**1Corinthians**

**Expository sermons**

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**Paul and the church at Corinth** 1Corinthians 1:1-2
*(Scripture quotes from the New King James Version unless otherwise indicated)*

If you open a Bible or NT given to you by a member of the Gideons you will find a page headed, ‘Help with life and its problems’. Here you are directed to a passage of the Bible that will help if you are troubled by addictions, adultery, anxiety, etc. Many references are to the Psalms, but Paul’s letters to the Corinthians also features as a place to find help in relation to bitterness, death, relationships, sex, temptation, or weariness. First Corinthians is unique in the NT in that it shows a wide range of problems being faced by this infant church, a church established by the apostle Paul in a prosperous but pagan city. The church in our city is by no means ‘infant’, but it exists in a post-Christian, even pagan, society.

Sexual perversity and immorality was rife in Corinth; some of the converts were saved from such a background (6:9). We note that a Christian in our own city was recently sacked from his job as a professional sportsman for quoting the verse just referred to. Sexual immorality is becoming an increasing challenge to Christians living in a western city like ours, in which homosexual marriage was recently made legal, and adultery was effectively legalised in a no fault divorce bill back in the 1975.

In this letter we find extensive teaching on marriage and divorce as the apostles answers questions about marriage, divorce and virgins in chapter 7. If you have questions about divisions or spiritual gifts in the church, about the Lord’s Supper or about eating food sacrificed to idols you will find answers in this letter. If you have questions about the resurrection of Jesus or your own resurrection, the apostle gives extensive teaching in the penultimate chapter of this letter. From this letter we learn that the early church probably met on the first day of the week.

The apostle Paul established the church in Corinth, but it was not long before his authority in the church was challenged. The first problem he deals with in this letter is that of division, division in which he was sidelined and his authority undermined. Some it seems did not accept his claim to be an apostle. Paul vigorously defends his status as an apostle because, although not among the group when Jesus rose from the dead, he did see Jesus on the Damascus road (9:1). Paul begins almost all his letters declaring himself to be an apostle, after adding the word ‘called’ or by ‘the will of God’. In this letter he adds both qualifications; ‘called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God’ (1:1).

Authority is a huge problem in the church today. Preachers and pastors face the same undermining and rejection as did the apostle Paul. Leaders in the church today do not claim apostolic authority of course but they do, or they should, claim the authority of the Bible and members of the church should accept this authority. Preachers and pastors can also learn from the way the apostle deals with attacks upon his authority in the church. With these words of introduction let us look into this letter. But before doing so we will gather some background information about the city of Corinth and its people, about the coming of the apostle Paul to this city and about the circumstances in which he wrote this letter.

**1. Corinth and its people**

Corinth was the capital of the Roman province of Achaia, having been rebuilt by the Romans in 46BC. It was strategically situated above the narrow neck of land or isthmus that separates mainland Greece from its southern peninsula called Peloponnese. Sailing around this peninsula was dangerous so they hauled small ships across this 6km long isthmus on wheels, while the cargo of larger ships was unloaded and carried from one side to the other. Transport across this isthmus brought lots of business and prosperity to Corinth. It was Rome’s gateway to the east, a trading city and centre of commerce. Corinth was materially prosperous, a city proud of its intellectual and physical prowess. The Isthmian games were held here before the advent of the Olympic Games.

Initially Romans were settled in Corinth but later on Greeks returned and eventually it became home for people from many different places. Corinth was a very cosmopolitan city. The names of the converts in the church reflect a Roman background. The focus on wisdom and oratory that Paul encountered in Corinth was a mark of Greek culture. Corinth attracted traders and travellers, many of whom looked for prostitutes during their stay. They found plenty of prostitutes in the temple of Aphrodite which dominated the city of Corinth; pagan worship of this fertility goddess involved prostitution. With prostitution comes other evils like drunkenness, theft, corruption and extortion (6:10). Corinth’s reputation for gross sexual immorality gave rise to the term, ‘corinthianise’, meaning to engage in sexual immorality (6:9). Pervasive and perverse sexual immorality was a challenge to Christians living in this city, as we will see as we read this letter to the Corinthians.

**2. Coming of the apostle Paul**

Corinth attracted some Jews who established a small synagogue in this city, the synagogue which Paul attended when he came to Corinth on his second missionary journey (Acts 18:4). It was probably there that he met a fellow Jew by the name of Aquila. Aquila and his wife Priscilla (or Prisca) had recently come to Corinth from Rome. They were expelled from Rome, like all Jews, by Emperor Claudius in AD49. The historian Suetonius writes of an expulsion edict being given because the Jews in Rome were rioting ‘at the instigation of Chrestus’. It is thought that ‘Chrestus’ was ‘Christos’ or Christ. We know from reading the book of Acts how ready the Jews were to riot when the gospel of Jesus Christ was preached. Paul stayed with Aquila and Priscilla because not only were they fellow Jews, but they shared the same trade, namely tentmakers or leather workers.

Silas and Timothy later joined Paul in Corinth. It seems that they brought good news as well as funds from the churches in Macedonia; with this support Paul could leave tent making to preach full time. As a missionary, Paul was careful not to burden people by asking for a preaching or lecture fee- a common practice in that day (9:15,18). The other apostles did not have to work to support themselves (9:6). Paul’s decision not to assert his rights was later used against him. Paul did accept support and gifts from established churches and taught that ruling elders should be supported by their congregation (9:9, 1Tim 5:18). There are circumstances where ministers of the gospel become tentmakers, but this is not the norm according to the Bible.

The Jews started opposing Paul and blaspheming- either Paul’s name or the Lord’s name (Acts 18:6); judging by Paul’s reaction it was probably the latter. Paul could not listen to blasphemy regarding the name of Jesus, so he left, after ritually shaking his coat against them. Paul walked out of the synagogue and went next door to the house of a God-fearer, and now Christian, called Justus, or Titius Justus, or Gaius Titius Justus (Acts 18:7, Rom 16:23); he must have believed after hearing Paul preaching in the synagogue. It was not long before others joined the meeting in his house.

When Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, joined this ‘house-church’ it must have sent shock waves through the synagogue- but delight to Paul and the church. Crispus believed on the Lord with all his household, was baptized and later became a leader in the church (1:14, Acts 18:8). The new ruler of the synagogue was Sosthenes, who also became a Christian, if this is the Sosthenes that Paul acknowledges as a brother, and present with him when he wrote this letter (1:1 cf. Acts 18:17). These are the only Jewish names associated with this church, apart from Priscilla and Aquila. Most converts appear to have come from a class of God-fearing pagans, people attracted to the monotheism and morality of the Jews but not ready to undergo circumcision. Not many were nobles or intellectuals; they were mostly freed slaves, men and women who came to this city to make money (1:26-28).

Remembering what happened in other places where he preached, Paul must have been waiting for the Jews to launch a violent attack against him. And after what had happened before, he could not be confident that the Roman authorities would protect him. Paul must have felt vulnerable, even afraid. If you or I are attacked by a person or a gang, we go to the police and trust we will receive justice. This was not the case for Paul; nor is it the case for many fellow Christians in the world today. They dare not go to the police if they are attacked, or if their church is burnt down, because the authorities hate Christians. The best they can hope for is that the police will turn a blind eye and not arrest them for disturbing the peace.

While in Corinth the Lord in his mercy spoke to Paul in a night vision (Acts 18:9). This was not the first vision of the risen Jesus that Paul had been given. At his conversion he saw a blinding light and heard the risen Jesus speak to him. He had also had a night vision from the Lord when he was called into Macedonia (Acts 16:9-10). Paul was ministering according to the God’s call to bear His name to the Gentiles, but a more specific call to stay in Corinth was reassuring. Paul did not doubt God’s presence with him here in Corinth but hearing the Lord’s voice in this vision strengthened him greatly. The Lord who knows and determines the future, revealed some of that future to Paul, and the part he was to play in that future. ‘Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent’. The Lord told him not to be afraid because, ‘I am with you’ (Acts 18: 9, 10). Each of these commands came with a promise:

Do not be afraid/ I am with you

Keeping on speaking/ No one is going to harm you

Do not be silent/I have many people in this city

‘For I have many people in this city’ (Acts 18:11). The Lord had his elect in the city of Corinth in the first century- and that despite the wickedness of this city. He was calling Paul to bring the gospel to these people because, ‘Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God’ (Rom 10:17). Not all would be saved- just the elect. Paul did not know who these were so he preached to as many people as he could. He preached for a year and a half and the Lord blessed the word preached, and ‘As many as were appointed to eternal life believed’ (Acts 13:48).

As expected however, Jews from outside eventually came and brought Paul before the court of Gallio, the Roman proconsul of Achaia. The case was dismissed, but Paul left Corinth shortly afterwards. He made his way Ephesus and back to Jerusalem where he wanted to keep the Passover. After Paul left Corinth, Apollos came and continued the work there (Acts 18:27, 28). His message was the same but his preaching different to that of the apostle Paul. It is apparent that the apostle Peter also spent some time in Corinth (1:12).

**3. Circumstances of this letter**

Paul made his way back to Ephesus on his third missionary journey and stayed there three years (Acts 20:31). He wrote a letter to the church in Corinth concerning sexual immorality in the church, a letter which was misunderstood and is unknown today (5:9). During this time he received news from Chloe’s household about divisions in the church at Corinth (1:11), and then a letter brought by Stephanus and friends (16:17); in this correspondence the church asked a number of questions which Paul carefully and prayerfully answered in this letter called 1Corinthians. He was also forced to defend his credentials as an apostle of Jesus Christ. This letter was probably written from Ephesus in AD 55, just five years after Paul established the church in Corinth.

In this letter the apostle Paul addresses numerous and varied problems in the church at Corinth, problems which we continue to face in the church today. Yet the letter is by no means full of negativity, or about a preacher overcome with depression. As Derek Prime writes, ‘the thing to watch for is the way in which Paul consistently relates every subject and problem to the centrality of the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ’. Paul closes his penultimate chapter saying, ‘Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labour is not in vain in the Lord’ (15:58).

**God calls and confirms** 1Corinthians 1:1-9

Many churches, like us, have resumed worship in their church building but others continue with online services. I am sure that most sermons preached today will make mention of the coronavirus pandemic. Our lives and our worship have been severely disrupted by this deadly virus. People talk about the world being turned upside down, and that is just a few months. Almost two thousand years ago the apostle Paul was accused of turning the world upside down (Acts 17:6); I like to think of him turning the world right side up! All Paul did was go from city to city preaching the gospel or good news of Jesus Christ.

The gospel is ‘the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek, for in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith’ (Rom 1:16, 17). The gospel of Jesus Christ has the power to change hearts, to make us alive unto Christ and dead unto sin. The coronavirus has power to make us sick and even kill us but Jesus, and only Jesus, has power to make us alive. May the Lord use this pandemic to bring many to himself, to call his elect into the salvation and righteousness found only in Jesus Christ our Lord?

The older we get the more we notice how the world has changed, even in our lifetime, and even before the coronavirus pandemic. If we go back many generations, back to the city of Corinth in Paul’s day, we see huge changes in architecture, communications, and daily life; you can see the relics of this city if you visit Greece. The apostle Paul was not concerned about architecture or communications; he was concerned about the people and the way they were living. If we look at the people in our city and the way they are living we see a remarkable similarity. It is as if the apostle is writing to us, so be wise and listen to this man who was called by Jesus to ‘preach the gospel , not with human wisdom lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power (1:17 NIV).

In the introductory words of this letter to the Corinthian church we will look at Paul’s call to be an apostle of Jesus Christ, at the church of God at Corinth, and at their call into the fellowship of Jesus Christ our Lord.

**1. Called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ**

In this letter, which was he probably wrote from Ephesus in AD55, the apostle Paul follows the standard format of letters of his day. He begins by introducing himself; the letter is from Paul to the church at Corinth. Paul was known to this church, having founded it back in AD50 or thereabouts. But his authority within the church did not stem from him being the founder of the church; his authority comes from God himself. Reading on in this letter we will see that Paul’s authority was being questioned; in fact, we find this here in the first chapter. So in introducing himself, Paul reminds the church of his credentials as an apostle of Jesus Christ.

Firstly, Paul was called to be ‘an apostle of Jesus Christ’. He was not self-appointed or appointed by men, but was called by God to be an apostle (1:1, Gal 1:1). Paul, who was born a Jew called Saul, was born again of the Spirit of God, and at his new birth was called by God to bear His name to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15). Paul never doubted this divine call. Having seen the risen Jesus in a powerful vision, he qualified as an apostle and was accepted as such by the other apostles; ‘apostle’ means ‘sent one’.

Secondly, Paul writes that he was an apostle, ‘by the will of God’ (1:1). He wrote to the church at Ephesus and at Colossae giving the same qualification. Paul knew Jesus to be the Son of God. The voice he heard on the Damascus road was that of Jesus the Son of God, risen from the dead. In a vision he had while at Corinth, ‘the Lord spoke to Paul’ (Acts 18:9). Paul was in no doubt regarding the will of God, so the church at Corinth should have no doubts either. It is important for a missionary or preacher of the gospel to be called by God and for the church to recognise this call. They may not have a vision like that given to Paul but they must know the inner call of the Holy Spirit, confirmed by the elders of the church.

Not all believers are called to be set apart as preachers of the gospel. All have gifts from the Holy Spirit but not all have the gift, or the calling to preach (12:4-11). Paul concludes his greeting referring to Sosthenes as a brother in Christ (1:1). He was not a blood-brother or simply a fellow human being but a fellow believer in Jesus Christ. The term ‘brethren’ (1:10) similarly refers to fellow believers, to men and women in the church of God.

**2. Church of God at Corinth**

The word translated ‘church’ is the Greek word ‘*ekklesia*’, which simply means ‘an assembly of people’. But just as Paul particularises his use of the word ‘brother’, so he particularises his use of this word ‘*ekklesia*’ or church. It refers to the assembly of Christians in a local congregation, or sometimes to the universal body of believers. Paul sends his letter to the church at Corinth but includes, ‘all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours’ (1:2). There was one church at Corinth, and as we will see. Paul did his utmost to keep it as one or at least united. Paul addresses specific problems in this church at Corinth but recognises that churches in other places may well face similar problems, even churches today.

The church or body of believers at Corinth was not the church of Saint Paul or Saint Peter; it was the church of God (1:2). This church, as with any true church including ours, belongs to God. Too often Christians who establish a church regard it as theirs rather than God’s. Some in the church at Corinth regarded the church as belonging to Paul but he rejected such thinking; it was the church of God at Corinth.

The church is the assembly of God’s people or believers, of people ‘called to be saints’, people who are ‘sanctified in Christ Jesus’ (1:2). The words ‘saint’ and ‘sanctified’ are based on the Greek word ‘*haggios*’ meaning ‘holy’. ‘Called to be saints’ means called to be holy. ‘Sanctified’ means being made holy. Jesus makes us holy but we are also being made holy by his Spirit; sometimes called positional holiness and progressive holiness. ‘Holy’ means to be set apart, to be consecrated or dedicated to God. Paul Barnet says that holiness is the theme of this letter: ‘God through his apostles, is calling us to a life of holiness. That, in a nutshell, is the message of Paul to the Corinthians, and to us’.

The apostle will insist that those who belong to God cannot also belong to Satan or the world. ‘Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you’, so how can you take what belongs to the Lord and unite with a prostitute (6:19). ‘You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons’ (10:21). Believers cannot go on living in sinful ways because, ‘the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God’ (6:9). Paul urges members of the church to, ‘Imitate me, even as I imitate Christ’ (4:14, 11:1). This is a challenge to any preacher of the gospel, and indeed to any follower of Christ living in this sinful world.

The apostle’s greeting ends with a prayer or doxology: ‘Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ’ (1:3). Grace is the undeserved favour of God, the free gift of salvation in the cross of Jesus Christ. Our redemption was planned by God and purchased by Christ. Grace is at the heart of the gospel from beginning to end. We are called by grace and we are kept by grace. We are saved by grace and we are sanctified by grace. Because of God’s grace we have peace, peace with God and peace with one another (Rom 5:1). This is why it is said, ‘no God, no peace’. Life without the grace of God, Father and Son, is life without peace and without hope in this world. Corinth was a city of prosperity and prostitutes but not peace, not until they heard the good news of Jesus Christ our Lord.

**3. Called into the fellowship of Christ**

After greeting the church and calling for God’s grace and peace to be upon them, as he does in all his letters, Paul starts his letter proper with a word of thanks to God for the souls whom the Lord has saved (1:4). Many in the church at Corinth were critical of Paul, and he will have some strong words to say to them, yet he finds something praiseworthy in them as he begins this letter. He remembers the sinful life from which the Lord in his grace delivered them. They were still not mature in the faith but they were in the faith and precious to the Lord, and hence to Paul.

In thanking God for the grace given them Paul reminds them of the rich blessings they received through Jesus when they believed in him. He refers to enrichment in knowledge and speech (1:5). Knowledge and speech were prized among the Greeks but in Christ their minds and their speech were transformed (2:16, Rom 12:2). Their search for knowledge and wisdom was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, ‘the power of God and the wisdom of God’ (1:24). Our knowledge of the world in which we live is vast and increasing by the day, but we cannot say the same about wisdom. Pride in our knowledge and our science has been shaken of late; we were going to change the climate but now find we cannot even control a little virus!

The apostle Paul was not impressed by worldly knowledge and eloquent speeches. What he looked for was evidence of the Spirit of Christ dwelling in the hearts of men and women. He saw and/or heard things that confirmed this reality in the believers at Corinth (1:6). They were living witnesses to the gospel of Jesus Christ, confirming the gospel in their transformed speech and conduct. From lives driven by sex, drugs and corruption, these believers came under power and control of the Holy Spirit. It was a dramatic change, although not all were continuing as they should. God had given gifts, spiritual gifts, to be used in the building up of the church (12:7, Eph 4:12). They had misunderstandings regarding these spiritual gifts, gifts that were fundamental to the operation and growth of the church. Changed lives were evidence of changed hearts. Our life, our words and our works, are testimony to the grace that we have received in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. We must know the gift of God’s grace if we are to share it with others.

The message of the gospel includes the promise of the Lord’s return. We must be attentive to the way we live in this world but at the same time remember the coming day of the Lord. We are to live with faith, hope and love (13:13); hope in the Lord’s return and the resurrection. We must endure to the end, blameless in Christ (1:8). The grace of God by which we are saved continues as grace that keeps us to the end. God is faithful. Those whom he predestined he also calls, and those whom he calls he justifies, and those whom he justifies he glorifies (Rom 8:29). This is the assurance the apostle gives the believers in Corinth, even as he reprimands them for various sins that continued or crept into their lives, sins that were threatening their fellowship and their witness.

God, who is faithful, called the Corinthian believes, as he called us, ‘into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord’ (1:9). Note that in each of these first nine verses the apostle uses the name of Jesus Christ; here in verse 9 it is, ‘His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord’. God did not call you to a prosperous, trouble-free life in this world. Too many Christians continue living the individualistic, self- centred life they lived before they were saved. God calls us into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ. The apostle John says the same things: ‘Truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ’ (1John 1:3). Christ is the head of the church and all members must be connected to the head (Eph 4:15, 16). In being connected to the same head we are necessarily connected to one another.

The church is the assembly of saints, of men and women saved by the grace of God, through faith in Jesus Christ. This church exists to the glory of God on earth and in heaven. This is why God is faithful in spite of our many failures (10:13). God makes a covenant with us in the blood of Jesus Christ and he is faithful to this covenant, just as he was faithful to his people under the old covenant (Deut 7:9). Called by God and kept by God- this is the assurance you and I have as believers in Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Quarrels and divisions in the church** 1Corinthians 1:10-17

At a recent conference I met a former seminary student. He was telling me about a new church in which he was ministering; in fact, about a new denomination he had started. I was surprised to hear that this denomination was based not far from the church to which he formerly belonged. I was disappointed to hear of his leaving this established Reformed church. More recently, I learned that he left his former church because the Presbytery disciplined him over some matter. So much for church discipline! This is the state of affairs in the church today. Discipline intended to lead to repentance and restoration, simply leads to division in the church. Even disagreement with a decision of the church court, or with something said from the pulpit or over a cup of tea leads to dissension and division. Some Christians end up in a perfect church- but they are the only member!

I often wonder what the apostle Paul would say to the church today with all its divisions. We do not have to wonder what he said to the church at Corinth when divisions arose there. We are going to listen to what he said now. Our subheadings will be: plea for unity, parties in the church, place of baptism, and preach the gospel.

**1. Plea for unity**

After greeting the church of God at Corinth, and then thanking God for His grace shown towards them in Jesus Christ, the apostle takes up a matter that was brought to his notice by those of Chloe’s household (1:11). Chloe was probably an early convert in the church at Corinth; her name suggests she was a God-fearer rather than a Jew before her conversion. Paul was informed that there were quarrels among members of this church. But before addressing the nature of these divisions he pleads for unity.

Paul has already explained that it is the church of God, an assembly or body of believers, not a political or social institution. He calls the members ‘brethren’; no heads or leaders are named because Christ is the head of the church. He pleads, ‘by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ’, or on behalf of Christ (1:10). Members of the church who leave when disciplined, or when they do not get their own way, should stop to consider the name of Christ before they leave. Are they honouring or dishonouring the name of Christ?

All believers are joined to the head of the body, who is Christ, and all have been given the Holy Spirit, so all should be of one mind, the mind of Christ (2:16). Paul pleads for them to be joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. If we all have the mind of Christ we should all be thinking the same thoughts and making the same judgments. We are not of the same mind because of sin, because our hearts are not yet transformed (Rom 12:2). In the next verse of Romans 12, Paul exhorts us not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought but to think soberly (Rom 12:3). The more we think upon Christ, and on things above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God, the more sober and the less selfish our thoughts will be (Col 3:1,12, Phil 4:8).

When our thoughts are of Christ and his grace towards us, we will be more agreeable and less inclined to disagree or dissent from decisions made; we will not be so ready to separate from the fellowship of believers. ‘If it is possible, as much as it depends on you, live peaceably with all men’ (Rom 12:19). If we are to live at peace with outsiders, as Paul is referring to here, how much more should we be living at peace with brothers and sisters in Christ. Tragically, divisions within the church are often more bitter that those with outsiders, just as divisions in a family are more bitter than divisions with friends. Reflecting on a father who took back a teenage child after she falsely accused him before the authorities, and reflecting on a wife who took back her husband more than once after his philandering, I thank God for the grace he gave to these believers.

A church that split from ours many years ago with great bitterness, recently wrote to apologise for things said and done at the time- another triumph of grace. Divisions often involve bitterness and too often this bitterness continues, to the detriment of the church and to the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul probably wrote this letter as soon as he heard of the divisions in the church at Corinth. The yeast of division must be removed as quickly as possible.

**2. Parties in the church**

In the realm of government we like party politics and fear government by one party or by a dictator. In the church however, we try to avoid party politics. We look for, and we have, a gracious and benevolent King in the Lord Jesus Christ. We call him a shepherd-king because he protects and provides for his sheep. Yet some in the church do not trust the Lord to protect and provide for them. They lower their eyes to look for men who will give them what they want. ‘What causes fights and quarrels among you’ asks James, and he answers, ‘Your desires for pleasure. You lust and do not have’ (James 4:1, 2). This lust can be for money, for power, for property, or for pleasures, as James says.

