priority of prophecy has evoked widely different responses.

According to Fee, for example, Paul’s argument is not that tongues are inferior to prophecy but that “in church intelligibility is preferred to non-intelligibility” because it edifies the whole community. When Paul urges the Corinthians to seek the “higher gifts” (12:31) he is not pointing “back to a list of gifts they should desire in the order he has given them.”⁴⁰ He is anticipating his emphasis on intelligibility and edification in chap. 14. Since tongues when interpreted becomes intelligible it can be regarded as “one of the ‘higher gifts’ in church.”⁴¹

Both Barrett and Green believe that Paul’s statements indicate a genuine appreciation for tongues as a gift that edifies the individual.

They admit, however, that it is inferior to prophecy. Nevertheless, tongues, when interpreted, can edify the church because interpretation “had the effect of turning tongues into prophecy.”⁴²

Two observations are in order at this point. In light of the contrasts which Paul makes between the two gifts, it is difficult to believe that he includes glossolalia, even when interpreted, in the category of “higher gifts.” Indeed, such a classification could easily have worked against the very corrections he was trying *to* make. It is equally difficult to comprehend the equation tongues plus interpretations equals prophecy. The orientation of tongues (to God, not to men) and its function as prayer militate against this identification. Because all gifts are from God, all gifts have the potential for edification. This does not justify equating them with prophecy.

A very different interpretation of Paul’s words is advocated by Chadwick. He argues that “The entire drift . . . of I Car. xii-xiv is such as to pour a douche of ice-cold water over the whole practice.”⁴³ But if Paul had denied the validity of glossolalia, he would have put a barrier between himself and those whose views he was trying to correct. Thus Paul must fully admit that *glossolalia* is indeed a divine gift; but, he urges, it is the most inferior of all gifts. But Paul does more than admit it. He asserts it: I give thanks to God that I speak in tongues more than all of you (XIV. 18). No stronger assertion of his belief in the validity of this gift of the Spirit could be made; and in the context it is a master-touch which leaves the enthusiasts completely outclassed and outmaneuvered on their own ground.⁴⁴

There is no reason to doubt that Paul accepted glossolalia as a genuine gift or that he himself experienced the gift. Nevertheless, in the present context he does not urge the Corinthians to seek this gift. He diplomatically recommends curbs on its use in public worship and suggests alternate goals of seeking. Thus Brunner writes: “Both of these dialectical facts-of tactful retention and tactical substitution-deserve attention if Paul’s own ‘testimony’ in these three chapters is to be understood.”⁴⁵

Guidelines for Public Worship (14:26-40)

In the final section of the chapter Paul seeks to accomplish three related aims: (1) to introduce order into the worship service (2) while maintaining a wholesome spontaneity and (3) reaffirming the criterion of edification.

Each person is allowed to contribute to worship (v. 26). Regulations are given for the use of tongues (vv. 27-28) and prophecy (vv. 29-32). Paul assumes that members, though inspired by the Spirit, exercise control over the use of their gift. There is no thought of being seized or carried away against one's will here. Order is essential because "God is not a God of confusion but of peace" (v. 33). He does not inspire chaos in the congregation.

The reason for imposing silence on women is not apparent from the context (vv. 34-36). Paul does not object in principle to a woman contributing to public worship. In chap. 11 he assumes that women might pray or prophesy, and he does not indicate that there is anything improper about it. The only condition he lays down is the wearing of a veil. Because of his concern for order, however, he could command a woman to be silent just as he could order a male prophet to be silent if his speaking was unedifying or disruptive (v. 30). It may be that Paul's allusion here is to "a passion for discussion which could give rise to heated argument between a wife and husband."⁴⁶ This may have occurred when speaking in tongues took place and interpretations were offered, or during a discussion of any one of a number of controversial issues. In any case, it would increase disorder in the church and threaten further contempt on the part of non-Christians.

Three summary statements conclude the chapter: (1) Paul is writing with apostolic authority. A true prophet and a truly spiritual person (*pneumatikos*) will recognize that what Paul has written "comes from the Lord" (vv. 37-38). (2) The priority of prophecy is reaffirmed, but speaking in tongues is not forbidden. (3) The

Corinthians are urged to do everything decently and in order (v. 40).