Teachers approving of sexual immorality were popular with some in the church at Corinth (5:2). But the divisions reported to Paul by some from Chloe’s household were about personalities, maybe about their preaching style; they were not about doctrine. It is the same today; most divisions in the church are about personalities rather than doctrine.

The apostle Paul founded this church in Corinth but after eighteen months he left and then Apollos came. After Priscilla and Aquila ‘explained to him the way of God more accurately, he vigorously refuted the Jews, showing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ’ (Acts 18:26-28). Paul was not an eloquent speaker (2:1). The Greeks loved great orators so were attracted to a man like Apollos. Then there was Cephas or Peter, the apostle to the Jews. If he had not visited Corinth they had somehow heard about him. Church members from a Jewish background may have liked Peter’s ‘Jewishness’ more than Paul’s. Something about each of these preachers attracted a certain party within the church - not that these men themselves encouraged such party politics, certainly not Paul.

There was another party saying, ‘I am of Christ’ (1:12). It would seem that they had a right mind, although Paul does not approve of this party any more than the others. In am reminded of the Christian who, after arguing with a fellow Christian concluded by saying, ‘You do it your way and I’ll do it God’s way’! Was this group saying, ‘You follow Paul or Apollos, and we will follow Christ’?

**3. The place of baptism**

‘One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, through all and in you all’ is what Paul writes when urging the church at Ephesus to be united in the Spirit (Eph 4:5,6). To the Corinthians he rhetorically asks, ‘Is Christ divided?’ and then points to the foolishness of their quarrelling by asking, ‘Was Paul crucified for you?’ (1:13). There is only one Saviour and Lord, and that is Jesus Christ. There can be no church of St. Paul, or church of St. Peter, no church of Mary or Thomas or any other human being. It is the ‘church of God which is in Corinth’ (1:2).

The mention of baptism - ‘Were you baptized in the name of Paul?’- points to one of the contentions in this church. Again it is a rhetorical question with ‘No’ as the obvious answer. They were all baptized in the same way, in the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Mat 28:19). We referred to the different preaching styles of these men but the question of who baptized who seems to have become the main point of contention. Some people demand to be baptized by the archbishop, and then frame their baptismal certificate for all to see.

A church that is more worldly than spiritual, will emphasise baptism, making it a ceremony rather than a sacrament. Baptism is scriptural but must not replace the gospel as the way of salvation; the Roman Catholic Church is a case in point. But evangelists and preachers can fall into this error also. An evangelist in India told me about the hundreds of villagers he had baptized. When I asked about the church they had joined and the teaching they were getting he said this was not his concern. Jesus sends us into the world to preach the gospel and make disciples, and to teach them the Bible. Yes, he also tells us to baptize but this was not the focus of Paul’s ministry so should not be our focus.

Paul looks back with thanks to God that he did not baptize many in Corinth. He recalls baptizing Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and Gaius, the man who gave his house as a meeting place (1:14: Acts 18:7,8). With further thought he remembers baptizing Stephanus and his household (1:16). The ‘household’ would have included his wife and children, and maybe servants. This Stephanus faithfully ministered within this church. He came with Fortunatus and Achaicus to visit Paul when he was at Ephesus (16:15-18). We cannot imagine these men being caught up in the party politics of the church; more likely they endorsed the report from members of Chloe’s household.

**4. Preach the gospel**

The apostle Paul clearly understood his divine calling through Ananias, a disciple at Damascus. The Lord called Paul to, ‘carry His name before the Gentiles, kings and the children of Israel’ (Acts 9:15) - no mention of baptizing in his call. Paul assured the church at Corinth that Christ did not send him to baptize but to preach the gospel (1:17). ‘How shall they hear without a preacher?’ he writes in his letter to the Romans (Rom 10:14, 17). It is not baptism that saves souls, but the preached word that the Lord uses to regenerate hearts dead in trespasses and sins. Preaching the gospel remains central to the ministry of the church today, the ministry of making disciples of all nations to the glory of God.

Paul hints at his method of preaching when he writes, ‘not with words of eloquent wisdom’ (1:17 ESV). Paul was a learned man but not a trained orator. He did not set out to convince people with clever words, with jokes, with gesticulations or voice manipulation. Such things draw attention to the speaker rather than the message. Some people are so mesmerised by the messenger that they don’t even hear the message. In Paul’s case, no one was mesmerised by the messenger, but they were gripped by the message as he resolved to preach nothing but the cross of Christ, and that with words from the heart (1:17, 2:1, 2).

‘A reliance on rhetoric would cause men to trust in men, the very antithesis of what the preaching of the cross is meant to effect’ (Morris). Paul was not in a competition with orators for the praise of men. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, he focussed on men’s hearts, knowing that only the Spirit could convict and convert hearts bound by sin (2:4). The Lord used preaching that was unimpressive by human standards to do what no human wisdom or rhetoric could do, namely lead men and women to repent of their sin and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Do you know the power of the gospel that changed hearts and lives in the city of Corinth? May the Lord be pleased to bless the preaching of his word in our city in our day?

**Christ the wisdom and power of God** 1Corinthians 1:18-25

A ‘Four Corners’ program on ABC television in 2011 led to a Federal Government minister banning live cattle exports to Indonesia. Almost ten years later, our Federal Court has ruled the decision of this minister to be reckless and, ‘a wrongful exercise of lawful authority’ - the word in the ruling is ‘misfeasance’. For a time we were concerned at what the next episode of this TV program would reveal, fearing another sudden change in Government policy.

Years ago I started watching another TV program called ‘Q&A’, again on the ABC. This program, which to my dismay is still being aired, purports to bring us an informed and wise opinion on any and every issue in our society; rarely is a true Christian invited onto the program. What has not been continued is the televising of a church service in Sunday morning; some of us are old enough to remember such a program! It seems today’s wisdom is being gleaned from TV shows, social media, and street protests.

In Corinth the situation was not that different. The Greeks listened to their philosophers and their politicians; in fact to anyone who could give a rousing speech and debate his opponents. What these men believed was not important; it was their rhetoric and oratory that was admired. I find it interesting that in the USA, presidential candidates engage in speeches and debates tearing down their fellow party members, before choosing a candidate and coming together to tear down their ‘true’ opponents in the other party. Everything they said about their in-party opponents is forgotten- was it ever true we might ask!

The wisdom of God is not mixed with jealousy, self-seeking, lies and demonic powers (James 3:14-16). It is wisdom from above, heavenly wisdom made available to us in the Bible and the gospel of Jesus Christ. Moreover, this gospel, this message of the cross of Jesus Christ and him crucified, is a powerful word, so powerful that it can change our hearts. Worldly wisdom has no such power despite all the efforts at ‘social engineering’, ‘brainwashing’ and relentless pressure to accept ‘majority opinion’.

While preaching in Corinth, the apostle Paul resolved not to join in party politics in society or in the church. He was not drawn into competing with the great orators or philosophers in the city. His message, the message of Christ crucified, was simple and powerful. It may have sounded foolish ‘to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God’ (1:18). Attempting to make the gospel acceptable to the people of Corinth would have robbed it of its power to save. To what extent has the gospel been robbed of its power in our city as preachers bend over backwards to be politically correct and not offend anyone?

**1. To the Greeks foolishness**

The Greeks ruled the ancient world for around three centuries before the rise of the Romans, who conquered Athens in 146BC. Corinth was rebuilt as a Roman colony in 46 BC. It was a bustling hub of worldwide commerce, degraded culture and idolatry when Paul first visited in AD 49/50. The nearby city of Athens was more of a centre for language and literature, science and philosophy. Philosophers like Socrates and Plato made Athens their home. Aristotle made Athens his home, along with Epicurus and Zeno, the men whose philosophies were followed by many in the ancient world - Epicurus was the founder of Epicureanism and Zeno the founder of Stoicism. Paul came across exponents of these rival philosophies when he went to the ‘Agora’ or market place in Athens on his second mission (Acts 17:18). He was in Athens before going to Corinth.

These philosophers had no background in the Scriptures of the Jews; unlike Paul who could quote an ancient prophet called Isaiah. Isaiah said that the wisdom of wise men shall perish as God brings their understanding to nothing (Isa 29:14). God did just that with the wisdom of the Greeks; he brought it to nothing. Greek and Roman rule came to an end long ago. The philosophies of the Greeks came out of their own minds, and their studies of the natural world. Study of the natural world should have pointed them to the God of creation, whose power and majesty are revealed in the creation. But, like many today, they chose to be blind. Professing to be wise they became fools (Rom 1:22). They worshipped created things rather than the creator, as Paul observed when he was in Athens (Acts 17:16). If you think philosophical and scientific people would have nothing to do with idols, think again. Philosophers and scientists can be quite superstitious, and in their superstition turn to idols- I have seen a scientist, a vet no less, worshipping a cow!

The people of Athens ‘spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or hear some new thing’ (Acts 17:21). They were eager to spruik their philosophies, as well as listen to the ideas of others. They were eager to listen to Paul, until he started talking about the resurrection and divine judgment. Aristides said of Corinth that on every street corner one met a so-called wise man who had his own solutions to the world’s problems. Paul refers to ‘the disputer or debater of this age’ (1:20). When I was a student in this city, the Domain was a place where people would go on Sunday afternoon to listen to whoever came along with their ‘soapbox’. Communists, Maoists, Socialists, Atheists, Feminists, Hedonists and Hare Krishna’s, as well as Christians, would stand on their soapbox and start talking. Some would listen and some would heckle the speaker on the soapbox. There were philosophies and religions for all.

I do not know where the public square is in our city today. Some think it is the television programs already referred to, or the ‘platforms’ of social media. What I do know is that we do not enjoy such freedoms in today’s world of politically correctness, where any mention of the name, ‘Jesus’ will get you expelled from such forums. Religion, we are told, has no place in the public square, as if humanism and worshipping created things is not a religious belief system. All human philosophies are about reaching God or achieving salvation by human effort, either physical or mental or both. The Greeks attempted to find God and know him by climbing a ladder called ‘philosophy’ or ‘knowledge’. ‘But they found no one there but themselves, no matter how high they climbed’, writes Paul Barnett. Such people never find God for he hides himself from them (Mat 11:25-27, Ps 89:46). “It is only as God reaches down in ‘the word of the cross’ and offers forgiveness of sins, that his hidden identity is at last revealed”.

Epicurean philosophy regarded the world as the result of the random motion and combination of atomic particles- basic materialism. They said that, ‘whatever gods there may be’ they took no interest in man, so man takes no interest in the gods. They are, ‘eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die’ people. For Stoics, man must know his place in the natural order; universal Reason is god. The chief end of life is being master of one’s own destiny. The Stoic tried to be indifferent to pain or pleasure. Stoics try to be morally upright and dutiful; they are also very proud men and women.

The Christian life is nothing like that of the Epicurean or the Stoic. For the true Christian, the chief end of man is the glory of God: ‘Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever’ (Westminster Shorter Catechism Q 1). Epicurean and Stoic philosophies are in essence humanistic philosophies, philosophies that deny the existence or involvement of God in this world. Ignoring the revealed wisdom of God leaves man to search nature and his own mind for wisdom.

**2. To the Jews a stumbling stone**

While the Greeks were blinded by intellectual pride and arrogance in their search for wisdom- ‘Greeks seek after wisdom’ - the Jews were blinded to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ because of their demand for a sign (1:20, 22). In referring to ‘the scribe’, Paul was referring to the Jew. The Jews had the Scriptures. They had the wisdom of God, although not revealed as yet in its fullness. In their blindness they thought that the promised Messiah would be a political deliverer. They welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem as their King, thinking he would lead them in throwing off the yoke of the Romans. Listening to their proud and jealous spiritual leaders instead of Jesus, they stumbled on the very rock of their salvation, on Jesus Christ himself. The Jews continued to stumble at the cross of Christ, and still stumble today. They continue to look for a political deliver, overlooking the One who delivers from death itself.

In their pride the Jews kept asking Jesus for a sign to verify his words and his authority (Matt 12:38, Mark 8:11). Their pride blinded them to the miraculous signs that Jesus was performing in their presence, and to the fulfilment of the very Scriptures that they were teaching. How could the Jews not have seen prophecy after prophecy fulfilled in Jesus Christ of Nazareth? Such blindness seems amazing to us who believe, but let us not become proud like them. There are many in the church today who are blind to the very truths of the Scriptures they teach! Where does the Bible teach the veneration of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and other church-declared ‘saints’? In this very chapter the apostle Paul empathically rejects any personal veneration saying, ‘Was Paul crucified?’, and the apostle Peter would have said the exact same thing. In this very chapter the apostle Paul rejects the saving power of baptism but many churches teach the opposite. The Jews, as we know, were teaching the saving power of circumcision and the law, even as they rejected the saving power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

**3. Message of the cross**

The world of Paul’s day was searching for wisdom, which is not the same as truth. As our Western world moves away from the teaching of the Bible, the question about how we should live is again being asked. Many are adopting a way of life that is not necessarily based on truth. Truth has become relative rather than absolute, personal rather than an absolute for all humanity. Like the Roman governor, Pilate, who asked Jesus, ‘What is truth?’ (John 18:38), they are not ready to listen to this man who taught with divine authority.

I remember when science was regarded as a body of truth but this is no longer the case. Truth is no longer objective but is what the majority of ‘experts’ say it is. A hundred and fifty years ago the ‘experts’ started telling us that everything that exists evolved from a single cell or blob of protein, and that the world came about with a ‘big bang’. Absolute truth is rejected by philosophers because it means their searching is over. This philosophy can be found in the study of science, and of theology. I remember a theologian saying theology was like working on a puzzle, and he still had pieces to put into place in that puzzle. I suggested he hurry up because he was over seventy!

How wonderful that in the Bible we find wisdom from the mind of the infinite, omnipotent and omniscient God. How wonderful that we find the power of God, not only in the creation but also in redemption. We learn about the incarnation, the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Jesus said, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life’. If you know Jesus you know the truth; your search for truth is over. This in effect, is what Paul told the philosophers in Athens when he said, ‘The one whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you’ (Acts 17:23) - but they did not want to know ‘the One appointed by God to judge the world in righteousness’ (Acts 17:31).

In speaking to Gentiles in Athens, and earlier in Lystra, Paul spoke of God as the one who made the world and everything in it (Acts 14:15, 17:24). This was part and parcel of the wisdom of God that he writes of here in 1 Corinthians, although his focus is on the cross, on Christ crucified. The Greeks saw the cross, the cross and resurrection of Christ, as foolishness (1:23). The Epicureans rejected anything supernatural. Materialists will endeavour with all their human wisdom to explain away the resurrection. They must reject God in order to avoid his judgment.

In the wisdom of God the gospel is not a philosophy arrived at by men or a truth discovered by men. It is a truth revealed by God to those whom he has called to receive it. Yes, it is a truth revealed in the Bible and available to anyone who will humbly repent of their sin and believe in Jesus. But no ‘son of Adam’ will do this apart from the call of God. The gospel is the greatest power in the world. It has the power to change hearts and change lives, and in this way to change families and change societies. You may have seen this power in your own life, your own family, your own society.

Societies are different and people are different, but the gospel is the same and has the same power to change lives today as it did in Corinth almost two thousand years ago. Educated men continue to call the gospel foolish and irrelevant to modern man. At the same time they try to ban the Bible, with some even calling it child abuse material. But the apostle Paul says, ‘the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men’ (1:25). History, both ancient and modern, and our own hearts, tell us that the apostle of Jesus Christ was right.

**God calls the world’s ‘nobodies’** 1Corinthians 1:26-31

On our recent holiday we ventured into a part of Australia explored by Hume and Hovell in 1824. At school I was taught about these explorers who travelled from Sydney (Appin) to Melbourne (Geelong). Hume’s name is remembered in the Hume Highway but Hovell has not be remembered in any place that I know! These explorers took five convicts with them on this expedition. I learnt that one of these, Henry Angel, was given his freedom and took up a large holding of land, where he is still remembered today. I am not here to tell you about our holiday but to remind you that just two hundred years ago our society was different to what it is today. We no longer have convicts labouring like slaves to build roads and bridges. At that time society included soldiers, free settlers, convicts and the indigenous people. In Paul’s day Corinthian society had various classes of people. There were Roman citizens, mostly military men, a learned class of Greeks, a business class and a huge class of servants or slaves. Slaves could come from any race or religion. Prisoners of war were made slaves. Poor people might sell their children or themselves as slaves. Rich people boasted in the number of slaves they kept. With hard work, or with the help of a benefactor, slaves could be freed. So there was a class of freed slaves in Corinth.

How did the gospel of Jesus Christ impact this cosmopolitan, but class conscious society? Which group were the first to accept the gospel preached by the apostle Paul? Missionaries are still trying to reach the upper classes in India, the Brahmins, with the gospel. Most believers come from the so-called ‘untouchable’ class, or from a tribal background. In Corinth, the first to believe were mostly from the lower classes of society, people who were despised and rejected by the elites; they were ‘nobodies’ in this society. Believing in the gospel, they became a new creation in Christ Jesus (2Cor 5:17). They became ‘somebodies’ and precious in the eyes of the God. In dealing with the various issues brought to his notice by members of Chloe’s household, and in a letter brought by Stephanus, Fortunatus, and Achaicus, Paul gives us a glimpse into the backgrounds of the men and women who made up the church in Corinth. Our first subheading is, ‘Church and society contrasted’, our second, ‘In Christ’ and our third, ‘All glory to God’.

**1. Church and society contrasted**

Paul has already addressed divisions in the church based on personalities (1:12). Some of this may have included a Jew-Gentile divide. Divisions in society were no doubt brought into the church, although from what we read here in verse 26, most converts were from the lower classes of society. Paul writes of not many wise ‘according to the flesh’ or in the eyes of men, not many being mighty or powerful, and not many being noble or high-born. We have been told how the Greeks sought after wisdom, or education. They were the class of intellectuals, of philosophers and their followers. We still have philosophers but it is scientists who are put on a pedestal in our society. Sadly, some are found to be frauds after the world in its wisdom honours them. When will Charles Darwin be discredited for his theory of evolution and survival of the fittest that has contributed to so many evils in our society?

Who were ‘the mighty’ in Corinthian society? Roman rule was brutal and deadly, as we know from the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ. The military class would have been self-contained within their barracks, although retired soldiers were more settled in the community. The class of mighty or influential people may have included politicians and rich people. Jesus interacted with Romans, as did Paul, back in Judea. The Jews brought Paul before the proconsul here in Corinth (Acts 18:12), but the church did not include many from this class, apart from Gaius. Thirdly, Paul identifies a class of nobles, people with some link to royalty. In England you will find a lingering class of high-borns, of dukes and earls and lords. What is it like in Tonga?

Men and women from these backgrounds were not absent in the church, but there were very few. Gaius had a house large enough to accommodate the church so must have been well-off. Crispus, the synagogue ruler, was probably not poor but still despised as a Jew. Other named members included Stephanus, Fortunatus and Achaicus; the names of the latter point to them being freed slaves, possibly in the house of Stephanus (16:17). Most members are not named, but here in verse 26 Paul tells us that they came from the lower classes of society. In fact, they were despised and rejected by society; they were ‘nobodies’, men and women treated like dogs. Slaves had no rights; they were valued according to their ability to work. Those who failed to measure up were discarded. We do not read of nursing homes in Corinth, or in Hitler’s Germany for that matter, certainly not for Jews, Gypsies or anyone disabled!

In the context of quarrelling over leadership, and the general quest for wisdom and power in society, Paul reminds church members of their background; some had an even darker background (6:11). They were not on the social, intellectual, or political radar of society. They were ‘nobodies’ when God called them. God deliberately chose the foolish things of this world to put to shame the wise. He chose the weak to put to shame the mighty. Moreover, he did not call them to become wise or mighty like the people around. This, unfortunately, is the thinking of some in the church today. They think that as Christians they should have at least as much as their pagan neighbours, if not more, so they can point to God’s blessing. They forget that the kingdom of God is not like the kingdoms of this world. They forget that, ‘the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men’ (1:25). In the kingdom of God, riches, family heritage, physical prowess and university degrees no longer count. Coal miners and carpenters can, and have been, elders in the church. So let us not glory in our worldly achievements, or those of our children, but let us glory in the Lord.

‘The great reversal and the great redemption of nobodies’ is the title Paul Barnett gives to this passage. This man, who was my minister when I was an undergraduate, is a respected NT scholar- here I am dropping names!! I should be telling about three of my uncles, a driver, a farmer and a builder, who were respected elders in the church. God’s calling turned despised citizens of Corinth into prized citizens of the kingdom of heaven. God’s call, which is an effectual call, opened their hearts to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. The gospel which declares, ‘God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God (2Cor 5:21), is foolishness to those who are perishing (1:18) but the greatest news you have ever heard- right?

Believing in Jesus is not guaranteed to make you popular, or to ensure your success in this world. Quite the opposite, especially in our increasingly pagan society. Believers in India and China are refused help from the government, even as they starve during the coronavirus pandemic. But they know that the Lord is powerful to help them. We are assured that ultimately, through his chosen people, God will ‘bring to nothing the things that are’, the things worshipped by world people (1:28). Shame will come upon the ‘experts’, the rich, and the powerful of this world (1:27). ‘Bring to nothing’ literally means ‘ineffective’ or ‘render idle’ (1:28). I am reminded of a story about a truck that got stuck under an overhead bridge. Engineers were brought in to give advice. They started calculating how many heavy cranes it would take to lift the bridge and free the truck, and how long this would take. A boy came by on his way home from school and suggested they let the air out of the truck’s tyres.

Jesus never went to Corinth but his parable about the rich man and Lazarus applied in Corinth- and most other cities of this world (Luke 16:19f). In this world the poor man had no name and was not seen by the rich man living in his mansion on the hill. But after they died and were buried the situation was reversed; the rich man had no name and was tormented in Hades while the poor man had a name, Lazarus, and was comforted in the bosom of Abraham. Death brought about a great reversal. Paul alludes to final judgment when he says that, ‘no flesh should glory in His presence’, in the presence of the Lord on the Last Day (1:29). Even in this life the rich and famous may be brought to nothing, like the government adviser who owned many properties. I heard him speak from a community housing flat where he told how, through drink and drugs, he lost everything- probably his wife and family also.

**2. ‘In Christ’**

‘But of him you are in Christ Jesus’ (1:30). These believers were no longer ‘nobodies’ but were in Christ; they were children of the King. The wisdom sought after by the Greeks was foolishness compared to the wisdom revealed in Jesus Christ. Paul will later rebuke members of this church for taking their disputes before ‘the unrighteous’, before a secular judge (6:1). When they have access to the wisdom and judgments of God, as they do in Jesus Christ, why seek judgment from mere men. Any believer should be able to give a better judgment than a judge appointed by men. This is certainly the case in many nations where judges routinely take bribes, but even in our own society the courts of the church should be preferred to courts of the state. We are entering dangerous times when state courts are being called upon to judge on spiritual matters. Christians should not take disputes to court, and state courts would be wise to follow the precedent set by Galleo (Acts 18:15).