Summary

It is evident from this passage that the church lives by the presence and activity of the Spirit. The Spirit, bearing witness to Christ as Lord, baptizes people into the body of Christ. He also gives gifts to each member of the church to enable them to function effectively as Christ's body in the world.

- The Spirit's gifts are inclusive, not exclusive. They are given to all Christians, not to an elite corps within the fellowship. In this fundamental sense, all Christians are both "spiritual" and "charismatic." No Christian can claim all of the Spirit's possible endowments. Hence Christians need one another. Together they can do more for Christ than any *one* of them can do in isolation.
- There is no arbitrary limit to the number of the Spirit's gifts. God is sovereign and creative; therefore he can endow his people with those gifts which are necessary for ministry in any given age and circumstance.
- The church receives the Spirit's gifts in the interim period, in the eschatological tension between what Christ has "already accomplished" and what he has "not yet consummated." These gifts, which make ministry possible now, will not be necessary in the consummation.
- The Spirit's gifts must not be thought of as autonomous, separate from the one 'who gives. They are expressions of God's grace and power and point beyond themselves to the gift of life in Christ Jesus.
- The mere exercise of "gifts" is not in and of itself an unequivocal sign of the Spirit's activity. Hence any evaluation of gifts and their function must involve the following criteria: (1) a clear witness to the lordship of Christ; (2) humble service rather than

self-aggrandizement; (3) the spirit of Christian love; (4) the edification of the congregation.

Endnotes

1. F. F. Bruce, *I & II Corinthians*, New Century Bible Commentary, ed. Matthew Black (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Co., 1980), p. 117.
2. John Coolidge Hurd Jr. *The Origin of I Corinthians*, (London: SPCK 1965) p. 193
3. Gordon D. Fee, "Tongues – Least of the Gifts? Some Exegetical Observations of I Corinthians 12-14" *Pneuma* 2 (1980): 6.
4. James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, (London: SCM Press, 1975), p. 208
5. Bruce, *I & II Corinthians*, p. 118.
6. What evoked this kind of utterance is not known. For a concise survey of opinions see Jack W. MacGorman, *The Gifts of the Spirit* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1974), pp. 24-26.
7. C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Harpers New Testament Commentaries, ed. Henry Chadwick (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 128.
8. MacGorman, *The Gifts of the Spirit*, p. 28.
9. Kasemann, "Ministry and Community," p. 67.
10. Arnold Bittlinger, *Gifts and Graces: A Commentary on I Corinthians 12-14*, trans. Herbert Klassen (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1967), p. 70.
11. John R. W. Stott, *Baptism and Fullness: The Work of the Holy Spirit Today*, (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1976), p. 90.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
14. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, p. 255.

15. Ibid. 21.
16. Ibid., 256.
17. Koenig, *Charismata*, p. 106.
18. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, p. 256.
19. Kasemann, "Ministry and Community," p. 70.
20. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 295.
22. MacGorman, *The Gifts of the Spirit*, p. 55.
23. See Gerhard Iber, "Zurn Verstandnis von I Cor. 12, 31," *Zeitschrift fur die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 54 (1963): 43-52.
24. For a discussion of different perspectives see Jack T. Sanders, "First Corinthians 13; Its Interpretation Since the First World War," *Interpre-tation* 20 (1960): 159-187.
25. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 299.
27. Bruce, *I & II Corinthians*, p. 124.
28. Jay T. Martin, "I Corinthians 13 Interpreted in its Context," *Jour-nal of Bible and Religion* 18 (1950): 101-105; Alan Barr, "Love in the Church," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 3 (1950): 416-425.
29. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, p. 294.
30. Some mss. read, "and if I give my body so that I may glory." For the evidence for and against this reading see: Raymond Bryan Brown, "I Corinthians," *Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1970), 10:371.
31. Brown, "I Corinthians," p. 371.
32. Barr, "Love in the Church," pp. 421-422.
33. The "knowledge" that passes away is "a special kind of knowledge, a manifestation of the Spirit designed for the present requirements of church life (cf. 1.5; 12.8), in which the Corinthians were want to take undue pride . . ." (Bruce, *I & II Corinthians*, p. 127).