When King Solomon asked for wisdom God was pleased to give him great wisdom, recorded for us in the Book of Proverbs. Here in the NT, the wisdom of God is seen in his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. ‘The wisdom of God is embodied in Christ, who offered himself that men might be saved’. Even as he walked the paths of Palestine, men and women marvelled at his wise words and actions. But this wisdom is supremely seen in the cross of Jesus Christ which for us is ‘righteousness, sanctification/holiness and redemption’ (1:30).

Righteousness is not a word you hear in the media but is found on almost every page of the Bible; which is why, as a believer, you should spend more time reading your Bible than watching TV! God is righteous. Jesus is our righteousness. The Judge who is righteous will judge rightly; he will judge impartially and honestly; he will judge you and me and everyone who has ever lived. Jesus said, ‘The Father …has committed all judgment to the Son’ (John 5:22). Paul told the Athenians, and no doubt the Corinthians also, that God will judge the world in righteousness by the Man he has ordained’, namely Jesus Christ (Acts 17:31). Yes, the man that hung on a cross outside the gates of Jerusalem will one day judge the world. ‘What foolishness’ the Greeks said, and people still say today, but to you who know the imputed righteousness of Christ, who now Christ to be the wisdom and power of God, this is the truth.

Justification means being declared ‘not guilty’ but ‘righteous’ in the sight of God. Sanctification is the process by which we become more and more like Jesus, like God himself: ‘Be ye holy because I am holy’ (1Peter 1:16). This is our aim in life as believers. No longer do we strive to be rich or famous or like other people. Our striving is for holiness, holiness that is found only in Jesus Christ. This is what Paul means in his favourite phrase, ‘in Christ’ (1:30). Redemption is the third and last element of God’s wisdom seen in Christ Jesus. Everyone in Corinth knew about slaves being redeemed, being bought at a price and set free. Paul will later remind them, ‘you are not your own, for you were bought at a price’ (6:20). The price of your redemption, your freedom from the penalty and the power of sin, is the blood of Jesus Christ. No cross, no freedom! Paul would have reminded the Jews of the Passover lamb and the blood sprinkled on the doorpost.

**3. All glory to God**

The apostle concludes this section with a quote from Jeremiah: ‘He who glories, let him glory in the Lord’ (1:31). Most believers in the church at Corinth had nothing to boast about in this world- they were ‘despised nobodies’. All believers in this church had nothing to boast about before God (1:29, 31). It is the same today- no titles, awards or accolades given by men count in the kingdom of God. We will stand naked before God. We are saved fully, and finally, and totally through the cross of Christ so there I no place for boasting or self-glory. All glory must be given to God. It is God who called you, a ‘nobody’ in the eyes of the world, to be a ‘somebody’ in his eyes. You were called by God that you and the whole world might give glory to God for his wisdom and his power. So let us together exalt his holy name today and every day until he comes.

**Jesus Christ and him crucified** 1Corinthians 2:1-6

F.F. Bruce is a renowned NT scholar of the last century. His books occupy almost one shelf of my library. I read and enjoyed many of his books when I was at university. On one occasion he visited Sydney and spoke in the university church. I recall sitting on the floor behind the pulpit because the church was packed. I also remember hearing a far-from-impressive preacher. I decided to stick with reading his books rather than listening to him speak! That said, I was probably not a good listener because I was only ‘a babe in Christ’ as Paul would say (3:1). Even so, it is often the case that great writers are not great speakers, and vice versa.

When the apostle Paul came to Corinth in AD 49/50 he did not come with the reputation of a writer or a speaker. The Jews saw him as an ‘activist’ or trouble maker. ‘Activist’ was not regarded as a profession in Paul’s day! When Paul came into Macedonia he faced trouble on every side, conflict outside and fears inside (2Cor 7:5). At that time he had companions. He spoke to a small gathering in Philippi before being thrown into prison for his ‘activism’. He went on to Thessalonica and was chased out of this city by violent Jews. He went on to Berea where the same people came after him. Paul did see some converts, mainly from the God-fearers and devout Greeks. He went on to Athens alone, where he spoke of Jesus and the resurrection in a public forum of philosophers. He was laughed out of town rather than chased out of Athens.

Still without his companions, Silas and Timothy, he went on to Corinth. This was no place for a man living an upright, moral life, much less a man preaching the righteous judgment of Christ (Acts 17:31). Not that Paul preached morality in itself; he preached the gospel of Jesus Christ which has the power to transform individuals from the inside out. In looking at the five verses before us, our subheadings will be: ‘Not like other preachers’, ‘Not with worldly wisdom’, and ‘Nothing but Christ Jesus and him crucified’.

**1. Not like other preachers**

In this chapter the apostle continues talking about the word or the ‘message of the cross’ that he preached when he first came to Corinth (1:18). The risen Jesus sent him to preach the gospel, not with human wisdom but in the power of the God. Despite widespread corruption and sexual immorality, Corinth was also known for its orators. Public speaking competitions were held on a regular basis; they were part of the biennial Isthmian games. These may have been like the Melbourne comedy festival, or a mix of this and a Bill Clinton lecture! People paid money to hear the best orators. It seems that some in the church were comparing Paul to these professional orators, or at least comparing him to more eloquent speakers in the church. Apollos, who came to Corinth after Paul, was good at public debate and a good speaker but there is no indication that he ‘competed’ with Paul. There were some of course, who for some reason or other made Apollos their hero preacher (1:12, 3:4).

In the context of divisions in the church, and the importance put on oratory, the apostle Paul was criticised for his less-than-impressive preaching. Later on people came out saying that his ‘bodily presence is weak and his speech of no account’ (2Cor 10:10 ESV). Paul admitted that he was not a trained speaker but made no apologies for this ‘weakness’ (2Cor 11:6). In fact, the Lord taught him through his ‘thorn in the flesh’ that, ‘When I am weak then I am strong’ (2Cor 12:10). The last thing Paul wanted was for people to praise his preaching style. He wanted converts not compliments. He was careful not to take glory to himself but to give all glory to God (1:31, 2Cor 10:17); he was careful not to preach for a fee (2Cor 11:7). As Paul wrote in another letter, ‘God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me and I to the world’ (Gal 6:14).

Paul’s attitude was like that of John the Baptist, namely, ‘He must increase, I must decrease’. Paul did not want people saying, ‘I am of Paul’; he wanted people believing in ‘Christ and him crucified’, people walking in the Spirit and obeying to the commands of Christ. Paul did not preach with ‘excellence of speech’ or with persuasive words but in the power of God, the power of the Spirit of God (2:1, 4). As a servant of God, he spoke the words of God. He did not have to rely on persuasive words or eloquent speech, and indeed shunned such preaching. Paul later compares himself to one who sows seed saying that it is God who makes the seed to grow (3:6). Jesus paints a similar picture in the parable of the sower.

Paul admits to coming to Corinth ‘in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling’ (2:3). We have noted that he came alone after being mocked in Athens, and he came without knowing the outcome of his ministry back in Macedonia. The reputation of Corinth for moral decadence and sexual immorality was not inviting to a man of God like Paul. If the Areopagus in Athens was oppressive, how much more the temple of Aphrodite in Corinth with a thousand religious prostitutes. Paul would first go to the Jews of course, but they usually opposed him with violence. Such fear caused Paul to tremble but did not stop him from going to this city and preaching the gospel. He knew the Lord was with him, a presence graciously confirmed by the Lord in a vision (Acts 18:9). When we step out in faith the Lord will, in some way, assure us of his presence. It is not a matter of our ability but of our availability to the Lord, as someone once said.

**2. Not with worldly wisdom**

If Paul did not measure up as a speaker, this was not the case with regard to his learning. The Roman governor, Festus, told Paul that much learning was driving him mad, but as a Jew, King Agrippa was ‘almost persuaded to become a Christian’ (Acts 26:24). Paul knew about local philosophers and poets (Acts 17:28), but what he knew best was the Scriptures. He knew and valued the wisdom of God more that the wisdom of this world. The wisdom of God is revealed in the Scriptures and ultimately in Jesus Christ, ‘who became for us wisdom from God’ (1:30).

The Greeks loved orators and they loved wisdom, the wisdom of the philosophers, the ‘scientists’ of that day. Every religion has its wise men. Our secular humanism religion has its experts in universities, in businesses and parliaments- not to mention the media itself. Whenever the media wants expert advice, who do they turn to? Almost anyone, but never to God’s word. Sometimes they turn to a religious leader, as in a Buddhist leader or yoga teacher but never to the word of God. This is what Paul confronted in the wisdom of the Greeks- human wisdom or the wisdom of this age (2:4, 6). The ‘worldly wise’ did not know the wisdom of God but Paul did. He knew the wisdom of God revealed in the cross of Christ or Christ crucified. Paul did not want the church comparing his preaching with the professional orators in Corinth, and nor did not want the wisdom of God confused with their worldly or human wisdom.

Paul preached the wisdom of God which is in Jesus Christ. In him is found righteousness and sanctification/holiness and redemption (1:30). The cross of Christ is central to this wisdom. This may have been a mystery, as in something hidden in the past, but it was now revealed in Jesus Christ. It may still have been a mystery to his listeners but in his preaching Paul was explaining this mystery so that they might be saved. ‘Mystery’ was another word used by orators; they tried to convince people they had ‘special knowledge’ which they could reveal to their listeners, for a price. The word translated ‘testimony’ in verse 1 is actually ‘mystery’ (cf. 2:7). Using this word, Paul could ‘connect’ to the culture of Corinth; but as with the word ‘wisdom’ he filled it with a different understanding; it was the wisdom of God in a mystery (2:7).

Paul referred to the cross Christ as a mystery. But he was not preaching a new idea or a new god, as some thought; he was preaching what was written in the Scriptures, what God had promised from the very beginning. Abraham saw the day of Christ and was glad, as Jesus himself said (John 8:56). The prophets spoke of one who was ‘coming after me who is greater than me’ (John 1:27). Only the Jews and God-fearers read the prophets of course, but Paul also noticed that the pagans had their ‘unknown God’ and offered to reveal this mystery to them (Acts 17:23). The mystery of where we all came from, and where we are going, is all revealed in the Bible. The mystery of why we are here, and how we should live, is revealed in Jesus Christ and him crucified.

Revelation of this mystery depends upon the preaching of the gospel, but preaching in itself is not the power that opens blinded eyes or quickens dead hearts. That power comes from the Spirit of God; ‘but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power’ (2:4). ‘Your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God’, power demonstrated in changed hearts and changed lives (2:5). The power of the Spirit to change lives is detailed in verse 11 of chapter 6. The wisdom of this age, of all the rulers of the world, is powerless to change a single soul. Education is great but in itself will not change anyone’s heart; it will not give anyone faith or hope or salvation. Among the most fearful people in the current pandemic are the most educated.

**3. Nothing but Christ and Him crucified**

While the Jews wanted a sign, and the Greeks sought after wisdom, Paul preached Christ crucified (1:23). He again refers this truth as the content of his preaching, assuring us that he resolved to know nothing but ‘Christ and him crucified’ when it came to preaching (2:2). He was not preaching what itching ears wanted to hear, or in a manner that would make him popular. Every gospel preacher must resist such temptations (2Tim 4:2).

Paul was not simply preaching Christ as an historical person either; he was historical and no one denied this. But he preached Christ crucified, a truth about his leader that any self-respecting follower would seek to hide. But for the apostle this truth was central to his worship of Jesus Christ. ‘Crucified’ is a perfect participle; ‘Not only was Christ once crucified but he continues in the character as the crucified One. The crucifixion is permanent in its efficacy and its effects’.

It is at the cross of Jesus that our sins are dealt with, that our sins are forgiven and we are given a new life in Christ. ‘God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in him’ (2Cor 5:21). The sinless Son of God took our sin and suffered the penalty of our sin, death, that we might not suffer that penalty. The prophet Isaiah tells us most clearly what the cross of Christ is about: ‘All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned, everyone, to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all’ (Isa 53:6). The Jews had these words in their Bible. The Greeks, like everyone if they are honest, must admit to their own sin.

The city of Corinth was a haven for human sin; the whole world knew this. It was ripe for the gospel of Jesus Christ, just like our city today - although, thanks to the pandemic, brothels and massage parlours have been closed I think. Jesus said, ‘I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance’ (Luke 5:32). As Paul preached this truth, the Holy Spirit touched hearts that were dead in sin and made them alive unto Christ, even in this city of gross immorality, corruption and death. As Paul predicted, the philosophers, the wise men and the orators of Corinth came to nothing (2:6). What preaching are you listening to today?

**Wisdom and glory** 1Corinthians 2:6-10a

In the allegory called ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’, John Bunyan writes of a man called ‘Christian’ living in the City of Destruction. Christian read a book about the Celestial City and set out to find this place. Among the first people he met along the way was Mr Worldly Wiseman. This man directed Christian to the house of Mr Legality and his son Civility. This world is full of Mr Worldly Wiseman’s. We read in the Bible that in the early days of Israel, ‘Everyone did what was right in his own eyes’ (Judg 21:25). It was much the same in Corinth in the days of Paul, and it is same in our day; everyone doing what is right in their own eyes.

Our society is also like that of Corinth in that many are searching for wisdom, just like the Greeks; but like the Greeks, they are not looking in the right place (1:22). There are many who claim to have found wisdom, but where did they find it? They found it in their own imagination! Worldly wisdom is found in traditions, the traditions of men, in experience or in learning, the learning of men. James speaks of two kinds of wisdom, one being from above and the other as ‘earthly, sensual and demonic’ (James 3:15). Indeed, Jesus told those who refused to listen to him that they were of their father the devil (John 8:44). He said, ‘You are not able to listen to my word… because you are not of God’ (John 8:43, 47).

Paul preached the gospel in a culture where wisdom was sought after and paraded by philosophers and orators. But note that in Corinth this wisdom sat comfortably alongside sexual immorality, deception, drunkenness and dishonesty, something we see in the wisdom paraded by many in our society (6:9,10). The apostle continues explaining the wisdom of God revealed in the gospel that he preached, in Christ and him crucified. He denounces the wisdom of this age as empty and futile. True wisdom may look foolish to the world but in the end it is worldly wisdom that is foolishness. The wisdom of God leads to glory, eternal glory; worldly wisdom ends in nothing. The word ‘wisdom’ certainly dominates this passage but let us not overlook the word ‘glory’ that is found twice in these five verses.

**1. Rulers of this age do not know wisdom**

When the apostle Paul came to Corinth he did not enter into competition with professional orators or preachers of mystery religions; he preached nothing but ‘Christ and him crucified’ (2:2). The faith he looked for was not based on the wisdom of men but on the word of God. Persuasive words may lead to a change of mind, but the power of the Spirit is needed to change hearts- and subsequently minds. Paul sought to persuade people to confess their sin and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ but this is not the same as persuasive words. Paul knew that the power to the Spirit must accompany his preaching if it was to result in changed hearts and the glory of God.

While condemning the ‘wisdom of this age’, the wisdom of the ‘rulers of this age’, Paul does not abandon the word ‘wisdom’. Wisdom is a very biblical word. King Solomon asked for wisdom and was given wisdom by God (1Kings 3:12). He was a wise king who recorded much of his ‘wisdom from above’ in the wisdom books of the OT. Jesus Christ is ‘wisdom from God’ (1:30). What Paul does is clearly distinguish between worldly wisdom and heavenly wisdom.

Paul writes, ‘But we speak wisdom among those who are mature’ (2:6). Paul is not referring to a special class of people within the church, a class of ‘initiated’ or elite Christians. The wisdom of the world might be portrayed as a secret reserved for the ‘initiated’ but the wisdom of God is revealed in the gospel, and is freely given to all who believe because all believers are given the Spirit of Christ (Rom 8:9). That said, not all fully grasped the truth of being ‘in Christ’ and belonging to the one body of Christ. Division in the church, with members saying they followed Paul or Apollos or Peter, was evidence of immaturity (3:3).

Every believer should be growing or maturing in the faith (Eph 4:14, 15). Christian growth is not automatic- we don’t necessarily mature as we get older. We mature as we mediate upon the written word, as we humble ourselves before the Lord in prayer, and as we join in the means of grace. If our faith is to grow it must be fed with spiritual food. Jesus speaks of himself as that food (John 6:51).

‘Rulers of this age’ sometimes refers to demonic powers (Eph 6:12), but in this passage the apostle is referring to men, to political and religious leaders in particular (2:6, 8). This becomes obvious in verse 8 where he writes, ‘The rulers of this age… would not have crucified the Lord of glory’ if they had known who Jesus is. ‘Lord of glory’ is a lofty title that usually refers to God but here clearly refers to Jesus. We will comment further in Paul’s use of this title shortly.

The wisdom of this age was seen in men like Caiaphas the high priest, Herod Antipas, and Pilate the Roman governor. All had a hand in crucifying Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus appeared before each of these rulers in turn, and all condemned him. Caiaphas asked Jesus under oath if he was the Son of God, and Jesus admitted he was. Herod questioned Jesus extensively, as did Pilate. Pilate, like so many, thought wisdom was about saving his own reputation and career. The wisdom of these men had nothing to do with the truth. The wisdom of the world is being increasingly distanced from the truth. The wisdom of God is of course, inseparable from the truth.

The ‘rulers of this age’ failed to understand wisdom when it (He) literally stared them in the face; they crucified the Lord of glory. But when the Lord of glory rose from the dead their wisdom was exposed as foolishness. They were left scrambling to cover up their foolishness. History remembers them as the most foolish of men, while Jesus is worshipped the world over. Even so, there are many who follow the wisdom of these rulers as they rule their own lives, their families, or nations. There are many whose wisdom is like that of the rich young ruler who wanted eternal life but refused to obey the Lord of glory and give up all his possessions. Many have no spiritual understanding whatsoever, as the apostle explains in the following passage.

**2. Revealed through the Spirit of God**

‘But God has revealed them/it to us through His Spirit’ (2:10). The ‘wisdom of God in a mystery’ is revealed in the gospel which Paul preached (2:7, 10). The apostle quotes, with some freedom, from Isaiah 64:4, to confirm by what is written that God long ago prepared this wisdom for those who love him (2:9). It was not wisdom dreamt up by the apostles! The wisdom of this world comes from men of this world but the wisdom of God comes from God. God is unchanging so this is unchanging wisdom. It was kept secret since the world began, but is now made manifest (Rom 16:25). The prophets spoke and wrote of the grace and glory that was to come as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (1Peter 1:10-12). The wisdom of God was revealed, in the fullness of time, in the cross of Jesus Christ.

This revelation was to ‘us through His Spirit’ (2:10). Barnett maintains that the ‘us’ here in verse 10 refers to Paul and the apostles. While the revelation was initially to the apostles, Paul does not limit what he is saying here to the apostles. His focus is on the revelation being through the Spirit of God, and the Spirit is given to all who believe. The apostle goes on to say that ‘the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God’ (2:14). The Spirit must first quicken the heart of the natural man if he is to understand this mystery.

The philosophers and orators proclaiming wisdom in Corinth spoke of it as a mystery which they could impart for a price. Paul uses the same word ‘mystery’ but fills it with his own meaning. The wisdom of God which is, ‘Christ and him crucified’, was kept hidden since the world began. It was ordained by God ‘before the ages for our glory’ (2:7). We might have expected ‘for our salvation’ but the apostle writes ‘for our glory’. Glory is the ultimate purpose of our salvation as far as God is concerned. Jesus prayed, ‘Father glorify me together with yourself’, so should we not pray, ‘Jesus glorify me together with yourself’? (John 17:5, 10).

The Scriptures have been unlocked or unveiled in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul was sent by the risen Jesus to make this mystery know to all the nations. As the gospel is proclaimed still today, the Spirit reveals this wisdom to human hearts, to men and women who humble themselves before the Lord, confessing their sin and believing in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the mystery of all mysteries. This is wisdom from above for all who will receive it.

**3. Reigns in glory**

Paul’s reference to Jesus as the ‘Lord of glory’ points to the divinity of Jesus because this title usually refers to God (2:8). It also stands as condemnation of those who in their worldly wisdom crucified Jesus. Jesus rose from the dead before returning to his heavenly glory. Paul also writes of the wisdom of God being revealed for ‘our glory’ (2:7). As we said before, ‘glory’ is a key word in this passage, but how are we to understand these two references in the text? The birth and death of Jesus were not seen as glorious events by the rulers of this age. But John writes, ‘We beheld his glory, the glory of the only begotten of the father, full of grace and truth’ (John 1:10). He, along with James, his brother, and Peter, saw Jesus transfigured on the mountain, but it was in the resurrection that the apostle Paul saw the glory of Jesus.

Paul preached ‘Christ and him crucified’ but he also preached the resurrection; the resurrection occupies the whole of the lengthy penultimate chapter of this letter. It was in the cross that the wisdom of God was revealed for our salvation but in the resurrection that the wisdom of God was revealed for our glory, and His. Anyone who rejects the wisdom of God in the cross of Christ also rejects the glory of God in the resurrection. They must deny the resurrection of Jesus Christ; this is what the ‘rulers of this age’ did, and it is what the worldly wise do today.

‘Glory’ is not a word the worldly wise associate with Jesus. They must keep telling themselves he was a deceiver and blasphemer, or that he was powerless to save himself. To the Jews, and sadly to some who call themselves Christians, Christ crucified remains a stumbling block. To the rest of the world, apart from those who have listened to the gospel and, in the eternal purposes and mighty power of God have believed, Christ crucified remains foolishness. But to those who are called he is, ‘Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God’ (1:24).

Christ Jesus, the Lord of glory, died and rose again ‘for our glory’ (2:7, Ps 8:5). The end of our salvation is to be glorified in Christ, to become like him in his resurrection glory (15:42-43, Phil 3:21). Jesus died on the cross, rose from the dead and ascended into heaven where he now lives and reigns (Acts 2:33, Heb 2:3). Jesus is the King of glory and he leads his people into his own glorious presence, into his own everlasting kingdom of power and glory (Ps 24:7-10, John 14:2, 1Peter 3:10, Eph 2:6).

Let me close with a story I read about Raphael, the Italian Renaissance painter when he was commissioned to paint a portrait of the Lord Jesus. “He obtained a New Testament and day after day was seen, brush in hand, with it open before him, every feature riveted and every thought absorbed; until suddenly one day he slipped upon his knees, and cried, ‘My Lord and my God’. The picture was never painted, but God had stamped an image on Raphael’s soul that would never be obliterated”.

**The Holy Spirit and spiritual discernment** 1Corinthians 2:10-16

A classic case of failure to understand spiritual things is that of Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. When Jesus told him that one has to be born again in order to see the kingdom of God, Nicodemus thought he meant some sort of physical rebirth (John 3:1-3). Do you know what Jesus means when he says, ‘You must be born again’? Do you know what Paul is talking about when he writes, ‘If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation, old things have passed away; behold all things are new’ (2Cor 5:17)? I have spoken to churchgoers who respond like Nicodemus to the question, ‘Have you been born again?’ I have seen churchgoers whose lives give no evidence of old things having passed away. It appears that Nicodemus was later given to understand spiritual things because his life had changed by the time Jesus was crucified.

The apostle Paul did not come to Corinth to join in a public speaking competition; nor did he come to outwit the wise men and philosophers of the city. He did not want to be compared with such men because he was speaking spiritual things which ‘natural’ or unspiritual people could not understand. We need to be discerning about so-called inter-faith gatherings or meetings. We do not expect men or women who do not have the Spirit of God to understand the truths of the gospel. We preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, praying for the Lord to give them understanding of this spiritual truth, and open their eyes that they might see ‘the things God has prepared for those who love Him’ (2:9). It is good for us to know something of their religion and their personal background but we do not engage in a comparison of religions. ‘Religion’ is sometimes defined as man searching after God, whereas the gospel of Jesus Christ is God searching after man.

The orators of Athens and Corinth spoke about wisdom, as did the apostle Paul. But Paul made a clear distinction between ‘the wisdom of this age’ or ‘human wisdom’ and the wisdom of God revealed in ‘Jesus Christ and him crucified’. In the second half of chapter 2 he goes on to explain how the wisdom of God was imparted, and received by him and others, by anyone who is a true Christian. The wisdom of God that is in ‘Jesus Christ and him crucified’ is revealed to us by the Spirit of God or the Holy Spirit (2:10). In these verses Paul focusses on the ‘Spirit who is from God’, ‘Spiritual truths for the spiritual’, and ‘Spiritual discernment’.

**1. Spirit who is from God**

God is spirit. God is not seen by the physical or natural eye. God did reveal himself at certain times and in various ways in the OT, but in these last days he sent his Son into the world. ‘Show us the Father’ asked Phillip, and Jesus said, ‘He who has seen me has seen the Father’ (John 14:8, 9, cf. John 1:18). Phillip saw Jesus, as did lots of people, but clearly he did not know Jesus. Jesus was fully man and fully God. As a man, other people could not know his heart or his spirit. The only person anyone can really know is themselves. The more we get to know someone the more we learn of what is in their hearts; this is the challenge of marriage, and of relationships in the body of Christ. But ultimately, ‘what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him’ (2:11).

As the Son of God, the Spirit of God was in Jesus. Phillip was not just dealing with another man, he was dealing with the Son of God. As human beings there are things deep within our hearts known only to ourselves, and to God. God is infinite and eternal, so the depths of his heart are unfathomable or ‘deep things of God’ (2:10, Ps 92:5). Only the Spirit who searches all things can search these unsearchable things of God. Paul speaks of the grace given to him to ‘preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ’ (Eph 3:8). He preached the same ‘unsearchable riches of Christ’ in Corinth.

How did Paul know these unfathomable truths of God? He writes of the grace given to him; the grace of God came with the giving of the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the apostles at Pentecost they declared that, ‘God has made this Jesus whom you crucified both Lord and Christ’. They told the people to repent, be baptized, and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:36-38). Paul was given understanding of the deep things of God, and as an apostle was given authority to preach and teach the ‘mystery’ of the gospel. It was not his knowledge of the Scriptures *per se* that gave him understanding of this mystery; it was the Spirit of God because no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God (2:11). The Scriptures were, of course, written by men of God moved by the Holy Spirit (2Peter 1:21).

**2. Spiritual truths for the spiritual**

‘We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us’ (2:12 NIV). The apostles were the first to receive the Spirit of God, and through the Spirit the first to understand the mystery of the gospel, but Paul’s ‘we’ can hardly be limited to the apostles. No one can understand the mystery of the gospel without the Holy Spirit, so no one can believe unless they receive the Spirit who is from God.

Paul again distinguishes between the spirit of the world and the Spirit who is from God (2:12). The spirit of the world is what gives understanding to the natural or unspiritual person, understanding of worldly things not spiritual things. In fact, such a person does not even recognise spiritual things; the spirit of the world, like the wisdom of the world, is demonic, sensual and earthly (James 3:15). The natural person only believes what they can see; their life is bound up in physical things. They think they are just another animal and live accordingly (Rom 1:22f, 2Peter 2:12, Jude v10).

God has given us his Spirit that we might know what he has given us, namely his only Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life’ (John 3:16). This is the mystery revealed to the world, but it remains a mystery until God, by his Spirit, opens our blind eyes and quickens our dead hearts. May the Lord send his Spirit upon you if you are still blind to the wonderful mystery of the gospel of ‘Jesus Christ and him crucified’. You can of course, pray for God to do just that as you bow before him confessing your sin. If you do not understand what we are talking about when we speak of being born again, and of becoming a new creation in Christ Jesus, this is what you need to do!

The apostles and all faithful preachers of the gospel speak not with the wisdom of men; not with words given them by philosophers, professors or politicians. They speak words given them by the Holy Spirit. Those words are found in the Holy Bible. Spiritual truths are conveyed by words, not by dreams, by dancing or by drumming. The sacraments are physical tokens of spiritual truth, but again, these must be accompanied by words; they have no efficacy apart from the Spirit.

What does Paul mean in saying, ‘Comparing spiritual things with spiritual’ at the end of verse 13?’ Comparing’ can be translated as ‘combining’, ‘interpreting’ (ESV) or ‘expressing’ (NIV). Some understand him as saying, ‘Interpreting spiritual truths in spiritual words’ and others as, ‘Interpreting spiritual truths for spiritual men’. Both are possible but the latter is preferred because he goes on to talk about the unspiritual or natural person ‘who does not receive the things of the Spirit of God’ (2:14). Spiritual truths are conveyed in words, in spiritual words, but the point is, these words and hence these truths are not understood by unbelievers unless and until the Spirit of God gives them understanding and enables them to believe. Until such time these spiritual truths remain as nonsense or foolishness to the unspiritual person (2:14).

Does this mean there is no point in preaching the gospel to those who are unspiritual? Certainly not. And we dare not start judging who is elect and who is not elect. We are to preach to all people, as the doctrine of the free offer of the gospel states. We do of course, make a distinction between spiritual and unspiritual people, between believers and unbelievers, in our fellowship and in our sacraments.

**3. Spiritual discernment**

‘If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not his’ (Rom 8:9). This is the conclusion of Paul after he explains the difference between the carnal or fleshly minded person and the spiritually minded person. He says that the carnal mind is enmity against God and cannot please God. The spiritually minded, on the other hand, is so minded because the ‘Spirit of God dwells in you’ (Rom 8:9). ‘The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God’ (Rom 8:9, 16).

When the Spirit enters a person’s life everything changes. One new thing that appears is the ability to make right judgments. As believers, the Spirit of God dwells in us and gives us powers of discernment or judgment which the unspiritual person does not have. Civil judges and lawyers might protest but this is the truth. How did King Solomon judge Israel so effectively? With the wisdom given him by God! We submit to the governing authorities appointed by God but this is not to say their judgments are right. In many nations judges are notoriously corrupt, and we see our fair share of unjust judgments.

He who is spiritual is ‘rightly judged by no one’ (2:15). This is not a licence to anarchy! We must submit to the rule of law but we are able to discern matters better than an unspiritual judge and should not be judged by an unspiritual person. Paul did not accept the judgment of others because the Lord was his judge (4:3). He tells the church to judge matters themselves and not go to civil courts (6:1). The wisdom of man was a total failure when it came to judging Jesus. It remains a failure in judging spiritual matters today. Spiritual matters are only discerned by spiritual people and should only be judged by such people- as Gallio realised (Acts 18:14-16). Even so, as spiritual people we must submit to the judgment of God. We must examine ourselves and allow the Holy Spirit to judge our hearts according to the law of Christ.

Only God is omniscient so he alone can make impartial and just judgments. But having the Spirit of God dwelling in our hearts enables us to search the things of God and know his mind. This is amazing. It is difficult to comprehend such an amazing truth. I feel like Moses on the mountain being told we are on holy ground, being told thus far and no further! Paul quotes Scripture which says, ‘Who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him’ (2:16, Isa 40:13). God is the almighty creator of heaven and earth, and also our creator. He knows what is in us (John 2:24, 25). And Isaiah reminds us that there is nothing we have to offer the Lord by way of counsel. But having the Spirit of God dwelling in us does bring us into the counsel of the Lord, not unlike Moses and the prophets, and ultimately our Lord Jesus Christ.

So Paul comes to the amazing conclusion, ‘But we have the mind of Christ’ (2:16). Peter says something similar when he writes of us being ‘partakers of the divine nature’ (2Peter 1:4). We are to ‘think Christ’s thoughts after him’ as someone said. Many years ago my wife was away in Nepal and I had no way of contacting her- I was in India. I had to leave home and wondered what she would think and do when she got home. The closer we are to someone the better we will know their thoughts. It is the same with Jesus. Do you have or do you know the mind of Christ?

**God’s church** 1Corinthians 3:1-13

Years ago a popular charismatic preacher emerged within the church in India. Whenever he went and preached, huge crowds gathered to listen. He travelled around the country, although not to the city where we lived. I was told that many in the crowd actually followed him from place to place around the country. They heard Pentecostal preaching and received a second baptism. How do we evaluate such a ministry in the light of what the apostle Paul teaches the Corinthian church? Firstly, we see people following a man rather than Christ, and secondly, there are no classes within the body of believers, as in those who have or have not received the Holy Spirit and speak in tongues. Some use Paul’s teaching about mature and immature Christians to support their teaching about different classes of Christians, and even about a division between clergy and laity.

Paul does refer to some in the church at Corinth as being ‘carnal’ or ‘babes in Christ’, but what does he mean by this? Let us ask the Lord to give us understanding as we look into this passage today. We will look firstly at ‘Carnal Christians’, secondly at the ‘Church as God’s garden’ and thirdly, at the ‘Church as God’s building’.

**1. Carnal Christians**

Ancient Corinth was a cosmopolitan city, a pagan city that was home to the temple of Aphrodite. It was also home to Greek philosophers who attracted crowds, as much by their eloquence as by the wisdom they claimed to possess. The apostle Paul makes it clear that worldly wisdom is not from God. He was not impressed by eloquence or by the words of men. He preached Christ and him crucified, a message natural men could not receive unless God, by his Spirit, touched their heart. He distinguishes clearly between the natural man and the spiritual man, between the unbeliever and the believer (2:14,15).

Paul was writing in response to news he received about divisions that had arisen in the church in Corinth after he left; he brought the gospel to Corinth and saw the church grow during the eighteen months he was there. The divisions were about personalities, about Paul and the preachers who came after him- Apollos and Peter are named. Members of the church were lining up behind one or other of these men. Paul condemned such behaviour in no uncertain terms back in chapter 1 verse 13, and continues this condemnation here in this chapter (3:4). Such behaviour shows a lack of maturity in the faith.

While there are no classes or castes within the church, there are different levels of spiritual maturity. Every believer should be growing in their faith, growing in their knowledge of, and love for, Jesus Christ our Lord. They should be ‘growing up in all things into Him who is the head - Christ’ (Eph 4:15). Some believers give little evidence of growing in the faith, and some actually backslide. I have studied this actual passage with a believer who no longer attends worship.

Paul warmly refers to the church members as ‘brethren’ but cannot refer to them as ‘spiritual’, as Christians growing in their faith. He calls them ‘carnal’ and ‘babes in Christ’ (3:1). They have the Holy Spirit, otherwise they would not be ‘brethren’ or believers, but they are more focussed on things of the flesh than things of the Spirit. ‘Carnal’ is the word ‘*sarkikos*’ or ‘fleshly’. The word for unbelievers is ‘*psychicos*’, the ‘natural man’ of chapter 2 verse 14. We all know Christians who are believers but who have not grown spiritually for years- looking to ourselves first of course!

Christians fail to grow when they fail to feast on spiritual food, when they show no interest in Bible studies or prayer meetings, and only come to worship services when there is nothing else to do. Such people are sad people; they miss out on the joys of fellowship with Christ and his people, and also miss out on the ‘pleasures of sin’ which they know are wrong. They do of course, enjoy church activities like parties and parades, and especially church politics- ‘fleshly activities’ as Paul would say.

Babes in Christ can only stomach milk; they cannot digest meat. Everyone starts out a babe in Christ but Paul expects us to grow up and start taking meat in our diet. He expects us to read our Bible to learn more and more about our great God. He expects us to be gripped and challenged by the message preached. And he expects the message read and preached to influence our behaviour. Growing up into Christ means becoming more like Christ. Christ is our measure of maturity (Eph 4:13). ‘Imitate me, just as I imitate Christ’ said Paul (11:1, 4:16).

Divisions, jealousy and strife in the church at Corinth were marks of immaturity. Mature believers do not act out of pride or jealousy. Such behaviour demonstrates worldliness; playing politics is worldly behaviour, behaviour characteristic of mere men (3:3). Paul does not call it politics, but when Christians start lining up behind particular leaders in the church they have ‘lost the plot’ as we say. Often leaders are guilty of encouraging such behaviour but there is no indication of this with Paul or Apollos; although it is interesting that only these two men are mentioned here (cf. 2:12, 3:22). He later refers to ‘another’ building on the foundation he laid so maybe there was such a leader in the church (3:10). ‘The plot’ of course is following Christ who ‘became for us wisdom from God- righteousness and sanctification and redemption’ (1:30). No minister or preacher can save you from sin and death. He is but a servant of Christ, as Paul goes on to say. If he claims more than this he is a false teacher who should be rejected.

**2. Church as God’s garden**

‘What, after all is Apollos, and what is Paul?’ Paul goes on to ask (3:5 NIV). They are but ministers or servants (Gk. *diakonoi*) ‘through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one’ (3:5). The word ‘*diakonoi’* originally referred to those who wait on tables; hence the office of deacon. Ministers are similarly servants through whom the Lord brings his word to our ears. It is not the task of ministers to stir the emotions, and certainly not to gather a personal following like the orators in Corinth. In the power of the Spirit, Paul preached Jesus Christ and him crucified, knowing that it was the Lord who gave spiritual life to each one (3:5); some say Paul is here thinking of the ministry assigned to himself and Apollos.

Some years ago a village woman came to believe in Jesus through our ministry. We nurtured her in the faith through Bible reading, prayer and singing. Amazingly, the Lord enabled her to start reading the Bible for herself. Still, when it came time for us leave the country I was concerned as to how she would manage without us. But I learnt, and also taught her, that it was Christ, not us, to whom she belonged and who would take care of her. Let us not be church hoppers, people who follow the crowd or who follow a favourite preacher. Let us be, first and last, followers of Christ, ready to worship and serve wherever the preaching is centred upon the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Paul uses an agricultural metaphor to explain his role in the church, and the role of Apollos. As servants or labourers, he pictured himself planting and Apollos watering (3:6). Paul had brought the gospel to Corinth; Apollos came later to teach and defend the gospel. Both ministries were important but what was most important was that ‘God gave the increase’ (3:6). Their new birth came from God and his Spirit (2:10). You, like me, may be out planting seeds in your garden in this warm spring weather. You prepare the soil and plant the seed but can do nothing to make that seed grow. You just wait until, as if by magic, that seed turns into a bean or corn plant. You water and fertilize but do not actually make it bear fruit.

This is how Paul pictures one’s spiritual life. We are saved by grace, and by grace we grow up into Christ. Justification and sanctification are by the grace of God. All glory and praise belongs to the Lord. Clearly, labourers in the garden must work together if the plants are to grow. And it is equally clear to Paul that the servants will be rewarded for their labours by the One they are serving. God is a good and faithful master who is able to reward his servants- ‘well done good and faith servant’ (Luke 19:17). He rewards faithfulness, not success as measured by the world, or even by the church. Paul and Apollos were servants of the Lord and accountable to him, not to the Corinthians (cf. 4:1-5).

‘For we are God’s fellow workers’ (3:9). This sentence could be translated as, ‘Fellow workers with one another in God’s service’ according to Leon Morris, but even as it stands, God is clearly the master or owner because it is God’s field not the field of Paul or Apollos. We are God’s fellow workers within this context. There is no higher calling than to be in the service of our Lord as his fellow workers. Spurgeon once said, ‘Who would be a king when he can be a minister in the house of God’.

**3. Church as God’s building**

The word ‘church’ translates the Greek ‘*ekklesia*’ which means assembly, an assembly of people; it is not a building. Yet Paul (3:9f) and Peter (1Peter 2:5) picture the church as a building. Paul changes from the garden metaphor to a building metaphor as he explains the role of ministers in the church. He pictures himself as laying the foundation, which is Jesus Christ (3:11). Firm foundations are essential for any building, especially a building that is to stand firm to the end. Jesus himself talks about building on rock, not shifting sand (Mat 7:24f). What is the foundation of the church? Is it religious or cultural traditions? Tradition is put above Christ in too many churches. Popularity is put above Christ in other churches. But Paul says that there can be no other foundation than Jesus Christ. People talk about putting Christ back into Christmas; could we not talk about putting Christ back into the church?

It is a great privilege to be a servant in the house of God, but also a great responsibility. We must take heed as to how we build, warns the apostle (3:10). By the grace of God, Paul laid the foundation as a wise master builder. He did this by preaching Christ and him crucified without compromise. He was not focussed on baptism or the church role. His task was to preach Christ as the only foundation for the life of every believer, and of the church to which every believer belonged. As with the garden, God would give the increase, although again like the garden, workers were needed to assist in the growth. Having laid the foundation other servants would build on this (3:10).

Having learned about divisions in the church at Corinth, Paul was concerned about how those who came after him were building on the foundation- ‘another builds on it’ (3:10). Continuing the building metaphor, he pictures someone building with solid, expensive materials and another with cheap, flimsy material; ‘If anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver or precious stones, wood, hay or straw’ (3:12). He has already given a warning about taking heed as to how one builds. Now he give substance to this warning, making it clear that the day in coming when ‘each one’s work will become clear’ (3:13). I don’t think the story of the three little pigs has its origins here, but it does come to mind as we read about these different building materials! Even with a firm foundation in the truth of the Bible, ministers who make numbers or popularity their measure of success are building with flimsy materials. They will start selecting parts of the Bible that people like to hear, and may even put the Bible aside altogether to focus on entertainment, fun activities and ‘doing good’. The Day of testing, divine testing, will come, and it will be like fire. ‘In the end it gets down to this, whose approval do we really seek, Christ’s or those around us?’ writes Barnett.

What will be left of a ministry that focussed on fleshly things rather than spiritual things? Will the Lord say to such a minister ‘Well done, good and faithful servant’? Only those who build with solid material, those who stick to the truth of God’s word, preaching and teaching the whole counsel of God and not the ideas of men, will see their work endure the fires of divine testing. They will receive their reward (3:14).

What of servants whose work is burned up? That man will himself ‘be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames’ (3:15). He will not lose his salvation but will lose his reward, and will not hear the words, ‘Well done good and faithful servant’.

**The temple of God** 1Corinthians 3:16-17

Three months after their deliverance from slavery in Egypt, the people of God came to Mt Sinai. The Lord met Moses on this mountain to establish a covenant with his special people. The Ten Commandments were, in a sense, the constitution of this new nation under God, the nation that had God as their King. God would speak to his people through his prophets and they would worship him at the tabernacle set up according to God’s design. This tabernacle, later the temple in Jerusalem, was a holy place because it was where the holy God came to dwell among his people (Exod 25:8). The temple was central to the worship of God’s special people, God’s holy nation. Solomon’s temple, and later Herod’s temple, were magnificent structures, but for the people of God their beauty lay in the truth that God dwelt between the cherubim in the Most Holy Place at the centre of the temple.

Herod’s temple was still standing when Jesus started his ministry in Palestine- it was destroyed some forty years after his death and resurrection. He went to the temple at the beginning of his ministry and took drastic action to cleanse the temple of corruption. When the Jewish leaders confronted him, Jesus said to them, ‘Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up’; John tells us that Jesus was speaking of ‘the temple of his body’ (John 2:19,21). Here in this letter to the Corinthians, Paul refers to the church as the temple of God (1:16, the ‘you’ is plural); this is just after he calls the church God’s building. Over in chapter 6 he says, ‘Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you’ in the context of fleeing sexual immorality (6:19).

The physical temple in Jerusalem is no more and has no ongoing significance for God’s people but Jesus and the apostles use the significance of the temple under the old covenant to teach truths belonging to the new covenant in the blood of Jesus Christ, the covenant to which we belong. This is why we study the OT. We will look at three of these teachings today, namely: Jesus as the temple, the church as the temple, and the believer’s body as the temple.

**1. The temple and Jesus**

When Jesus came to the temple in Jerusalem he saw that its holiness was being compromised. God is holy and must be worshipped in holiness and truth. Jesus said that God is Spirit and must be worshipped in spirit and truth. God’s presence in the temple was central to acceptable worship under the old covenant. He removed his presence from the first temple in the days of Ezekiel (Ezek 11:23) and would remove his presence from the second temple also. God’s presence among his people would no longer be in the temple but in his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord: ‘The word became flesh and dwelt among us. We beheld His glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth’ (John 1:14). The glory of the temple was but a dim reflection of the glory now revealed in Jesus Christ.

In the Book of Hebrews the writer describes the furniture and the functions of the temple, especially the Most Holy Place, and explains how these are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ offered up his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption (Heb 9:12). The death of Jesus is the sacrifice to end all sacrifices. The death of Jesus opened the way for all worshippers to come into the presence of the Holy One of Israel; ‘A new and living way which he [Jesus] consecrated for us, through the veil, that is his flesh’ (Heb 10:20). John saw no temple in his vision of the new heavens and new earth because, ‘The Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple’ (Rev 21:22).

Jesus was speaking of his body as the temple when he said, ‘Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up’ (John 2:19). Jesus is risen and he is the temple of God. There is no other place and no other way to worship God but in and through his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. ‘Jesus is the living abode of God on earth, the fulfilment of all that the temple meant, and the centre of all true worship’ writes Carson.

**2. The temple and the church**

When Paul referred to the church as ‘God’s building’, he spoke of himself laying the foundation, ‘which is Jesus Christ’ (3:9, 11). If Jesus Christ, the truth of his death and resurrection, are not the foundation of the church then it is not a true church. But being a true church it is precious to God- it is God’s building, and as such servants or workers in the church must be careful to build with the resources given by God, not by men. The ideas and suggestions of men may be clever, and even effective, but in the long term will be consumed in the fire of divine judgment (3:13).

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul modifies this metaphor making Jesus the chief cornerstone of God’s building, and speaks of this building being fitted together in Jesus and growing ‘into a holy temple in the Lord’ (Eph 2:21). The picture of the church as a building is developed into a special building, namely a temple. Converts in Corinth may have been familiar with pagan temples in their city but for Jews and for Paul there was only one temple, the temple in Jerusalem. Pagans were probably aware of this temple also because they saw Jews going there on pilgrimage each year. This temple, like all temples, was regarded as a holy place. Jews went to Jerusalem and to the temple there because they were taught that God’s presence was there, above the Ark of the Covenant in the Most Holy Place.

Paul transfers teaching about the temple to Jesus Christ, as Jesus himself did, and to the church of Jesus Christ. He will later picture the church directly as the body of Christ (12:12, 27). The temple is the body of Christ and the church is the body of Christ. The apostles use both pictures to teach us about the church, remembering that the church, as the assembly of God’s people, is established by God and precious to him.