34. Bruce, *I & II Corinthians*, p. 129; cf. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 307; MacGorman, *The Gifts of the Spirit*, p. 78.
35. An attractive alternative to this interpretation is given by Ralph Martin. See his "Suggested Exegesis of I Corinthians 13:13," *The Expository Times* 82 (1970-71): 120.
36. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, p. 230.
37. Bruce, *I & II Corinthians*, p. 131.
38. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 320. Italics Barrett's.
39. Krister Stendahl, "Glossolalia – The New Testament Evidence," *Paul among Jews and Gentiles* (London: SCM Press, 1977), pp. 115-116.
40. Fee, "Tongues – Least of the Gifts?" p. 13.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
42. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 316.
43. Henry Chadwick, "'All Things to All Men,'" *New Testament Studies* 1 (1954-55): 268.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 269.
45. Bruner, *A Theology of the Holy Spirit*, p. 298.
46. J. N. Sevenster, *Paul and Seneca*, Supplements to *Novum Testamentum*, vol. 4 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1961), p. 198.

Bert Dominy

1 Corinthians 15: Paul's *Unified* Explanation of the Resurrection

The fifteenth chapter from Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians "contains the fullest treatment of the resurrection...found anywhere in the Bible."¹ Since it discusses extraordinary events which have yet to come to pass, 1 Corinthians 15 naturally stimulates a whole host of eschatological questions. For instance, what does this section of Scripture teach New Covenant (NC) believers regarding the order of end-times events? Does it teach a two-stage return of Christ, that is to say, a pretribulation rapture of the church seven years before Christ's Second Advent, as taught by Dispensationalists? Does this chapter support the existence of a future premillennial kingdom as taught by all versions of premillennialism? And what does it say, if anything, concerning Christ's current activity in heaven? Biblical answers to these and many other

questions regarding the resurrection can be found through a contextual exegesis of this chapter. The conclusion of this paper is that 1 Corinthians 15 clearly teaches that the *single* general resurrection occurs at the end of the NC age when the Lord Jesus Christ returns at His *one-stage* Second Coming.

In 1 Corinthians 15, the Apostle Paul is responding to “a decidedly aberrant view of the resurrection,” which had begun to take root in the church at Corinth.² The Apostle Paul begins his resurrection discourse in 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 by arguing that the resurrection is central to the Gospel itself. Then, in 1 Corinthians 15:12, the Apostle declares, “Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?”³ In response to this denial of the future bodily resurrection of believers, Paul authoritatively proclaims, “But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, your faith also is in vain” (1 Cor 15:13-14). Regarding the Apostle Paul’s response, Anthony Hoekema states: “Paul replies to this error by indicating that if one believes in the resurrection of Christ, one cannot very well deny the resurrection of believers. . . . One cannot, in other words, deny the resurrection of believers without denying the resurrection of Christ, since the two go together. And if one denies the resurrection of Christ, his faith is in vain- he is still in his sin.”⁴ Likewise, Carson states that Paul “denies that any wedge can be driven between these two resurrections so far as their nature is concerned, thereby forcing his readers to direct their gaze and their aspirations to the triumph at the end.”⁵

Understanding the structure of 1 Corinthians 15 is crucial to recognizing that the chapter is indeed a *unified* explanation of the *single* general resurrection. The chapter may be summarily outlined in the following manner:

- 15:1-11 The Centrality of the Resurrection to the Gospel
- 15:12-19 The Necessity of the Resurrection to the Gospel
- 15:20-28 The Sequence of the Resurrection:
1. Christ the Firstfruits
 2. Adam vs. Christ
 3. Resurrection occurs at Christ's coming (*parousia*)
 4. Destruction of Death
- 15:29 Baptism for the dead 6
- 15:30-32 Paul's Persecution: Another Justification for the Resurrection
- 15:33-34 Apostolic Exhortation
- 15:35-49 The Resurrection Body
1. Earthly perishable body vs. spiritual imperishable body
 2. Adam vs. Christ
 1. Resurrection of the Elect
 2. Destruction of Death

Notice that both the Adam – Christ comparison and the destruction of death are mentioned twice within Paul's resurrection discourse. Both are mentioned briefly in 1 Corinthians 15:20 -28; however, each receives greater treatment later in the chapter. For example, the Apostle Paul introduces the typological comparison between Adam and Christ in verses 20-21, and he later expands this concept in verses 45-49. Similarly, he states that death is the last enemy to be destroyed in 1 Corinthians 15:26, while later devoting verses 50-58 to the swallowing up or *destruction* of death. The repetition of these concepts strongly implies that Paul is teaching a *single* general resurrection when death is swallowed up at the end of the NC age when Christ returns at His Second Coming in both 1 Corinthians 15:20-28 and 1 Corinthians 15:50-58.

In 1 Corinthians 15:22-23, the Apostle Paul declares, “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive. 23 But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ’s at His coming [*parousia*].” There are two primary meanings of the Greek word *parousia*: 1) “the state of being present at a place, *presence*” and 2) “arrival as the first stage in presence, *coming, advent*.”⁷ A contextual word study of the Greek word *parousia* (1 Cor 15:23) and its various synonyms further strengthens the argument that 1 Corinthians 15:20-28 and 1 Corinthians 15:50-58 describe the exact same event.⁸ For example, verse 23 of 1 Corinthians 15 clearly teaches “that those who are Christ’s” will be resurrected “at His coming [*parousia*].” Couple this verse with 1 Thessalonians 3:13 which declares, “...so that He may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness before our God and Father at the coming [*tē parousia*] of our Lord Jesus **with all His saints**” [**brackets & emphasis mine**].⁹ The implications of this second verse are quite staggering: at His *parousia*, the Lord Jesus Christ will return with *all* His saints! Hoekema perceptively writes, “...the passage clearly says that Christ will return with *all* his saints, not just with some of them. How does this leave room for the reemergence of other saints who have not yet been born, and who must still be converted during the millennium?”¹⁰ *There is only one general resurrection at the end of the NC age when Christ returns at His one-stage Second Coming.*

As previously stated, the destruction of Death is highlighted twice in the fifteenth chapter of Paul’s first epistle to the Corinthians. The Apostle writes the following in 1 Corinthians 15:22-26:

22 For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive. 23 But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ’s **at His coming** [*tē parousia autou*], 24 then *comes* the end, when He delivers up the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power. 25 For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under

His feet. 26 ***The last enemy that will be abolished is death [brackets & emphasis mine].***

In 1 Corinthians 15:51-57, he declares:

51 Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. 53 ***For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality. 54 But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, “Death is swallowed up in victory. 55 “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” 56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; 57 but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ [emphasis mine].***

Since Death is destroyed in both 1 Corinthians 15:22-26 and 1 Corinthians 15:51-58, the *parousia* of 1 Corinthians 15:23 is the event described in 1 Corinthians 15:51-58. Furthermore, the *parousia* of 1 Corinthians 15:23, 51-57 is “the end” (1 Cor 15:24), when Death is destroyed. This exegetical reality leaves absolutely *no* room for a literal, earthly millennium.¹¹ Revelation 20:12-14 teaches that “death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire” after the Great White Throne Judgment. The only way to reconcile Revelation 20:12-14 with 1 Corinthians 15 is to recognize that Death is destroyed at the resurrection which occurs at Christ’s *parousia* and is subsequently thrown into the lake of fire at the Final Judgment which occurs immediately after Christ’s return. This interpretation, of course, does not allow for any form of premillennialism.