The church is precious to God because it is founded in his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Remember, there can be no other foundation. And remember also, because the church is God’s church it will prevail. Jesus said, ‘On this rock’, on the confession of Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, ‘I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it’ (Mat 16:18). When Paul writes of anyone destroying the temple of God, he is talking about the local church, not the church universal (3:17). And remember that the church is not a building but the people of God assembled to worship him.

Just as the temple ‘housed’ the presence of God, so the church ‘houses’ the Spirit of God. Paul writes, ‘The Spirit of God dwells in you’ (3:16) or is ‘a dwelling place of God in the Spirit’ (Eph 2:22). It was Jesus who said, ‘Where two or three are gathered in my name there I am in the midst of them’ (Mat 18:20). The church is not a man-made institution governed by the rules of men; it is God’s house governed by God’s rules, just like the temple of old. God himself destroyed that physical temple when worshippers forgot this basic truth, but the true church in which God dwells by his Spirit, and in which worshippers worship in Spirit and truth, will prevail until the coming of Jesus Christ. On that Day God will dwell with his people. God himself will be with them and be their God’ (Rev 21:4).

This is the glorious future of the church of God. Will you be there when this promise becomes a reality? Such a future is not assured by having your name on the membership roll of this church or any other church. It is assured by your being saved by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ, and by your membership of the mystical body of Christ. That membership is seen by God and by the world in your worship and service in the visible church. The church cannot grow if its members are not growing. God has ordained that we grow by stirring one another to love and good works, ‘not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together… all the more as we see the Day approaching’ (Heb 11:24, 25).

The apostle Paul warns the people in the church at Corinth not to destroy the temple of God lest God destroy them (3:17). This word refers to God’s eternal punishment; it is not a matter of escaping through the flames but of being destroyed by the flames. Why? Because the church, as the temple of God, is holy (3:17). Jesus said that if anyone causes a little one who believes in him to sin it would be better for that person to hang a millstone around their neck and be drowned in the sea (Mat 18:6).

False teachers are widely and severely condemned in the Bible. Every teacher and preacher should understand that the church is holy because it is belongs to God. God is jealous for his glory and will not tolerate anyone in the church taking glory to themselves. Paul goes on, ‘Therefore, let no one boast in men’ (3:21). As we know, certain leaders in the church at Corinth were promoting division, division based on personalities. If this ‘personality cult’ continued the church would have been divided, bringing shame to the name of Jesus Christ. God establishes his church to bring glory to his holy name, not shame. The church must root out false teachers and discipline its members, like the sexually immoral man in chapter 5.

**3. The temple and my body**

If the temple of God is to be holy, ‘which temple you are’ says Paul, referring to the church in Corinth, then its members must be holy. The church cannot be holy if its members are unholy. It is the apostle Peter who, while speaking of Christ as the living cornerstone says that, ‘you also as living stones are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ’ (1Peter 2:5). Note the picture of the temple coming through with these spiritual sacrifices. Living stones are necessary because Christ is a living stone. We could say holy stones are necessary because it a holy temple. It is Peter who reminds us to ‘Be holy in all your conduct because he who called you is holy’ (1Peter 1:15).

Holy conduct, conduct fitting for the church as the holy temple of God, does not allow for sexual immorality. Why? Because sexual immorality in particular is sin against one’s body, and ‘your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you’ (6:18, 19). It is false teaching, later Gnostic teaching, to claim that for the Christian the body no longer matters. “Some in the Corinthian church reckoned that physical lust cannot touch the secure ‘personality’ of the initiated. Paul taught otherwise in the strongest of terms; sexual sin is sin against one’s ‘personality’, and more than this, sin against the Holy Spirit who dwells in that personality”.

One of the most dangerous teachings of secular humanism is the idea that I can do as I like with my body because it is mine. Not only does this philosophy allow all manner of sexual immorality (cf. 6:9) and the associated abuse that we hear about every day, it leads to other dangerous behaviour regarding the body, such a drug and alcohol abuse. It gives rise to an unhealthy focus on the physical body, sometimes to the detriment of mental wellbeing. People do not like the body given them by God; they want to look like someone else or be in the body of someone else. Such people may start abusing their body. This is not what Paul is talking about here in Corinthians 6 but the cure to ‘body image’ is the same as the cure for the ‘lusts of the flesh’. That cure is Christ.

When we believe in Jesus we become a new creation in him (2Cor 5:17). God gives us his Spirit to dwell in our hearts thereby making us his special person, his holy person. Our body does not change, although I have seen converts taking a new interest in personal hygiene, and towards gluttony and drinking as mentioned. Being a new person in Christ, a person who belongs to Christ, gives us purpose and meaning in life, that purpose being to ‘glorify God and enjoy him forever’. If this is our purpose in life, and if we are growing up into Christ who is the head, we will be like stones neatly fitted into the place prepared for us in the church, into the temple of God which is holy.

**All things are yours** 1Corinthians 3:18-4:5

The gospel of Jesus Christ sets us free from bondage to the law, from a religion of works and legalism: ‘If Christ sets you free you are free indeed’. Our salvation is by grace through faith, ‘not of works lest anyone should boast’ (Eph 2:9). The freedom we have is freedom to love and serve our heavenly Master; it is not a freedom to love ourselves and indulge the flesh. Some in the church at Corinth got the wrong idea about Christian freedom. They were saying, ‘All things are lawful for me’ (6:12), as they satisfied the desires of the flesh in sexual immorality, drunkenness and gluttony. The apostle’s emphasis on being a new creation in Christ Jesus, on being indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and on having the mind of Christ was not yet understood. They were still carnal, babes in Christ. It appears that some leaders in the church were also carnal, and actually leading the people not only into personality cults but into other carnal behaviour.

Years ago I visited a hill tribe in NE India. Young men from this place had come to study in a course I taught and they invited me to visit. Their fathers had heard the gospel and believed in Jesus Christ. They built a huge church in the centre of their village where they gathered to sing and praise God. They were a gentle, kind people but this had not always been the case. Before the gospel came they were head hunters. I presume this behaviour quickly ceased when they became believers, but other aspects of their culture changed slowly. The gospel was transforming their culture. The missionaries were only there a short time so it was not a western culture but a biblical culture that was emerging in their society.

Growing up and coming to faith in a Christian family and Christian society I did not experience the huge cultural transformation being worked out by these tribal people. But mixing with Christians from different cultures does make us examine our own culture, and ask if it is biblical. Are their things in my culture that do not conform to the gospel of Jesus Christ? This is certainly the case today. I heard that Australian values now include homosexual marriage- euphemistically called ‘marriage equality’. Can we still call Australia a Christian country?

The culture of ancient Corinth was a bit like the culture of our country today. It had more than a thousand temple prostitutes, and divorce and homosexuality were common (6:9). Indulging the flesh meant widespread drunkenness; we have many alcoholics and drug addicts. Dishonesty and theft were rife. In many countries bribery is so widespread that some Christians argue that they can’t get anything done unless they pay a bribe- no bribe, no promotion! But believers I know refused to pay a bribe and suffered loss. The culture of Corinth was to line up behind a leader who appeared wise and witty, men who preached what they wanted to hear.

The apostle Paul would have none of this culture in the church. Having heard of the divisions in the church he wrote this letter condemning worldly behaviour, not as a matter of law but as a matter of love, love for Christ and an understanding of the blessings believers have in Jesus Christ. As Paul continues dealing with this problem of personality cults within the church, he again condemns worldly wisdom as foolishness in the eyes of God. He goes on to remind them that in Christ ‘all things are yours’, and thirdly that ‘each one’s praise will come from God’.

**1. Empty thoughts and lives**

The message of Jesus Christ and him crucified is foolishness to the world, foolishness to Greeks and a stumbling block to the Jews (1:23). The wisdom of man has no place for the gospel, but in the wisdom of God, the gospel of Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation. Christ is the wisdom of God- righteousness, and sanctification and redemption (1:30). This gospel is no longer a mystery but is revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity. This truth is revealed to human hearts through the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity (2:10).

But even after all this revelation, Christians are still tempted, and still succumb, to worldly wisdom. They focus on themselves, on the approval of other people, and on their standing in the world. They get caught up in appearances, telling themselves they must keep up with the wisdom of this age, or at least give the appearance of doing so. Paul bluntly tells them that they are deceiving themselves because the wisdom of God appears foolish to the world, and vice versa. You cannot have it both ways. I feel sorry for students who have to learn about evolution in order to pass their exams, but they cannot agree with such teaching if they believe the Bible. Whenever I hear people talking about the earth being millions or billions of years old I grieve for the millions who have succumbed to this great deception.

Paul, as always, anchors his teaching in the Scriptures. He gives two references, the first from Job and the second from Psalm 94. Job refers to what we might call ‘clever devils’. I used to tell my students that it would be easier, and wiser, to just learn their work rather than devising clever ways of cheating in the exam. Psalm 94 speaks of the wicked telling themselves that God does not see the evil they do. Their futile thoughts give rise to foolish, even wicked behaviour, in this case thinking that God, who makes the eye, does not himself see (Ps 94:9). Futile thoughts abound even in our modern society. In fact our modern society increasingly appreciates the beliefs and the witchcraft of animistic people, like those of NE India.

Futile thoughts abound in our society. Some years ago, in response to a newspaper article claiming that climate change was causing poverty, I wrote asking if we should stop giving aid to the poor and focus on helping them by reducing greenhouse gas emissions! It is the same with bushfires; the wisdom of the world says we must stop climate change in order to stop bushfires. Does not God who made this world, the God who sends the rain and withholds the rain, not know about the climate? God made mankind stewards of his creation of course; he gives us wisdom to manage what is his for his glory. As Christians under the new covenant we are also stewards of the mysteries of God (4:1). God has revealed all truth to us, truth about the creation and about our salvation, the truth about the past, the present, and the future.

**2. Everything in Christ**

The person who is wise will not boast in himself or any man. Our only boasting can be in Christ because all we have comes from him. And indeed, in Christ we have more than we can ask or think (Eph 3:20). ‘All things are yours’ says Paul to the Corinthians. He is speaking in the context of them lining up behind various men who ministered in their church. Paul, Apollos and Peter all belong to all of them. As apostles they came to them as servants of Christ. They were not looking for a personal following in which they could boast. Politicians, sporting heroes and celebrities like to cultivate a personal following; they have their fan club. These days everyone has their fan club it seems, as they compare lists of Facebook friends. Paul did not want a personal fan club; he wanted everyone in the church to be a follower of Christ and Christ alone. It was Christ who called these men to Corinth to preach and teach the gospel.

Paul continues listing things that as believers they have in Christ (3:22). As he does he launches into a kind of doxology with words reminiscent of Romans 8:38-39 where he rejoices in the love of God in Jesus Christ, and in Romans 11:23 where he concludes of Christ, ‘For from him, and through him, and to him, are all things, to whom be glory forever, Amen’. He tells the Corinthians that, ‘All things are yours’, including the world, life and death, as well as things present and things to come. Would you like the world to be yours? This is a thing of dreams, right? No. In Christ this is a reality. Christ is the creator so the world is his, and in him it is yours! Christ is the giver of life, and in him you have conquered death! And you were worrying about what you will eat and what you will wear, or maybe about your looks, your health or your family? Check out what Jesus says in Matthew 6:25f.

Jesus tells us not to worry and Paul agrees, telling us that, ‘all things are yours’. The present is yours and even the future - all are yours (3:22). He is not promising you health, wealth and happiness in worldly terms- remember the wisdom of this world is empty and vain. Being a new creation and having the mind of Christ, our desires are different. Our desire is to please our heavenly Father in all we do because of who he is and all he has done for us in Jesus Christ. He has put us into Christ, in whom we have new life, a life of hope, the hope of glory. ‘You are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s’. There is no higher calling than what we have received in Jesus Christ our Lord.

**3. Each one’s praise from God**

Following this doxological outburst, Paul returns to the matter of divisions in the church at Corinth- he will continue on this subject to the end of chapter 4. When we choose one preacher over another we praise one and judge the other, often blindly so. Spurgeon said that ‘ministers are not often estimated rightly’. I think Paul’s condemnation would extend to those who regard the words of a certain preacher or commentator as almost inerrant. Paul was being judged by a certain cohort in Corinth, apparently because he was not a ‘gifted speaker’ (2:1, 4). He wanted these critics to know that he was not concerned about their judgment because again, this was worldly conduct; they probably stood and applauded a good sermon!

Paul and Apollos and Peter should be regarded as ‘servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God’ (4:1). Paul has already spoken of his task as planting and that of Apollos as watering the crop that belongs to God. The word ‘steward’ is literally ‘housekeeper’ or ‘administrator’. Joseph was such a person in the house of Potiphar. In Victorian England wealthy people had large houses and an array of servants. A loyal and trustworthy servant or housekeeper was highly valued. Stewards in the service of Almighty God are required to be found faithful (4:2).

Ministers in the church are ‘stewards’ of God and accountable to him, not to the members of the church. Paul did not accept their judgment of him as God’s servant, nor did he accept the judgment of a human court with regard to his service as God’s servant. He did not even accept his own judgment. Some ministers cop criticism from various quarters and other are very self-critical. Criticism can be constructive and helpful, although that directed at Paul, like a lot of criticism, was more destructive than constructive. Some ministers think they are above criticism, and a personality cult mentality only confirms such a delusion. The truth is that, ‘He who judges me is the Lord’ (4:4). At the appropriate time, namely at the coming of the Lord, the Lord’s judgment will be made known. He will not only judge each one’s work with fire, as pictured in the previous chapter, but will judge secret things of the heart and motives by which people served him (4:5).

Before I was called to the ministry I worked with a man who had left the ministry. He was in a church where the members could vote to remove him. In our church only the presbytery can do such a thing; the presbytery ordains a man for the ministry and, upon receiving complaints can remove that ordination. But ultimately it is the Lord who judges each man’s work and it is this judgment that concerned Paul. A minister who fears being judged by members of the church will find it hard being faithful to his true Judge. He will be concerned about pleasing men rather than God.

Paul concludes by looking at the other side of the coin, namely praise. It we do not regard the judgment of people then we can hardly regard their praise. A servant looks to praise from their master. A servant of God will look for praise from God (4:5). They will look to the heavenly reward spoken of by Jesus, and by Paul in the previous chapter (3:15): ‘Well done good and faithful servant’.

**A fool for Christ’s sake** 1Corinthians 4:6-13

A few years ago, a young pastor was invited to speak at a Christian convention in our city. People came away praising his clear and forthright presentation of the gospel. He was already popular in the USA where he pastored a rapidly growing congregation. Books he wrote were as popular as his preaching. But I have not seen or heard of this man recently. The last I heard was of him being asked to leave his church. The members started complaining about his arrogance and bullying ways within the church; he was forthright as I said, but this confidence apparently moved into overconfidence and arrogance. When he refused to listen to the elders they had to sack him because of the trouble he was causing in the congregation.

The men Paul left in charge of the church at Corinth had not grown as believers in Christ. They had set out well as Paul preached Christ and him crucified. Apollos came after Paul and we have no reason to believe that he departed from the truth established by Paul; although it seems he was a more eloquent preacher. Paul writes of himself as planting and Apollos as watering in the garden of God (3:6). But the society in which these people lived placed great value on oratory, on men spruiking some new philosophy or wisdom. People flocked to hear such men, some this man and some the other. These worldly ways were creeping into the church, with various leaders gathering a cult following. In doing so they sidelined Paul and the apostles. Paul was concerned that they would sideline the gospel itself if they continued in these worldly ways.

The gospel Paul preached was accompanied by the Spirit’s working in individual hearts making for a new creation in Christ Jesus. They had received the Holy Spirit but their behaviour was more worldly or carnal than spiritual. Jealousy and arrogance are not evidence of the indwelling Spirit of God (3:3). Paul continues addressing these unnamed leaders or trouble makers in the church at Corinth, even though they had judged him as being weak and no longer relevant to their church. They thought the church was theirs and were ready to split the church rather than humble themselves before one another, before the apostle Paul or before the Lord himself.

I don’t know why anyone would join a church run by a man accountable to no one but himself, but thousands of Christians do just this. I am not advocating for churches claiming apostolic succession of course, but church leadership must at least be accountable to the Lord and to the elders of the church. Let us in the church today look and learn from the way the apostle deals with this problem of arrogant leaders and divisions in the church. In this passage from his letter we will firstly deal with, ‘Puffed up preachers’ and then with, ‘Pulled down apostles’.

**1. Puffed up preachers**

The whole matter of divisions in the church at Corinth came to the notice of Paul through a report from Chloe’s household- she must have been a member of this church. The report was that members were lining up behind Paul or Apollos or Peter- or Christ (1:12). It becomes evident that resident leaders were stoking the fires of division. Paul was no longer there, nor was Apollos or Peter; they may have been using these names for their own selfish purposes. Paul refers to ‘another’ person building on the foundation he laid, which is Jesus Christ (3:10,11), warning them to be careful how they build.

Paul now says that the things he was writing about himself and Apollos applied to any and every leader in the church- namely, ‘I planted and Apollos watered’ (3:6) and, ‘Paul, Apollos and Cephas… are all yours’ (3:22). Whatever leaders had been appointed in the church should be accepted by the whole church, and these leaders should accept the whole church, not just their party. Moreover, let them note that Paul and Apollos were servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God (4:1). The word ‘servant’ originally meant ‘slave rower’ and a ‘steward’ was a butler. Slaves have owners and butlers have masters, so no leader in the church can consider himself an owner or master of the church of God.

‘Do not go beyond what is written’ may have been a local proverb but could also be something Paul taught with regard to Scripture; ‘what is written’ usually refers to Scripture (4:6). Whatever Paul taught was Scriptural or biblical. He taught what he received from the risen Christ. He knew about the life of Christ and sought to live like Christ. He urged the Corinthians to, ‘Imitate me, just as I imitate Christ’ (11:1). Their behaviour, as he learned in this report from Chloe’s household, was not what Paul taught or demonstrated, and certainly not Christ-like. They were making up their own standards of conduct, standards to suit their ‘still carnal’ nature. They were going beyond what is written.

Derek Prime writes, ‘Shallow obedience to the Bible is one of the most subtle snares Satan places before us’. Too many churches are ‘evangelical’ or ‘Bible-believing’ in name but not in practice. Many have gone beyond what is written in ordaining women into positions of leadership. Why? Because of pressure from the world. Some have gone way beyond the Bible in condoning divorce and homosexual marriage. Why? Because of pressure from the world, the world, the flesh and the devil. The church in Corinth was heading in the direction of condoning sexual immorality, as we will see in the next chapter. For now, Paul is dealing with another sin raising its ugly head within the church, the sin of pride and arrogance. Our Bible translates with the very descriptive term, ‘puffed up’; we might use the word ‘big-headed’, and even add ‘pig-headed’! Let ‘none of you be puffed up on behalf of one against the other’ warns the apostle (4:4:6). As he said previously, ‘Let no one boast in men’ (3:21). Prime writes, ‘It is a dreadful thing to give Christ’s messengers the prominence that belongs to their Master’. Our next subheading will point to a similarly dreadful thing, that of disrespect and mistreatment of Christ’s messenger.

‘For who makes you different from anyone else?’ asks Paul (4:7 NIV). This is the first of three rhetorical questions used by the apostle to remind ‘uppity’ or ‘puffed up’ people in the church of their true standing before men and before God. Firstly, all men are created equal. It was a wise man called Job who said, ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I shall return there’ (Job 1:21). In the nursing home the archbishop sits at the same table as the one who washed his robes, so should they not sit at the same table in the church? Should a senior minister be saying to a junior, ‘Who do you think you are to question what I teach’? There is of course, a place for instruction but there is no place for puffed up bullies. To be proud of one’s knowledge or wisdom is to show a lack of both!

Paul’s second question reminds the puffed up person that whatever they have they have received, received from God (4:7). Again we have the words of Job, ‘The Lord gives and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord’ (Job 1:21). And thirdly, if what you have you received from the Lord, why do you boast? Do you boast in something you are given? People boast in what they achieve on the sports field, in the exam, or in a promotion. Pastors might boast in their ‘fan club’, but how can they when it is the Lord who gives us everything we have? ‘Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord’ (1:36 NIV), because the Lord is the giver of every good and perfect gift. What Paul says is logical and biblical, even if it is widely forgotten as the world impacts our lives, even within the church.

Paul moves from rhetorical questions to irony as he presses home his condemnation of what was going on in the church at Corinth. He is not trying to shame any particular person- he mentions no names- but urges them not to forget who they are in Christ. Their focus must be on their saviour and Lord, not on themselves and their status within the church, and certainly not their status in the world. They viewed themselves as being full; they were satisfied, having everything they wanted (4:8). They were rich; they felt like kings within the little ‘empire’ they had built for themselves. These people had become self-sufficient; they had ‘arrived’ spiritually. Scholars speak of an emphasis on an ‘over-realised eschatology’ that is noticeable in ‘Holy Spirit’ movements.

The Christian should not be seeking after things of this world, material things or earthly rewards. To be full of such things is dangerous to the soul. Paul mocks such boasting from members and leaders in the church at Corinth; he writes, ‘I could wish that you did reign, that we also might reign with you’ (4:9). Material riches and the praise of men mean nothing in the kingdom of God. In fact, ‘the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil’ (1Tim 6:10). The praise of men is equally dangerous to a believer; praise from God should be our focus (4:5).

**2. Pulled down apostle**

Paul gets personal as he tells these carnal, worldly Christians the things that he has suffered, and continues to suffer, as an apostle of Jesus Christ, as the one who first preached the gospel in their city and their father in the faith (4:15). Continuing his irony he writes, ‘We are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are wise in Christ!’ (4:10). He had earlier told them that the gospel appears foolish to the Greeks but is in fact, the power and wisdom of God. These renegade leaders in the church had reverted to worldly thinking by claiming to be wise, and by rubbishing Paul and making him out to be a fool. They said, ‘His bodily presence is weak and his speech contemptible’ (2Cor 10:10). They were judging him by worldly standards. Paul responds by agreeing that he is a fool for Christ’s sake, and that he is weak and he is dishonoured - in contrast to them! The words, ‘For Christ’s sake’ indicate Paul’s focus. He remembered how Christ lived in this world and how this world treated Christ. He does not compare his sufferings with those of Christ of course, but he does compare himself with these men who were leading, or misleading, themselves and the church at Corinth.

The Roman world was a brutal world. Gladiators fought to the death before huge audiences. When their army returned victorious from a battle their prisoners were dragged along at the end of their victory parade. One or both of these gruesome images is in Paul’s mind as he describes his ministry as an apostle- coming ‘last, as men condemned to death’ (4:9). Far from having men lined up following him, Paul regarded himself as last in a line of men despised by this world, ‘a spectacle to the world, to both angels and to men’, a spectacle to the whole universe (4:9).

As Paul wrote this letter from Ephesus after twenty years of ministry, he was still suffering as an apostle of Jesus Christ. He was suffering hunger and thirst, beatings and being clothed in rags and being homeless (4:11 cf.2Cor 11:27). Paul was in Ephesus when pagans rioted against him for preaching the gospel. His friends saved him from being torn to pieces by the mob. He had previously been stoned in Lystra, and imprisoned in Philippi. When in Corinth he had to work in the leather trade to support himself. Manual labour was despised by the Greeks; none of the orators would have dared touch a tool. Such a culture was being carried over into the church, not for the first or the last time (cf. 2Thess 3:10, 11).

The apostle continues listing the things he had suffered for the sake of the gospel, emphasising his response to the mistreatment and abuse showered upon him. Here was a highly educated Jew, most likely more educated than any in that church, working with his hands and feeling no shame. Why? Because he was called to an apostle of Jesus Christ. When reviled he blessed and when persecuted he endured, just like the One who called him (1Peter 2:23). When defamed or slandered he did not run to the court seeing revenge but spoke kindly to his detractors (4:13). Working with leather is not only hard work, it is dirty work. A worse job is that of making the leather itself; flesh and hair has to be removed from rotting animal hides in a process called scouring. Paul writes, ‘We have been made as the filth of the world, the off-scouring of all things until now’ (4:13). Men who break a union picket line are called scum or scabs- Paul had been called much worse and treated much worse. He endured name-calling, physical beating and whatever abuse the world threw at him. He did so silently and without fighting back or taking people to court; he blessed those who cursed him, just as his Lord did before him. ‘Paul’s weakness was the secret of his strength because he was walking in the way of the cross, which is true wisdom’.

**Concluding plea and warning** 1Corinthians 4:14-21

A church pastor often feels like writing a letter pleading with, or indeed warning, a church member about some matter, but he rarely does so. Why? Maybe he is afraid of getting a sharply critical reply- which is often the case! Or maybe he is afraid that the church member will pack up and leave- which is often the case also! Godly discipline is rarely seen in the church today. Barnett writes, ‘Few aspects of modern church life are so at odds with the apostle as our failure to exercise godly discipline, whether in regard to unrepented immorality or unrepented heresy’. Godly discipline requires upright and fearless leaders in the church, men who are so bold as to say with the apostle Paul, ‘Imitate me, even as I imitate Christ’ (11:1), and men who depend not on politics but on the power of God.

Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthian church in response to concerns brought to his notice. Even so, he began by thanking God for the grace and the gifts given to these saints in Corinth, and reminding them that God who is faithful, will keep them to the end. Christians in Corinth were precious to God and precious to the apostle. The first concern he deals with is that of divisions in the church. He established this church with Christ as the head but various men had put themselves forward, or had been put forward, as ‘heads’ of the church- maybe with the help of women. Not infrequently it is the wife of the pastor or elder who foments division in a church.

Division in the church is a serious matter to the apostle. In uncovering the cause of this problem in Corinth he noted worldly wisdom and worldly ways creeping into the church; its focus was on eloquent and persuasive speakers. Paul was not such a speaker and he was being sidelined by the ‘upstart’ or puffed up leaders in this church. At stake was the very nature of the church; it is not a man-made institution but a divine ‘organism’, as we note on our website. Christ is the head of this ‘body’, or in Paul’s metaphor of a building, the foundation, and no other foundation can be laid (3:11). Let no one claim privileges or authority as founding members of a particular congregation. Paul will refer to himself as a father to these people, a spiritual father not an institutional father (4:15); ‘do not call anyone on earth your father, for one is your Father in heaven’ said Jesus (Mat 23:9).

After four chapters of assessing this problem of division in the church at Corinth we come to the apostle’s concluding words. He speaks gently to the members as ‘beloved children’ but includes a final warning to those who are puffed up, and thinking that Paul would not return (4:14, 18).

**1. Plea to ‘imitate me’**

The apostle got rather personal in what he wrote to the puffed up people in the church at Corinth just before this concluding paragraph. He used pointed rhetorical questions and irony as he exposed their proud ways and hollow claims to have ‘arrived’ spiritually, and materially. And this while he as an apostle of Christ worked with his hands, and suffered slander and personal abuse- even from them. Paul did not like talking about the things he suffered (2Cor 12:1), but he wanted the Corinthians to know that following Christ is seen as foolishness by the world, so a Christian will be a fool for Christ’s sake. We used to hear true Christians mockingly referred to as ‘wowsers’ or ‘Bible bashers’ but today it is sufficient to call us ‘evangelicals’ or ‘fundamentalists’. Sections of the church even use such terms in a derogatory sense.

‘I do not write these things to shame you’ says Paul, half apologising for speaking about his suffering for Christ’s sake. Not that he was above shaming heretics and immoral people (6:5), but it was always his aim to bring about repentance and restoration in any who went astray. In writing to the church in Corinth he endearingly calls them ‘my beloved children’; he was drawing near to them even as he rebuked them, or some of them, for worldly thinking and behaviour. With brotherly, and even fatherly concern, he warned them not to continue in the way they were going.

When Paul wrote to Timothy he called him a true son in the faith, and a ‘beloved son’ (1Tim 1:2, 2Tim 1:2). Why? Because Timothy came to faith in Jesus Christ through the preaching of Paul. Timothy gets a special mention in verse 17. The Christians in Corinth similarly came to faith through the preaching of this apostle, his preaching of Jesus Christ and him crucified, so he similarly calls them his ‘beloved children’. Paul was no longer present but he was still their father in the faith; ‘In Jesus Christ I have begotten you through the gospel’ (4:15). He pleaded with them to remember him and respect him as such because though they had countless instructors or guardians in Christ they had only one father. Guardians are slaves or servants in the household, employed to teach and care for the children; they could never replace the father and the love of the father. A loving father wants to see his children mature and become independent (3:2), independent of Paul as father but not of Christ and their heavenly Father.

Paul’s plea to his ‘beloved children’ in the church at Corinth is that they imitate him (4:16). This is a bold proposition from the apostle. We don’t see many Christian leaders pleading with people to ‘imitate me’. More often they are saying, ‘do what I say, not what I do!’ Paul could say, ‘Do what I do because I do what I say; I practice what I preach’. Paul was not claiming to be perfect, as some think. He was claiming to be their father in the faith, and what father does not tell his son to watch him and then do the same? That’s how children learn- by watching their Sunday School teacher or their pastor.

In pleading for them to imitate him, it is understood that Paul is imitating Christ (11:1). It is not Paul setting the standards of behaviour in the fellowship but Christ. The apostles saw Christ not reviling when reviled and not threatening people when they abused him. Peter writes of Christ as our example when it comes to suffering, and indeed in loving and being a blessing to others (1Peter 2:21-23). I hope you see Christ as your example, and pray that the indwelling Holy Spirit give you the grace to follow Christ’s example. I hope that you see the importance of modelling Christ within your home, your workplace and your church, and that you might be able to say, with the apostle Paul, ‘Imitate me even as I imitate Christ’.

As we mentioned, Timothy was Paul’s ‘beloved and faithful son in the Lord’ (4:17). Paul met Timothy in Lystra and invited him to come with him on his second missionary journey. Timothy and Silas were in Corinth with Paul when he first visited and established the church- his only visit up to this time. He was with Paul in Ephesus also, but Paul had sent him across to Macedonia before the city rioted against Paul for preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. It seems that when Paul heard about the problems in Corinth he immediately sent a message to Timothy to go and help this church (4:17, 16:10). As Paul’s ‘beloved son’ and like-minded deputy (Phil 2:20), Timothy would remind the Corinthians of what Paul taught and how Paul lived in all the churches he established. Paul was not demanding any more of the Corinthians than he was of any other church. Other churches had their problems but were not troubled by divisions and by renegade leaders to the same extent as the Corinthian church.

**2. Puffed up ones warned**

The apostles warning was mainly directed at ‘some’ in the church who were ‘puffed up’ or arrogant (4:18). These few are not named but we have learned a lot about them (3:10, 17), and learn more about them now. Barnett thinks of them as leading a Coup d’Etat within the church. Paul was no longer present and they presumed he was not coming back- at least this was the rumour they spread as they promoted their own cause. Paul may have established elders before he left, but church rule by a plurality of elders became church division by a plurality of self-appointed leaders. Such leaders may have been claiming authority from Apollos, Peter or Paul (3:22). Christian publishing has succumbed to the influence of popular names. One lecturer and writer told of how, when asked to write a book on the OT, the publishers said they would get someone else to write it- they just wanted to use his name!

The arrogant leaders Paul had in focus were not at all fond of his emphasis on Christ and him crucified. They wanted a gospel more acceptable to the world, a gospel that would make them popular with the people. Paul, and possibly a few who held to his teaching, were being sidelined in this church. Paul is sidelined in many churches today, churches that do not like what he teaches about sexual immorality and divorce, or about women in the church. Some churches only preach from the gospels, claiming that only there do we find the real Christ- there or ‘behind’ the gospel stories! In Paul’s letters we find the same gospel but find it interacting with a pagan environment, an environment not unlike that in which the church interacts today.

Paul has a surprise for these puffed up people: ‘I will come to you shortly’ he writes, ‘if the Lord wills’ (4:19). Paul was not a politician rushing here and there according to his own timetable. He came and went according to the will of God. Sometimes the Lord stopped him going places and at other times opened the door. He wanted to come to Corinth but not until the Lord again opened the door for him to do so. Pastors, and all believers, should be concerned to come and go as the Lord wills (James 4:15). Pastors must never get involved in correction or discipline without prayer; and often it is through prayer alone that discipline is affected. Prayer is more powerful than words in the kingdom of God.

Jesus often spoke about the kingdom of God but Paul not so often (4:20). The kingdom of God came in Jesus Christ, the King of this kingdom. Like the temple of God, the kingdom of God is within you the believer (Mark 10:13); Christ should be ruling your life just as he ruled the life of the apostle Paul. The kingdom of God can also refer to the church in which Christ is the head or the king. The kingdom of God can also have a future reference, to the coming of Jesus in all his glory. Paul is here referring to the church as the kingdom of God (4:20). He preached Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God (1:18, 24). Some like to think that by ‘power’ Paul is referring to miracles, but in context ‘power’ refers to the gospel that Paul preached; the power of the Holy Spirit accompanied his preaching of Jesus Christ and him crucified.

When Paul says, ‘the kingdom of God is not in word’ (4:20), he is referring to the many words and eloquent speeches of the world’s wise men which these puffed up leaders in the church were emulating. They thought that with clever but deceitful words they could win over the majority in this church, thereby establishing their own little empire. We see too much of this philosophy in the church today, particularly in churches where ‘power’ is understood to be in healing and other miracles rather than in the message of the cross.

The question Paul leaves with them is not whether he will come but how he will come. He would prefer to come in love and a spirit of gentleness but that depended on their response to his letter, and to Timothy’s visit. Biblical evidence is that they did not respond positively and that Paul subsequently made a ‘painful visit’ (2Cor 2:1) - a visit with the rod rather than with gentleness. Either way, it would be with love, although the rod does not seem loving at the time. Jesus was loving and gentle but at times took the rod to people corrupting the house of God (John 2:15-16). The Lord is zealous for his house. Paul was zealous for the church of God at Corinth and we should be zealous for the church of God to which we belong.

**Discipline in the church** 1Corinthians 5:1-8

The Church of Rome has come under intense criticism since a number of its priests have been found guilty of child sexual abuse. Even pagans are horrified by such wickedness. We now have the State stepping in to judge priests found guilty of gross sexual immorality because the church failed to exercise discipline. The criticism aimed at the church is not so much that such priests were found in the church but that the church failed to discipline and expel these members of the church. We are told that all they did was move such men from one church or school to another.

All churches, including ours, have been, or will be, faced with matters of discipline while ever we exist in this fallen world, and its members live in mortal bodies. We contend with the world, the flesh and the devil individually and as a fellowship of believers. Yet we are called to be holy, and by the grace and power of God we strive to be holy in thought, word and deed. Paul concluded the previous chapter saying that the kingdom of God is a kingdom of power. Not that this chapter flows on from the previous chapter. The apostle deals with a different matter here in chapters 5-7, the matter of sexual immorality in the church. He has dealt with the matter of divisions in the church that was reported to him by ‘those from Chloe’s household’ (1:11). In his answer he took us into the whole matter of the wisdom of God and the wisdom of the world, into the nature of the church, and into the Holy Spirit working to make men and women alive in Christ and empower those who believe. Here in chapter 5 Paul deals with another matter reported to him by Chloe’s household, or by Stephanus and his friends who had come to visit Paul in Ephesus (16:17). In looking at this chapter we will ask, ‘What is going on?’ and then note Paul’s concern for the, ‘Welfare of the offender’ and the, ‘Welfare of the church’.

**1. What is going on?**

We know from ancient history, and from what we read in this letter, that sexual immorality was rife in Corinthian society, along with many other sins. Over a thousand prostitutes were attached to the temple of Aphrodite here in Corinth. The Greek word ‘*porneia*’, translated ‘fornication’ or ‘sexual immorality’, covers a range of sexual sins from pre-marital sex, extra-marital sex, incest , homosexual sex and bestiality- although some of these are referred to by specific terms, as in 6:9. And here in this report received by the apostle a specific sexual sin is referred to, namely, ‘a man has his father’s wife!’ (5:1).

Although not actually incest, it is within the realm of familial relationships, his father’s wife being his stepmother; ‘He has his father’s wife’ points to both men ‘having’ the same woman. You are shocked, as I am, and even as the pagans of this city renowned for sexual immorality were shocked (5:2, 1Peter 2:11,12). Some converts in the church had come from a background of sexual immorality (6:9-11), but in Christ they had been washed of such sin and been given the Holy Spirit. As Paul says in the next chapter when dealing with prostitutes, ‘Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you’ (6:19).

God made us either male or female- not both together, and not neither- despite what our pagan society is trying to tell us (Gen 1:27). God made us sexual beings and ordained marriage, the union between a man and a woman, as the place for our sexual desires to be satisfied. The Ten Commandments prohibit adultery, the taking of another man’s wife, which is what this man in the church at Corinth was doing; the other man happened to be his father, who must have been deeply humiliated.

Further prohibitions regarding sexual conduct are given in the so-called ‘holiness code’ in Leviticus 18-20. This makes specific mention ‘uncovering the nakedness’ of your father’s wife (Lev 18:8) because it is a sin against your father as well as against his wife, and of course sin in the eyes of the Lord. Sin of this nature was to be judged by ‘cutting off from the people’ or putting to death the man found guilty (Lev 18:29, 20:11). Paul does not call for the death penalty but he does leave open the possibility of God’s judgment being death (5:5).

Members of the church, including this young man, had either fallen back into old ways or were led astray by false teaching. Paul’s words point to the latter: ‘And you are puffed up’ he says to the church and its leaders, and later, ‘Your boasting is not good’ (5:2, 6). In preaching Christ and him crucified, Paul probably spoke of the freedom we have in Christ, telling the Jews in particular that as believers they were no longer bound to the law or rituals like circumcision; ‘You are not under the law but under grace’ (Rom 6:14).

But these Christians, like many today, did not understand grace. Grace and truth came in Jesus Christ. We are free from the law but are bound to Jesus Christ by his grace- ‘for by grace you have been saved through faith’ (Eph 2:8). Through his death and resurrection, Jesus delivered us from the power of Satan into the kingdom of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, ‘therefore glorify God in your body’ (6:20). There is absolutely nothing in the words or the life of Jesus, or of the apostle Paul, to suggest the libertine lifestyle being adopted by the Christians in Corinth.

Paul was not told of any in the church at Corinth who mourned the sin of this man having his father’s wife. Instead they were proud of this display of their newly found ‘freedoms’ in the gospel (5:2, 6). But they had corrupted the pure gospel preached by Paul by adding the wisdom of this age and of the rulers of this age (2:6). The church is in the world and should be as a light shining in a dark place. But in Corinth the world had entered into the church bringing spiritual and moral darkness. The church boasted of its ‘freedoms’ surrounding sex, ‘freedoms’ not even accepted by the world. Their endorsement of this man’s sin was as bad as the sin itself. They should have been grieving this wickedness and removed the perpetrator from their midst (5:2). We grieve a church that was recently at the forefront of accepting homosexual marriage, and before this in accepting adultery and divorce and women leaders in the church.

**2. Welfare of the offender**

If the apostle had been present things would have been different in the Corinthian church. He writes that he ‘is present in spirit’ and has already judged this sexually immoral member of the church. You might think ‘judgment of the offender’ would be a better heading than ‘welfare of the offender’, but let us look at the process of discipline outlined by the apostle. Judgment is certainly involved but as always in the NT, judgment in the hope of restoration, or at least being saved from hell- saved in the Day of the Lord (cf. 3:15). In a family children are disciplined for their good, and it is the same in the church. God disciplines those he loves. Failure to discipline means failure to love, either a child or a brother in Christ (Gal 6:1). Discipline in the church must never be a matter of vengeance or vindication. Such things are avoided by following the process set down by the apostle Paul.

The first step is for the church or its leaders to gather together in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul says that when they do so he will be there in spirit (5:3, 4). He is having his say in this letter and wants his judgment noted. But more important than the presence of the apostle is the presence of the Lord Jesus. This gathering is to be a solemn meeting at which the word of the Lord prevails and the power of Jesus is recognised (5:4). The second step is to ensure two witnesses, although this is not noted here because the sin is openly acknowledged- but not repented.

The third step is to accept the verdict of the majority; Paul mentions this in 2Corinthains 2:6 where he refers to punishment ‘inflicted by the majority’. The punishment set down for this offence is to ‘deliver such a one to Satan’ (5:5), meaning he be put out of the fellowship (5:2). His expulsion would be grievous to the fellowship and hopefully even more grievous to the offender. We do not condone the practice of sects cutting off members of their family who do not conform to their rules, or the Jews who hold a funeral service for a child who leaves their religion, but removal of fellowship, sometimes called excommunication, is biblical when sinners refuse to repent and seek forgiveness.

Each step in the process of discipline is meant to be positive or restorative with regard to the offender. Delivering him to Satan may not seem positive but the fifth step shows how it can be positive. ‘For the destruction of the flesh’ (5:5) refers to suffering and pain, like that which Satan, with God’s permission, inflicted on Job and on Paul himself (2Cor 12:7). Offences in regard to the Lord’s Supper were judged with sickness and even death (11:30). Death may not seem a positive punishment but physical death is better than spiritual death (Mat 5:27-30); better to be saved through the flames than not saved (3:15). The aim of all Christian discipline is in the sixth step, namely restoration of the sinner to fellowship with the Lord and the Lord’s people. Sickness and suffering experienced outside the fellowship has served to restore many a Christian to the fellowship, and may it continue to do so, to the glory of God!

**3. Welfare of the church**

Every saved sinner is precious to God, but so is the church, the bride of Christ. Every believer will belong to the church. Those who think they can live outside the fellowship of God’s people are deceiving themselves. It is when two or three are gathered together in God’s name that He is in their midst (Mat 18:20). As the bride of Christ, the church should be holy and without blemish (Eph 5:27); the members of the church must be holy or sanctified, and this God has done in Christ Jesus (1:2, 5:7). But when members sin they blemish the church, not only in the eyes of God but in the eyes of other members and in the eyes of the world. We all sin but when we do we must repent and seek forgiveness. When we deny our sin or try to excuse it by saying it is okay, or even worse, saying it shows our freedom in Christ, or that we have arrived at some super-spiritual state, we blemish the bride of Christ. We put a stumbling block in the way of others and destroy the witness of the church. Look at the witness of the Church of Rome and other churches today!

By way of illustration, Paul refers to a practice of the Jews, the practice of removing all leaven or yeast from the house before celebrating Passover. Moses detailed this practice at the first Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread (Exod 12). The Hebrews were becoming a new nation so every contaminating evil of Egypt had to be removed. The apostle viewed the church in the same way; every believer was a new creation in Christ Jesus, ‘old things have passed away; behold all things are new’ (2Cor 5:17). If this sexually immoral man was allowed to continue this sin in this church the whole church would be contaminated and corrupted in no time. Other members, especially the young, might say, ‘If he can live like that and remain a member so can I’. Some might even show they have ‘arrived’ by taking two wives or by returning to the prostitutes they once frequented- or even by sexually abusing children!

Paul warns this church to remove the old leaven, the leaven of malice and wickedness, to do this thoroughly and without delay (5:8). This church needed to be swept clean of evil just like the house of the Passover was swept clean of old leaven- it was not just swept under the carpet! A house swept clean must not be left empty but be filled with truth and righteousness, or as Paul writes, with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth (5:8). Sincerity refers to pure motives, and truth refers to pure or Christ-like conduct.

In using the Exodus story as an analogy, the apostle is drawn to declare, ‘For indeed, Christ our Passover was sacrificed for us’ (5:7). As a Jew he kept the Passover in remembrance of God’s deliverance of his forefathers from bondage in Egypt. But he knew Passover was fulfilled in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ because Jesus spoke of the Passover cup being ‘a new covenant in my blood which is shed for you’ (Luke 22:20). At Corinth, and in every place, he preached Christ and him crucified, and he expected the church to remember the precious blood of Jesus Christ; as a lamb without blemish he gave his blood for the forgiveness of our sins. Sin is real. Sin is abhorrent to God; it always was and always will be. There is no place in the church, or anywhere else, for men or women to think that they are beyond sin, that they have arrived at some super-spiritual state in which the body no longer matters. Not until Jesus comes again will our bodies be changed and we will be ushered into the place of no more pain, no more sorrow and no more sin.

**Put away the wicked person** 1Corinthians 5:9-13

When you see a brother or sister in Christ falling into sin what do you do? The easiest thing to do is say nothing and act as if nothing is happening. But something must be happening to your relationship with this person if you are walking in the truth; you must show your disapproval of their behaviour in some way. If you decide to speak to your brother or sister about their sin you will probably get told, ‘Judge not that you be not judged’ (Mat 7:1). This is among the best known verses of the Bible- but also the most misunderstood! All Jesus is saying is, look to your own life before you judge someone else. If you have done this, and if you love your fellow believer, you will speak to them about their sin, particularly if their sin is against you (Mat 18:15). Speak to this person in love, with the aim of restoring him or her to fellowship with the Lord and with the Lord’s people.

Paul urged the believers at Corinth to mourn because of the sin of a member of the church. His sin was public rather than personal, so it was to be taken to the church for judgment (5:4, Mat 18:17). If he will not listen to the church then, ‘let him be as a heathen and a tax-collector’ said Jesus (Mat 18:17). As a tax-collector, Zacchaeus was despised by fellow Jews. When Jesus went to visit his house and eat with Zacchaeus the Jews criticised him for associating with this ‘sinner’ (Luke 19:7). Jesus of course, was ready to forgive this ‘sinner’ when he repented. We in the church must also be ready to forgive sinners who repent.

The apostle Paul received a report from the church in Corinth in which he learnt that a member of this church ‘had his father’s wife’ (5:1). Some think this means he was married to his stepmother, but having sexual relations with a woman, as this text indicates, does not make for marriage. The woman was his father’s wife, not his! Polyandry is practiced in some societies but not in ancient Corinth and certainly not in the church. The Samaritan woman had a man but Jesus makes it clear that he was not her husband (John 4:18). Sexual relations are part of marriage but they do not define marriage; they make for a *de facto* marriage not a *de jure* marriage.