In addition, 1 Corinthians 15 strongly indicates that Christ’s current reign in heaven *must* be the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant, since Christ is to relinquish the kingdom to God the Father at His *parousia*. Verses 25-26 declare that Christ “must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be

abolished is death.” Remember that death is destroyed at the resurrection which occurs at Christ’s *one-stage* Second Coming or *parousia*. This means that the end, when Christ “delivers up the kingdom to the God and Father,” occurs when the Lord Jesus returns in glory at the end of the NC age. *Therefore, Christ’s current reign in heaven is the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant.* Is such a view of 1 Corinthians 15 compatible with the stipulations of the Davidic Covenant? Or can the Davidic Covenant *only* be fulfilled in an earthly millennial reign of Christ as premillennialists claim? All forms of premillennialism teach that the Lord Jesus Christ will reign over the earth from Jerusalem after David has been resurrected. The problem with this teaching lies in the fact that it directly contradicts the terms of the Davidic Covenant! Recall that the Lord promised David, “***When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom***” (2 Sam 7:12) [**emphasis mine**]. In other words, David *has* to already be dead, for God to raise up David’s Greater Son and “establish his kingdom.” This is exactly why the Apostle Peter emphasizes the fact that David is dead in Acts 2 as a proof that Christ’s cosmic reign at the Father’s right hand fulfills the Davidic Covenant:

25 For David says of Him, ‘I was always beholding the Lord in my presence; For He is at my right hand, that I may not be shaken. 26 Therefore my heart was glad and my tongue exulted; Moreover my flesh also will abide in hope; 27 Because Thou wilt not abandon my soul to Hades, Nor allow Thy Holy One to undergo decay. 28 Thou hast made known to me the ways of life; Thou wilt make me full of gladness with Thy presence.’ 29 ***Brethren, I may confidently say to you regarding the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. 30 And so, because he was a prophet, and knew that God had sworn to him with an oath to seat one of his descendants upon his throne, 31 he looked ahead and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that He was neither abandoned to Hades, nor did***

His flesh suffer decay. 32 This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses. 33 ***Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God,*** and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear.

34 For it was not David who ascended into heaven, but he himself says: ‘The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at My right hand, 35 Until I make Thine enemies a footstool for Thy feet.’ 36 Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ— this Jesus whom you crucified’[emphasis mine].

John Reisinger highlights this truth with the following words:

Further proof of this time factor can be seen in the words “while David was sleeping with the fathers.” This can only mean that Christ would sit on David’s throne at the *same time* that David was still “sleeping with the fathers,” or *before David’s resurrection*. This is why Peter deliberately mentioned that David is “both dead and buried and his sepulcher is with us unto this day.” Peter is saying, “The promise to David has been fulfilled in the exact manner and precise time (how and when) as it was prophesied to David.” The throne was to be established at the time of the resurrection and ascension of Christ, and it would happen “while David was sleeping with his fathers” awaiting his own resurrection (1 Chronicles 17:11 and Acts 13:35, 36 for the same time reference).¹²

1 Corinthians 15 clearly teaches that the *single* general resurrection occurs at the end of the NC age when the Lord Jesus Christ returns at His *one-stage* Second Coming. This section of Scripture teaches neither a two-stage return of Christ nor a future premillennial kingdom. As a result, advocates of these two teachings cannot legitimately appeal to the fifteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians 15 to find support for their eschatological constructs. When the Lord Jesus Christ returns at His *parousia*, He will resurrect and rescue His people, destroy all of His enemies, resurrect the wicked,

execute the Final Judgment, abolish death once and for all, and usher in the eternal state.

It is upon this basis that the Old Testament on no less than three occasions typologically equates David's throne with Yahweh's throne. Consider King David's testimony before the princes of Israel regarding his son Solomon in 1 Chronicles 28:5: "And of all my sons (for the LORD has given me many sons), **He has chosen my son Solomon to sit on the throne of the kingdom of the LORD over Israel**" [emphasis mine]. 1 Chronicles 29:23 also states, "Then Solomon sat on **the throne of the LORD as king** instead of David his father; and he prospered, and all Israel obeyed him" [emphasis mine]. Additionally, the Queen of Sheba declares to Solomon, "Blessed be the LORD your God who delighted in you, **setting you on His throne as king for the LORD your God**; because your God loved Israel establishing them forever, therefore He made you king over them, to do justice and righteousness" (2 Chronicles 9:8) [emphasis mine].