In dealing with this sin of sexual immorality that was being tolerated, and even boasted about in the church at Corinth, the apostle refers to a previous letter he sent to Corinth (5:9). It is generally accepted that this letter is now lost, but it obviously dealt with various matters of immorality, including sexual immorality in the church. Their misunderstanding of what he wrote opens the way for Paul to teach about relations between the church and the world. Our first subheading is, ‘Do understand Paul’s letter’, our second, ‘Do not associate with an immoral brother’ and our third, ‘Do not judge immoral outsiders’.

**1. Do understand Paul’s letter**

In this previous letter mentioned in verse 9, Paul told those in the church not to keep company or mix with sexually immoral people in the church (5:9). However, they did not take note of the qualifying words, ‘in the church’. Sexual immorality of all kinds was rampant within Corinthian society so the Christians thought Paul was referring to these outsiders. A blindness towards things going on in the church no doubt contributed to their misreading of his letter. Did they recognise this man’s behaviour with his stepmother as sexual immorality and as sin? If this was not sin what is! Did they not know the seventh commandment? Did they think Jesus did away with the commandments?

As Jesus spoke about judging others he spoke about having a plank in your own eye (Mat 7:3). He was referring to an individual, but sometimes a church can have a plank its eye. We can become blind to things going on in our own life and in the life of our church. We can be vehemently criticising the sins of others while guilty of sins within our own church. And let us not be making value judgments about sin. Paul’s letter was about sexual immorality but he also mentioned coveting, extortion, and idolatry (5:10). Such sins were as widespread in Corinthian society as sexual immorality. I just received an email from a friend in India dealing with people in the church who are grabbing church land for themselves- and bribing judges to do so! In fact, one sin leads to another so various sins would be found in sinners at Corinth or in India or in any church.

Converts in Corinth once frequented prostitutes, and it seems they were returning to them (6:15). If a man could have his father’s wife they reasoned they could have a prostitute. Prostitutes cost money of course, so this ‘business’ is often linked to extortion and swindling. The sin of coveting is included in the Ten Commandments, along with adultery and stealing, but is rarely considered a sin. The Ten Commandments have been reduced to less than five today! Coveting or eagerly desiring what belongs to someone else is seen as acceptable and even admirable behaviour. The man in question at Corinth obviously coveted his father’s wife. Contentment and thankfulness is what we are taught in the Bible (cf. 4:7, 1Tim 6:5-10).

How could the Christians in Corinth think Paul was telling them not to associate with people outside the church who we sexually immoral, covetous, idolaters or extortioners? This is what people of the world are like! Indeed, this is what these people were like before they believed in Jesus Christ, and became a new creation in him. To not associate with such people would mean ‘going out of this world’ (5:10). It would mean only working for Christians and only having Christians working for you, only shopping in stores owned and run by Christians and only playing on Christian sports teams. A lot of Christians hold to such ideals, but few are consistent in doing so.

Some Christians do cut themselves off from ‘sinful society’ to live in a monastery or commune but this is not what the Bible teaches. If all Christians did this then who would be left to witness to the sinful society? ‘It is possible to so retreat from the world that we are not in a position to share the good news’. The church is to be in the world as a light, reflecting the ‘Light of the world’, the Lord Jesus Christ (John 8:12). ‘As we have opportunity, let us do good to all men’, writes Paul, without neglecting fellow believers of course (Gal 6:10). To do good in the name of Jesus we must get alongside people. We can do this without sharing in their sin- just look at Jesus. Mixing with unbelievers does not include marriage of course, or joining them in worshipping idols (2Cor 6:14-17).

**2. Do not associate with an immoral brother**

Paul’s first letter, and now this present letter, was about associating with a brother, with a fellow Christian, who was caught up in sin and refusing to repent; repentance means turning away from sin. A brother in the Corinthian church was guilty of sexual immorality but there was no evidence of repentance; and the church was not demanding repentance. Such was the morality, or lack thereof, being displayed and accepted by this church.

Paul indicates that other sins like covetousness, idolatry, slander, drunkenness and extortion were present in this church. In a church in India it was common, and common knowledge, for the bishop to be found drunk on the side of the road. A man in the Vatican was recently accused of extortion. Christians are not immune to any sin, so the church is not immune to any sin but it must be ready to deal with sin inside the church as and when it becomes known. This was the context of the apostle’s letter and these follow-up instructions.

With reference to the man who had his father’s wife, Paul has outlined the six steps to be taken by the church in disciplining the offender. Their judgment, made with the apostle being present in spirit, was to deliver this man over to Satan (5:5). Paul explains what this meant by comparing the removal of leaven from the home before Passover. Here in verse 11 he tells the church not to associate with an immoral brother, ‘not even to eat with such a person’ (5:11). This would include the Lord’s Supper and any communal meal at the church, and even eating with him in the home. Just as Moses spoke of cutting off a person from the congregation of Israel, so this offender was to be cut off from the congregation of God’s people, from the visible church. Paul quotes the stipulation made many times by Moses, ‘put away from yourselves the evil person’ (5:13, Deut 22:21, 24, 24:7).

Exclusion of a sinning brother or sister from the fellowship is a responsibility and duty given to the church by God (5:11, 12). By a sinning brother or sister we mean one who refuses counsel to repent and seek forgiveness. Unrepentant sinners are to be cut off from every form of fellowship, including table fellowship. The aim of such punishment is firstly, to produce repentance and a desire to be restored to the fellowship. Secondly, to prevent a contagion of sin within the church, and thirdly, to ensure Christian witness into the observant outside community.

**3. Do not judge immoral outsiders**

Jesus said that God did not send him into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved (John 3:17). Do we need to be reminded that we are in the world not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved? Do we spend too much time condemning those outside the church rather than examining ourselves and judging sins within the church? Do we spend too much time condemning the lost rather than seeking to save them? When the Pharisees saw Zacchaeus the tax-collector they condemned him, but Jesus went to his house, where he heard Zacchaeus repent and be saved (Luke 19:9).

The apostle Paul rules out judging people outside the church (5:12). His duty, and the duty of the church, was, and is, to judge those inside the church. In preaching the gospel we do preach God as the creator and controller of the world. We do preach the commands God has given for all people, for their good and his glory. We do call on all people to repent of their disobedience to God’s holy commands because God forgives those who repent and believe in Jesus Christ. But preaching the gospel is different to pronouncing judgment upon particular sins. Paul preached Christ and him crucified, not conformity to the law as the way of salvation.

It was not the apostle’s duty to judge those outside the church because this is the prerogative of God; ‘those who are outside God judges’ (5:13). There are two aspects to God’s judgment: firstly, God has appointed civil authorities to judge law breakers; he has given them ‘the power of the sword’ (Rom 13:1-4). We are to pray for these authorities that they will administer the law with equity and justice, and we cooperate with them in this endeavour. The moral standards of the church will always be higher than those imposed by the State. It is the standards of the church, standards derived from the Bible, that are the standards by which the church is to judge its own members, not the standards of the State.

Secondly, God has set a Day when he will judge all people in righteousness by the man he has ordained, namely his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. While Jesus said he had not come to condemn the world but to save (John 3:17), he went on to say, ‘The Father judges no one but has committed all judgment to the Son’ (John 5:22). All will appear before the judgment seat of Christ when he returns (2Cor 5:10). His judgment will be completely just; it will be righteous judgment. Christ crucified, the message of the gospel, is the righteousness of God revealed to the world: ‘For he made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him’ (2Cor 5:21).

**Brothers going to court** 1Corinthians 6:1-8

I retrieved from my files a letter a church member had a solicitor write for him, threatening legal action against another church member: ‘Notice of intent to litigate defamatory imputations made by you’. I was told that this man was in the habit of making threats to sue other people. I am also told that people in the USA are in the habit of suing one another in the courts, a habit that can enter the church. Not that our ancestors in Scotland were reticent to take church matters to secular courts! Such matters often involved church property. Moving across to India, I have a friend assisting a mission in stopping a worker from grabbing mission land for himself. They have been forced to go to court, but it not certain that justice will be done because the secular courts in India, like so many places, are notoriously corrupt.

In the church at Corinth two members were in dispute and this dispute was taken to the secular court. The apostle Paul came to know of this matter, and in this letter to the church condemns them in the strongest terms. In fact he writes to shame them, something he was reluctant to do with regard to fellow Christians (6:5).

Paul was in Ephesus when he received a report from the church in Corinth- two reports in fact. Members of Chloe’s household told him about divisions in the church. They, or maybe Stephanus, told him about the man having his father’s wife and other sexual immorality in the church. The church actually wrote to Paul with questions about sex and marriage (7:1). Paul deals with this matter of taking a brother or sister to a secular court in the middle of dealing with sexual immorality in the church, but it is not entirely out of context. He made it clear that the church had the duty of judging immoral persons within their ranks, not of judging those outside the church (5:12). So the church has the duty of judging other matters like disputes between members, particularly disputes over money and property. Matters of a criminal nature must be referred to the State because it alone has the ‘power of the sword’ (Rom 13:4).

Let us look at Paul’s biblically reasoned condemnation of public litigation by church members under three subheadings: ‘Look at what brothers are doing’, ‘Listen to the words of God’, and, ‘Let yourselves be cheated’.

**1. Look at what brothers are doing**

Roman courts were much better at delivering justice than other courts of the day, but were far from perfect. A Roman court judged Jesus of Nazareth to be innocent, but politics and self -interest prevailed to see him crucified. It judged Jesus innocent when the Jewish court judged him guilty; politics and self-interest prevailed in this court also. Paul found himself in a Roman court more than once. In fact, he was brought before a Roman court in Corinth, and had no reason to complain of the judgment given (Acts 18:14).

Paul was not concerned with judging outsiders or with condemning secular courts. But in chapters 1-3 he made it clear that the wisdom of the world is human wisdom whereas Christians and the church have been given the wisdom of God. Having the mind of Christ (2:16), true Christians make Christ-like judgments. Christ-like judgments are based on love, love for God and the honour of his name, and love for your neighbour and his spiritual well-being. Some wise person once said, ‘You can win the argument but lose your brother’. Winning a case against your brother in court will inevitably result in the loss of that brother, if not the division of the church.

Paul was not condemning Roman courts or any secular court but was horrified that members of the church were going before ‘the unrighteous’ or the ungodly judges of such courts rather than ‘the saints’ who presided over church courts. Every believer is given the Holy Spirit when they believe. With God’s holy word and the Holy Spirit, every believer is better equipped to judge matters of morality and fairness than an unbeliever. With the wisdom given him by God, King Solomon made judgments that were noted beyond the borders of Israel. Jesus of course, made judgments that silenced his critics. Moreover, when brothers had a dispute Jesus told them to seek reconciliation and/or counsel, or as a last resort to take it to the church (Mat 18:17). He says nothing about going to secular courts.

**2. Listen to the word of God**

As with many matters that we as believers confront in this fallen world, there is no clear command in Scripture, no command saying, ‘Do not go to a secular court’. But answers to this and other questions can be derived from Scripture- if we know the Scriptures! The apostle takes the Corinthians, and us, to two teachings of Scripture by asking, ‘Do you not know?’ (6:2, 3). He had earlier called them ‘babes in Christ’ and ‘carnal’ Christians (3:1). Carnal Christians do not bother to read or study the Scriptures- which is why they end up behaving in carnal and worldly ways. Six times in this chapter Paul asks this pointed rhetorical question: ‘Do you not know?’

‘Do you not know that the saints will judge the world?’ (6:2); every believer is a saint or holy one according to the Bible, not just men or women nominated by the church. Jesus told his disciples that in his kingdom they would sit on twelve thrones with him judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Mat 19:28, Luke 22:30, Rev 20:4). In the coming age the saints will not only judge Israel but will also judge angels (6:3).

When God raised Jesus from the dead he exalted him to the highest place (Phil 2:9). Being in Christ, the saints are also made to ‘sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus’ (Eph 2:6). This may seem like boasting but this is what the Bible teaches. Paul was not encouraging the Corinthians to boast- they were boasting enough in their own teaching- false teaching. We must know who we are in Christ Jesus and behave as the transformed people that we are in him. Believers who will one day judge the world, and even judge angels, should surely be able to judge matters within the visible church. What is to be gained by looking to outsiders, to people ‘least esteemed by the church’ to judge? Nothing at all- only shame!

The apostle wanted the church at Corinth to feel shame in this matter of taking their disputes to a secular courts. It was totally unacceptable, a total denial of the wisdom given them in Christ Jesus. Anyone in the church should have been able to bring the mind of Christ into the matter in question. Paul does not detail what this matter was but the Corinthians would have known, and we know it was a matter of one brother ‘cheating’ another (6:7). The apostle assumes that a number of members or a church court should be more than able to judge on this matter if wise counsel was not sufficient. He had earlier called for a church court to judge the sexually immoral member. Going to secular courts with matters of morality, and matters of money and property, brings shame on the church of God and the name of God. Some scholars point to Paul appealing to Rome in his trial before a Roman judge, but he was not in court on a money or property matter; he was facing the prospect of being murdered.

Commenting on verse 6, Paul Barnett writes, “Here are two evils. One is that between ‘brothers’, men who trust in the same Lord, who belong to the same Father, who are indwelt by the same Spirit and who are destined for the same eternal kingdom; between *these* litigation has erupted! The other is that *this* dreadful thing occurred in front of those who are ‘unbelievers’, ‘lost’ people to whom the gospel is yet to be presented. Paul is saying to these litigants, ‘your very presence in the court is a categorical denial of all that you profess and unhelpful in the extreme!’”

**3. Let yourselves be cheated**

Two men, two brothers in Christ, had gone to a secular court to settle a dispute. The apostle condemns them for doing so in no uncertain terms. It shows a complete lack of understanding of the difference between the church and the world. It shows a failure to understand Christ as the wisdom of God and that, ‘we have the mind of Christ’ (1:30, 2:16). It shows a failure to listen to the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

When the disciples had disputes, as they did, what did they do? They did not go to the courts; they went to Christ- or Christ came to them. He reminded them that the kingdom of God is different to the kingdoms of this world. He said that the kings of the Gentiles lord it over others, but not so among you (Luke 22:25, 26). ‘Where do disputes and quarrels come from?’ asks James. They come from an unholy lust for pleasure, for profit, for power, or for the praise of men (James 4:1). A dispute involves two people, of whom at least one has given themselves over to a lust that belongs to the world, not to a member of Christ’s family (1John 2:16).

The command of Christ is to love your neighbour as yourself- and your brother in Christ is closer than a neighbour. If you love your brother you will not be cheating him. But given that one brother was cheating another brother in the church at Corinth, what does Paul have to say to the second brother? If he was a worldly person whose heart was ruled by pride and self-interest he would fight back with vengeance. He would assert his rights, demanding justice and his day in court. But a believer is not ruled by pride and self-interest; he is ruled by love; he is looking out for the interests of others, and the interest of Christ (Phil 2:4, 21).

So the apostle counsels. ‘Why do you not rather accept wrong? Why do you not rather let yourselves be cheated?’ (6:7). ‘What sort of counsel is that?’ you might say. Who is going to let themselves be cheated? If someone hits you, hit them back- right? No, wrong. If someone steals your purse you demand it back - right? No, wrong. Remember what Jesus says about turning the other cheek.

Remember what Jesus says about giving your coat to the person who wants to sue you for your shirt (Mat 5:39, 40). When I got off the train in India I was surrounded by a bunch of women begging. And sure enough, I soon felt a hand in my pocket searching for my wallet; I had forgotten to put my wallet in a safe place. I caught hold of the woman holding my wallet and marched her off to the police booth demanding something be done. The policeman looked at me as if to say, ‘What do you want me to do?’ Fine the beggar lady, or lock her up? I realised that nothing could be done. Should I not rather have given her what was in my wallet- and more?

The values or ethics taught by Jesus are not the same as those of the world. He expected his followers to behave differently to people of the world. The apostle Paul expected members of the church, men and women who belonged to Christ, to behave differently to people outside the church. He expected them to live by kingdom-of-God values. This world is not our home. The things of this world are passing away so why do we fight one another over such things.

When we focus on worldly things, and fight over such things, we are no different to those outside the church. The church that preaches Christ and him crucified, and lives by the commands of Christ, will appeal to people who are tired of the selfish and vindictive ways of the world. Such a church can preach the words of Jesus, ‘Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest’, rest today and rest into eternity (Mat 11:28).

**No wicked in the kingdom of God** 1Corinthians 6:9-11

The words of Scripture we are looking at today were recently highlighted in the media thanks to a Christian rugby player; it is a shame that only verse 9 was quoted and not the whole passage in which the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ is declared. We live in a society where homosexuality is becoming as widespread as it was in the ancient word, in Corinth and in other cities of the Roman Empire. It was of course, widespread in the Egyptian empire and among the Canaanites, kingdoms that God destroyed (Lev 18: 3). Sexual immorality and perversions are widespread in every pagan society. In India there is a community of men who dress up as women and tour the country as dancers. Temple carvings depict acts of sexual immorality, acts that continue in temples today. Animistic religions had their sexual perversions; did the indigenous people of our own land only recently learn about the sexual abuse of children? What we see in our society is a return to sexual behaviour that characterises pagan societies, behaviour that is condemned in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

These verses come within the context of the apostle Paul dealing with sexual immorality and other sins in the church at Corinth. He briefly digressed to deal with the matter of brothers taking their dispute to a secular court or ‘unrighteous’ judge (6:1). The larger context of the apostle’s teaching is that of understanding the difference between the church and the world, understanding that as believers in Jesus Christ, and members of the church, they are a new creation in Christ Jesus, so old ways must give way to new ways of living (2Cor 5:17). The word ‘unrighteous’ in verse 9, which means ungodly or unjust or wicked, links this passage to that of ‘going before the unrighteous’ in verse 1. The unrighteous are outsiders, not only with regard to the church but with regard to the kingdom of God. Paul makes it clear that conduct characteristic of the unrighteous rules out entry into the kingdom of God. Our three points today are, ‘the kingdom of God’, ‘activities that prevent entry to the kingdom’, and, ‘such were some of you’.

**1. The kingdom of God**

Jesus began his earthly ministry proclaiming, ‘Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand’ (Mat 5:17). He told many parables as he taught about the kingdom of God. The apostle Paul did not speak so much about the kingdom of God but we find him doing so in this passage from 1Corinthians. He previously spoke of the kingdom of God being a kingdom ‘in power’ (4:20). Here he speaks about the kingdom of God as a kingdom which certain people cannot enter or ‘inherit’ (6:9). Entrance into this kingdom is by invitation only; no one enters on their own merits no matter who they are. Included with the invitation is a ‘garment’ that must be worn, according to the parable of the wedding feast (Mat 22:11). In theological terms it is putting on the righteousness of Christ. All ‘guests’ must be washed and clothed in righteousness in order to ‘inherit’ the kingdom of God. No ‘unrighteous’ person can enter.

The kingdom of God has come in Jesus Christ. It became a reality when Jesus died for our sins and was raised bodily on the third day. ‘The kingdom of God is within you’ when Jesus rules in your midst (Luke 17:21). It is invisible in this present age yet should be reflected in the visible church. When it comes in fullness with the return of Jesus Christ then it will become clear as to who is inside and who is outside the kingdom, or who has inherited and who has not inherited the kingdom of God. But even now, under divine inspiration, the apostle declares that men and women whose lives are ruled by sin will not inherit the kingdom of God. He declares this truth before and after listing various sins that were widespread in Corinthian society and were creeping into the Corinthian church under the guise of freedom from law (5:2, 6:9, 10, 12).

While anyone living a life characterised by these sins will not inherit the kingdom of the God, the reverse is not true. A person whose life exhibits none of these sins is not automatically granted a place in the kingdom - places are ‘inherited’ not earned. To inherit a place you must be a child of the king, King Jesus. It is being ‘in Christ’ that we inherit a place in the kingdom of God. And it is by grace through faith that we become ‘in Christ’ people. Faith involves confession of your sin and believing that Jesus Christ died bearing your sin; that he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven from where he will return to judge the world in righteousness.

**2. Activities that prevent one entering the kingdom of God**

In telling the church how to deal with a member living a sexually immoral life (5:1), the apostle goes on to list other sins which might need dealing with in the church at Corinth: covetousness, idolatry, drunkenness, extortion, and reviling (5:10, 11). The same sins, with the addition of theft, come up again here in these verses even as he turns the focus to sexual immorality. In other letters the list of sins is more extensive but the conclusion is the same: ‘Those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God’ (Gal 5:21, Eph 5:5). Not inheriting the kingdom of God is the same as going to hell, as our footballer friend declared, raising the ire of his pagan colleagues and supporters.

While sins like covetousness and extortion and theft were present in the church at Corinth, as seen with one brother cheating another (6:8), it was sexual immorality that was raising its ugly head the highest. This sin was entering the church from the pagan outside world. Not only had some members been converted from a life of sexual immorality, they walked past temple prostitutes every day. We are similarly confronted by sexual immorality and perversion in movies, in the media, and on pornographic websites if we are not careful. But these church members were not offended by this sexual immorality; they were being deceived by false teachers in the church, men twisting the gospel preached by the apostle Paul (6:9). When Paul said they were free from the law they twisted this to mean free to sin, free to indulge the flesh because only the spirit was important to God. They were ‘spiritual’ men for whom the flesh meant nothing. In denying the flesh, some became ascetics but many became libertines.

‘*Porneia*’ is the Greek word translated ‘fornication’ or ‘sexual immorality’ (5:1, 6:9); we get the word ‘pornography’ from this Greek word. The word ‘*porneia*’ includes a number of sexual sins which the apostle lists in verse 9. Adultery is the sin of taking another man’s wife, as in the case of a man in this church (5:1). Taking another woman’s husband is likewise adultery. The Pharisees wanted a woman caught in the act of adultery stoned but two people are necessarily involved in adultery (John 8:3). Adultery is no longer regarded as a sin in our State law, but it is still listed in the law of God, in the so-called ‘Holiness Code’ that Paul has in mind as he lists acts of sexual immorality.

‘Lying with a man as with a woman’ is an abomination according to the Holiness Code (Lev 18:22). Relating to homosexuality, Paul refers to male prostitutes, or ones sodomised, and to homosexual offenders, literally men who have sex with men (6:9). As previously mentioned, homosexuality was widespread in this and other ancient societies; it is not a behaviour invented by our ‘progressive’ society. Our society may change the law regarding acceptable behaviour but God’s law does not change. Homosexual acts are both a perversion of nature (Rom 1:26, 27) and a violation of God’s holy law. Such behaviour, like adultery and theft and drunkenness and extortion and slander mean exclusion from the kingdom of God.

**3. Such were some of you**

Sexual immorality, including adultery and homosexuality, is an abomination to the Lord, to the apostle Paul and, I trust, to you a believer. But what about the other sins listed here by the apostle? What about coveting, drunkenness or verbally abusing your neighbour? When Paul writes, ‘and such were some of you’ do you say, ‘not me’? The apostle himself admitted to coveting (Rom 7:7, 8). Does this mean we are all excluded from the kingdom of God? Thankfully, no. In reminding the Christians in Corinth what they once were, he also reminds them of what they became after hearing the gospel and believing in Jesus Christ. He reminds them of the power of the gospel to change hearts and lives, the power of the King of the kingdom of God to make them clean and holy before Him.