Endnotes

- 1 Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1979), 247.
- 2 Donald A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992; reprint 2005), 421.
- 3 All of this writer's Bible citations are from the NASB unless otherwise stated.
- 4 Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 247.
- 5 Carson & Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 417.
- 6 It is best to understand that Paul mentions the Corinthian practice of baptism for the dead in order to point out the inconsistency of the Corinthian denial of a future bodily resurrection, not to endorse or condone this practice.

- 7 Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. and trans. William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick William Danker [BAGD], 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 780.
- 8 An exhaustive contextual word study of *parousia* and other synonymous terms is beyond the scope of this paper. However, such a study should include the following terms and references: 1) *parousia* (Matthew 24:27-31, 24:37-39; 1 Thess 3:13, 4:15-17, 5:23; 2 Thess 2:1, 2:8; 2 Pet 3:4, 3:10-12; 1 Cor 15:22-26), 2) *apokalypsis* (1 Cor 1:7; 2 Thess 1:4-10; 1 Pet 1:7, 1:13, 4:13), 3) *epiphaneia* (1 Tim 6:14; 2 Thess 2:8; 2 Tim 4:1, 4:8; Titus 2:13), 4) *Day of the Lord* (2 Pet 3:10-12; 2 Thess 2:1-2; 1 Thess 4:15-5:10; Zeph 1:14-18; Isa 13:6-13; Joel 2:1-11; cf. Matt 24:27-31, Rev 6:12-17), and 5) *Day of Christ* (Phil 1:6, 1:10, 2:16; 1 Cor 1:8; 2 Cor 1:14). Special attention should be given to overlapping references where a few of these terms are clearly equated or used interchangeably (e.g. 2 Pet 3:10-12; 1 Cor 1:7-8; 2 Thess 2:1-8). Furthermore, the absence of any explicit reference to unbelievers, judgment, torment, punishment, glory, etc. does not justify understanding any of the above verses as a reference to a pretribulation rapture. *Such argumentation is from silence and extremely weak.*
- 9 Some argue that “all His saints” in 1 Thessalonians 3:13 refers to *angels* and not *believers*. While this is a possible interpretation of this phrase, it is more likely that Paul is referring to believers here, since this is how he primarily uses “saints” in his writings (cf. Rom 1:7, 8:27, 12:13, 15:25-26, 16:2, 16:15; 1 Cor 1:2, 6:1-2, 14:33, 16:1, 16:15; 2 Cor 1:1, etc.). Furthermore, even if 1 Thessalonians 3:13 is understood in this manner, “all his saints” would include *all believers* and *all angels*, since the word *saints* can carry the meaning of believers and/or angels.
- 10 Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 218.

- 11 Most premillennialists argue that the temporal adverb *eita* (meaning “then”) in the phrase “then *comes* the end” (1 Cor 15:24) signals that “the end” occurs after a literal, earthly millennium. Therefore, the crucial question regarding this particular word is whether it indicates that “the end” occurs at Christ’s *parousia* or after a literal, earthly millennium. However, this particular question can only be answered by the local context in which *eita* appears. Although *eita can* signal a long interval as Premillennialists claim, the context seems to argue that Christ’s *parousia* is the end. Recall that Death is destroyed in both 1 Corinthians 15:22-26 and 1 Corinthians 15:51-58. Also recall that Death is destroyed at “the end” (1 Cor 15:24). Furthermore, since the *parousia* is the event described in both 1 Corinthians 15:22-26 and 1 Corinthians 15:51-58, Christ’s *parousia* signals the end. Thus, the temporal adverb *eita* does not indicate a long interval.
- 12 John G. Reisinger, *Abraham’s Four Seeds: A Biblical Examination of the Presuppositions of Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism* (Frederick: New Covenant Media, 1998), 56. Some may attempt to defeat this argument by erecting a straw man – namely, that David’s throne and God’s throne cannot be equated in any real sense. It is obvious that David’s throne and God’s throne *cannot* be equated in any real sense. However, David’s throne *is* typologically analogous of God’s throne, because the Davidic monarch is typologically analogous of God Himself.

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