‘But’ is the key word in verse 11, occurring three times in this one verse. In Ephesians 2 Paul writes, ‘You were dead in trespasses and sins’ and then, ‘But God… made us alive’. He is saying the same thing here: you were filthy, horrible sinners but you were washed, sanctified and justified. Being ‘washed’ is not often used with reference to salvation, apart from the sacrament of baptism, but in Revelation 1:5 we read of ‘Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in his blood’. In Acts 22:16 baptism is described as washing away sins but there is no mention of baptism here in 1Corinthians 6. The reference is to cleansing but cleansing of the heart by the blood of Jesus Christ, as described in Revelation 1:5. ‘What can wash away my sin, nothing but the blood of Jesus’ are the words of a classic hymn.

We are familiar with salvation being referred to as justification. This is how Paul describes salvation in Romans 3: ‘For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus’ (Rom 3:23, 24). ‘Justification’ is courtroom vocabulary; guilty sinners are declared not guilty or righteous by God the judge, against whom they have sinned. In his death, Jesus paid the penalty for our sins.

What is interesting in verse 11 is the inclusion of sanctification, and that before justification, although in his opening greeting Paul refers to church members as ‘sanctified in Christ Jesus’ (1:2). Sanctification means ‘to make holy’ or ‘to set apart for God’. We use this word to describe growth in righteousness before God. The Shorter Catechism Q35 speaks of ‘renewal in the whole man after the image of God’. But sanctification has three aspects: positional, progressive and ultimate. It is the first of these which Paul is thinking of here in verse 11. He is using the terms washed, sanctified and justified synonymously.

Our Shorter Catechism says that both justification and sanctification are acts of God’s free grace, and it is the same with being washed in the blood of Christ. God’s grace is all powerful; it is irresistible. Grace involves the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross, together with the work of the Holy Spirit or ‘the Spirit of our God’ (6:11). Men and women at Corinth who were involved in any or all of the sins listed in the preceding verses were supposedly born again of the Spirit of God. They were a new creation in Christ Jesus, ‘old things have passed away: behold, all things have become new’ (2Cor 5:17). In reminding them of what they once were, Paul urges them not to return to their old ways. In the words of the apostle Peter, he is urging them not to be like the dog returning to its vomit, or the washed pig returning to wallowing in the mud from which it was taken (2Peter 2:22).

**Flee sexual immorality** 1Corinthians 6:12-20

Our life in this world is governed by the laws of our society, no more so than in the crisis of this current pandemic. People are being fined for driving more than 5km from home, for standing instead of sitting in a café, and for not wearing a face mask. Years ago I laughed as a Vietnamese refugee told me how she saw a road sign that said ‘no standing’ and told her friend they had to keep walking! The sign was about cars parking of course. We have had laws about wearing seat belts for many years and, of course, we get fined for speeding. This is how our society works - by everyone adhering to established laws. This is how the kingdoms of this world are governed- obey the rules or you are out.

Unfortunately many think the kingdom of God is the same. They think they automatically belong to this kingdom, and remain in unless they break the rules and get thrown out. I have just returned from a funeral at which the family was assured their loved one was in heaven because he was baptised and lived a good life. Such people are in error about how one enters the kingdom of God (6:11), and also tend to make their own rules about staying in- this church burned candles and incense, and bowed to carved images. Some people think we enter the kingdom by grace and remain in by obeying the rules. People from a Jewish background were/are particularly prone to the idea of law keeping as the way of remaining in the kingdom of God. People from a Gentile background who worship other gods also hold to the idea of law keeping as the way of salvation. Most have an array of food laws that must be kept, along with laws about dress and, of course, laws about worship.

When the apostle Paul came preaching Christ and him crucified as the way of salvation he proclaimed freedom from bondage to laws (Gal 5:1). He said, ‘You are not under law but under grace’ (Rom 6:14). But Christians at Corinth did not hear, or did not understand, the last word ‘grace’. Paul seems to be quoting what they heard and what they were saying when he writes, ‘All things are lawful for me’ (6:12).

In the church today we find some who continue the thinking that salvation is by works of the law, at least in part, but also many Christians who have adopted the libertine view of the Corinthians: ‘All things are lawful for me’. Such teaching is so widespread in the church today that some evangelicals are seeking to counter it with a theology which says we enter the kingdom of God by grace but remain in by keeping the law. But let us see how the apostle Paul counters libertine teaching and practice in the church, particularly with regard to the sexual immorality.

The man who ‘had his father’s wife’ probably held this libertine view (5:1) - and he was not alone. Others thought Christian liberty made frequenting prostitutes permissible. But Christian liberty is not the same as libertine teaching. Paul was horrified that they had misunderstood, or deliberately twisted his teaching in this way. He called upon the church to condemn and expel the man having his father’s wife. He now reasons, on the basis of Scripture, that sex with prostitutes is also sinful despite the abundance of prostitutes in this pagan society. Note how he again rebukes these Christians by asking, ‘Do you not know?’ in verses 15, 16 and 19. Our three subheadings today are: ‘Understand Christian liberty’, ‘United to Christ’ and ‘Indwelt by the Holy Spirit’.

**1. Understand Christian liberty**

The apostle heard of how sexual immorality had crept into the church since his departure. He also heard of how church members were justifying this immoral behaviour. A pithy phrase, ‘All things are lawful for me’ bandied about in the church told only part of the truth. Maybe this was something Paul had said, but not all. Paul does not refute what they were saying but points out their total misunderstanding of what he said. He counters by saying, ‘But all things are not beneficial or helpful’, and again, ‘But I will not be brought under the control of any’ (6:12).

Clearly, many things that are lawful for us to do are not good for us. It is lawful to smoke tobacco but this is not good for your body. It is lawful to drink but drinking to excess is not good for your body either; besides, thousands of lives are harmed by alcoholism. ‘A little wine for your stomach’s sake’ (1Tim 5:23) points to the importance of self-control in this matter, and indeed in all our conduct as Christians. One of the fruits of the Spirit is self-control; ‘against such there is no law’ (Gal 5:22). Paul answers their slogan, ‘All things are lawful for me’, by reminding them of this important fruit of the Spirit- and these were people boasting in the spectacular gifts of the Spirit! The law of liberty is not a licence to let the lusts of the flesh rule one’s life.

The Corinthians had a second ‘wise saying’, as they would claim: ‘Food for the stomach and the stomach for food’ (6:13). They extrapolated from the obvious necessity of the body for food to a necessity for sex. Many credit Sigmund Freud with such ‘wisdom’ but here it is in ancient Corinth. Freud thought that most, if not all, psychological disorders were the result of sexual repression. We still have doctors who think sex is the best treatment for some patients! The apostle counters such worldly wisdom by an obvious truth, namely, ‘God will destroy both the stomach and food’ (6:13). Sure, we need food to live, and without food we will die, but we will not die if our appetite for sex is not met. Saying that the body’s need for sex is the same as its need for food is not valid.

**2. United to Christ**

‘The body is not for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body’ (6:13). The Lord is not really concerned with what goes into your stomach (1Tim 4:3-5) but he is concerned with what you do with your body. If what you eat or drink causes you to lose self-control then the Lord is concerned; sexual immorality is often linked to drunkenness.

Being created in the image of God means our bodies have dignity, human dignity. God the Son came to earth with a human body. Jesus died on the cross and was buried, but God raised him from the dead and will also raise us by his power (6:14). Our bodies end up in the grave but we are destined for resurrection so our bodies should not be used for immorality. The Corinthians had misunderstandings about the resurrection, as we see with their questions in chapter 15 (15:35). They had what some call an over-realized eschatology meaning they thought heaven belonged to this life; richer members of the church tend to have such ideas. They also had Gnostic tendencies with regard to their body and spirit; they thought the spirit was good and important to God but the body was bad and of no importance to salvation.

If the Corinthians had listened carefully to Paul’s preaching they would have understood that being saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ they became an adopted child of God and were therefore related to Jesus, the only begotten Son of God. We become members of Christ as a whole person, body and soul, not as souls without a body. Our bodies are members of Christ, and those ‘who are joined to the Lord are one spirit with him’ (6:15, 17). Paul repeatedly refers to believers as being in Christ’ and as members of the body of Christ. ‘We are members of his body and belong to him just as a husband and wife belong to each other in body and spirit (Eph 5:30). Paul draws upon God’s ordinance of marriage as set down in Genesis 2:14, ‘and the two shall become one flesh’, as he describes the believer’s relationship to Christ (6:16, Eph 5:31).

If Christians understand that being a new creation in Christ Jesus means being in Christ or being joined to Christ, they would not give their bodies over to sexual immorality, to uniting their body with that of a prostitute. Such behaviour is unthinkable for a believer, for a man or woman who knows the Scriptures and the gospel of Jesus Christ. Having sex with a prostitute does not constitute marriage but it does mean becoming one flesh and is therefore a violation of spiritual union with Christ. It means corruption of God’s design for marriage between a man and a woman as the place where all sexual desires are to be satisfied. Moreover, the sexual relationship in marriage is designed for procreation.

Finally, Paul asks members of the church who were tempted to go to prostitutes if they realized that they would be uniting Christ with a prostitute. How could they even contemplate such a thing! To make matters worse, the prostitutes in Corinth probably belonged to the temple of the goddess Aphrodite.

**3. Indwelt by the Holy Spirit**

The apostle’s conclusion and earnest appeal to the Christians at Corinth is, ‘Flee sexual immorality’ (6:18). He could have reminded them of their forefather Joseph who fled the room when Potiphar’s wife tried to seduce him (Gen 39:12) - although it was probably Gentile converts who were drawn to this sin. Paul was blowing apart the arguments being advanced by these sexually immoral Christians in Corinth. In saying, ‘All things are lawful for me’ they must further ask if all things are beneficial, and if this thing will gain mastery over them. The thing in question was the use of prostitutes. Self-control means control over one’s body, to being able to say ‘no!’ to the lusts of the flesh. Self-control, as we have seen, is a fruit of the Spirit. Being indwelt by the Holy Spirit, as all believers are, means being united to Christ, body and soul, so how can a believer join his body to a prostitute when it is already joined to Christ?

The apostle has three more points to make as he condemns sexual immorality among members of the church at Corinth. Sexual sin is against one’s own body, not outside the body like other sins (6:18, Prov 6:32). Food was mentioned, but this enters the body and passes through. Other sins against the body such as drunkenness or drugs involve use of what comes from outside the body but sexual appetites arise from within. Sex involves the body itself. ‘Sex strikes at the very roots of man’s being’. A person engaging in sexual immorality is committing an offense against his very ‘personality’. They are sinning against their own body, not to mention the body of another person.

By means of another, ‘Do you not know?’ rebuke, Paul reminds believers that, ‘Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God’ (6:19). Such profound theology silences any and every argument a believer might have regarding sexual immorality. Every believer is given the Holy Spirit when they believe (Acts 2:38, Rom 8:9). The Spirit is a seal or guarantee from God (2Cor 1:22, 5:5). Just as the Holy Spirit came upon the body of Jesus, so he comes upon the body of the believer. The Spirit does not dwell in a bodiless soul. ‘Your body’ says Paul, ‘is the temple of the Holy Spirit’ so honour God in your body (6:19, 20). The argument is similar to that of being a member of the body of Christ. It points to the dignity of the body as made by God, and as seen fit by God to dwell in by his Spirit. Let no one deceive themselves with the idea that the body is of no significance to God. We note in passing that ‘the body’ here is singular so the temple is not the church as in Paul’s earlier reference to the Spirit dwelling in you (3:16).

Paul’s final point is about the cost paid by the Lord to redeem us, body and soul. As a believer, your body is not only made by God but has been redeemed by God with the precious blood of Jesus Christ. God in Christ delivered you from slavery to sin and death, adopting you as his own child. So ‘you are not your own but have been bought at a price’, a very high price (6:19, 20). You were, body and soul, a slave to sin but are now, body and soul, a slave of God, free to serve God your redeemer in righteousness and holiness, not free to indulge the flesh as you once did. ‘Therefore glorify God in your body’.

**Sex and marriage** 1Corinthians 7:1-7

Is our title too confronting? We could have said, ‘Principles of marriage’ or, ‘Is marriage good or bad’, and this is what the apostle speaks about, but the question brought to him is simply, ‘It is good for a man not to touch a woman’ or ‘It is good to avoid sex’ (7:1). This question came from the church in Corinth, along with other questions about food offered to idols (8:1) and spiritual gifts (12:1). These matters are indicated by the word ‘concerning’, as in verse 1 and again in verse 25. This whole chapter is about being married or unmarried in the ‘present distress’, including the impact of conversion upon marriage and life situations. Kistemaker writes, ‘Apart from a few passages elsewhere in the New Testament, this chapter is unique in providing basic guidelines for those who are married, those who wish to be married or once were married, and those who want to remain single’. It appears there is something here for each of us.

First century Corinth was a city of gross sexual immorality. It is reported to have had a thousand temple prostitutes. Fornication, adultery, homosexuality and sodomy are listed in the backgrounds of some converts (6:9). In our nation, marriage has been under attack for some decades. It was in 1975 that the Prime Minister declared he knew better than God and passed a law allowing no-fault divorce. Divorce skyrocketed but soon levelled out. At the same time marriage became unpopular. People could come and go as they liked, and children would benefit from ‘new’ mums and dads in blended families- so we were told. This was the new world of human relationships. When a recent government set aside money for free marriage counselling it was ridiculed.

The headlines today tell of the scourge of domestic violence- although the data shows it is not actually increasing. What the data does show is the tragic effect of alcohol and marriage breakdown on domestic violence. Easy divorce did not solve the problem. Living together before marriage did not solve the problem. More laws will not solve the problem. Does the Bible offer an answer? The apostle Paul answers various questions about the marriage relationship but be does not mention domestic violence. We might wonder what he would have had to say; the matter of a fellow Christian sinning against you is dealt with elsewhere in the Bible (Mat 18:15f). It seems that when marriages operate on Biblical principles such evils will not arise.

**1. Decision**Paul begins to answer the question about avoiding sex by referring to sexual immorality. The NIV translation is, ‘But since there is so much sexual immorality’ (7:2). We have referred to life in this pagan city when Paul brought the gospel. It seems that no matter where people turned they were confronted by sexual immorality- newspapers, books, TV, internet- or whatever they had in first century Corinth. Some were not so confronted; they thought they could ‘accommodate’ such immorality; sexual immorality even came into the church (5:1). Was this the answer? Should the church just accept the way of the world- ‘boys will be boys’? Certainly not. Paul urges the Christians in Corinth to stay away from prostitutes, and flee sexual immorality (6:18).

Some in the church may have responded to this rampant sexual immorality by teaching that sex is bad- ‘do not touch a woman’ (7:1). Was a celibate life the only way to be holy? Paul writes to Timothy condemning those who forbid ‘marriage’ (1Tim 4:3). This was not the way to respond. What the apostle advocates is monogamous, stable, life- long marriage. Although he later says it is good to remain unmarried, he does not say this is a better way or a more holy way of life. He does not deny what is written in the Bible: ‘and the Lord God said, it is not good for man to be alone’, and so God made woman and said, ‘a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’ (Gen 2:18,24). Jesus maintained the validity of this truth (Mat 19:5), and so did Paul, especially in the context of a society of gross sexual immorality.

The apostle Paul wrote under inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Yet he does distinguish between what is of the Lord, and what is his inspired advice. He upholds all that Jesus said about marriage and divorce in Matthew 19 and other places. So he says to the Christians in Corinth, ‘Let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband’ (7:2). That he includes the second part of this statement is amazing. It points to equality between the man and the woman in marriage. It is not that the wife belongs to the husband, like his cow or some other object- some men in India valued their cow more highly than their wife. She is ‘comparable to him’, as the Lord said in the beginning (Gen 2:18).

**2. Duties**Marriage is between one man and one woman. It is a monogamous, heterosexual relationship, ordained by God. It is a relationship of equality, of mutual giving and sharing, particularly in the area of sexuality, which is the focus of Paul’s answer to the question about avoiding sex. Within this marriage, recognised in the society, husband and wife are to render ‘due affection’ to each other, or are to give each other their ‘conjugal rights’ (7:3). Marriage is about giving to, and doing what pleases the other person. It is not about pleasing yourself. This may come as a shock to some. Indeed, worldly wisdom tells you that you have rights in the marriage, and that you must stand up for your rights. You must not let your husband/wife push you around, but must put them in their place and keep them there. The world and its ‘experts’ counsel you about your rights. Paul counsels you to consider the rights of your spouse. Focus on giving them their conjugal rights.

If this is not clear, Paul goes on to make it clear in the next verse. He says that, ‘The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but his wife does’ (7:4). What radical teaching- then and now! Read it again! Imagine saying this in a meeting of feminists. Imagine saying this down at the football club. Paul said this in a day when men regularly visited prostitutes. He said to husbands, ‘your body belongs to you wife’ and to wives, ‘your body belongs to your husband’.

Within the context of domestic violence we are told about rape with marriage. We do hear of tragic cases, but still we ask, ‘where does rape fit within the marriage relationship outlined here by the apostle?’ Of course, the marriage relationship is not immune from the curse of sin, and Paul warns about Satan being eager to get in and mess up marriages with all manner of evil (7:5). Closer attention to what is taught here can, in the grace of God, keep Satan out.

‘The husband and wife have conjugal rights and exclusive possession of the other in this area’ (NIV study notes). Denial of conjugal rights must not be part of the wife’s, or the husband’s, arsenal of weapons for taking revenge in a family dispute. Do we need to elaborate? If your wife burns the dinner do not make her sleep on the sofa! If your husband forgets your anniversary do not make him sleep on the sofa! We are not going into disputes and how to solve them, except to say denial of sex is not part of the solution. In marriage your body belongs to your spouse, your loving, God-fearing wife or husband. ‘Do not deprive one another, except with consent for a time’ (7:5). Paul is not talking about refusing to cook the dinner!

**3. Discipline**The question was, ‘Is it good to avoid sex?’ Paul’s answer is a qualified, ‘No’. He answers, ‘Let each man have his own wife and each woman her own husband’. Within this relationship, called marriage, God-given sexual passions are to be satisfied, and indeed used for procreation. Marriage is not simply to satisfy sexual passions. Marriage is a multi-faceted relationship, a coming together of minds, as well as bodies. It is a sharing of life in all its ups and downs, and a haven from the outside world. Marriage actually models the relationship between Christ and the church, which is a great mystery (Eph 5:22f). It rightly called ‘holy matrimony’.

Paul does not envisage a marriage without sex, any more than he does a marriage that chooses not to have children; he does envision being unmarried, as we will see shortly. Within a marriage sexual relations may cease under three conditions: mutual consent, for a limited time, and for the purpose of prayer (7:5). Can we call this separation? It is very limited in time; it is not separation in preparation for divorce, even if this is what the laws of our land speak about- a one year separation before divorce. Depriving your spouse of sex to teach them a lesson is not permitted by Paul the apostle. If you want to deprive your spouse, remember it must be for prayer. And true prayer will lead to confession of sin and to reconciliation.

After a period of mutually agreed separation or cessation of sexual relations, the couple must come together again and resume the giving of conjugal rights to each other. Paul allows this, but is aware of Satan’s great desire to get between husband and wife and break what God has joined together. Paul warns against Satan tempting you, ‘because of your lack of self-control’ (7:5). Putting it plainly, you do not want your spouse looking outside the marriage to satisfy their sexual desires. Sexual desires are real and powerful- Paul speaks about burning with passion in verse 9. Yet self-control or discipline is also demanded, such that this passion is confined to marriage.

‘But I say this as a concession, not a commandment’ writes the apostle in verse 6. What does he mean? What is the ‘this’ he refers to? Commentators are divided. Hodge says it refers back to verse 2, so that marriage is ‘permitted, not commanded’; Morris agrees, ‘Marriage is not a duty required of all’. But this is looking forward in the text. Paul does not see marriage as a concession, despite his personal status, declared in the following verse. The ‘this’ that is a concession is the ‘temporary abstinence that has the consent of the both parties’, as Kistemaker writes. Paul does not command periods of temporary separation in a marriage but allows such for the purpose of ‘giving ourselves to prayer’.

In concluding his answer to the question about avoiding sex, and about the proper place for sex being within marriage, Paul speaks about his own status and the ‘goodness’ of being single. ‘I wish that all men were even as I myself’ he writes, and, ‘It is good for them to remain even as I am’ (7:7, 8). He writes about conjugal rights and not depriving one another, but being unmarried he had no such issues in his life. It is conjectured that he must have ‘once been married because a rabbi had to be married. The rabbis taught that all Jews should be married to procreate’.

Whatever his past, he was now living a celibate life and validly so. But he does not claim this to a more holy calling. He says that each one has their own gift from God. When dealing with the Pharisee’s question about divorce, Jesus said the same thing. The Pharisees were astounded when Jesus said a man must not divorce his wife. They taught that a Jew could divorce his wife by simply giving her a certificate of divorce. They complained to Jesus, ‘If this is the case it is better not to marry’ (Mat 19:10). Jesus said of the single life that some can accept it and others not. Some have the God-given gift of marriage, and some like Paul have the gift of celibacy. Christians must not be told they cannot marry, nor must they he told they have to marry.

Paul tells ‘the unmarried and the widows’, meaning men and women who are widows or widowers, never married, or divorced (under special provisions- 7:11), that it is good to remain unmarried. The mention of widows in this verse seems redundant but they did have a special place in the NT church. The unmarried status is good (not better) but it does require God’s gift and self-control. If the unmarried burns, burns with passion, it is better that they marry and satisfy their sexual passion in the God-ordained way. Not that they are to marry the first person that comes along! Paul has more to say on who a believer is to marry later in the chapter.

**Marriage, separation and divorce** 1Corinthians 7:10-16

Marriage is called a creation ordinance. This means it was given by God at the time of creation. God made human beings; he made them male and female, in his own image. He made Adam and Eve to live as man and wife, and to be fruitful and multiply. The marriage relationship, like everything, was corrupted by sin; Adam blamed his wife for giving him the forbidden fruit. Marriage continued in its corrupted form into the days of Noah and Abraham. When God made a covenant with his people he gave commands about marriage, in particular the command not to commit adultery.

Breaking of the marriage bond became an issue, and Moses permitted a man to give his wife a certificate of divorce under certain conditions (Deut 24). Jesus said this was because of the hardness of man’s heart. He said, ‘What God has joined together let no man separate’. Matthew records an exception clause; ‘except for sexual immorality’ (Mat 19:6, 9). Basically, remarriage after divorce means committing adultery. We also note that the Jews, as the holy people of God, were not allowed to marry Gentiles or pagans.

Many in the early church were from a Jewish background; they adhered to the principles of marriage as taught in the Bible. But others in the church were from a Gentile background. In Corinth the Gentile or pagan culture was soaked in sexual immorality (1Cor 6:9-11). In the church believers from these very different backgrounds came together. Did they intermarry? We presume so, although marriage can be closely controlled along ethnic lines. So, in general, sexually moral Jews came together in the church with previously sexually immoral Gentiles.

This situation gave rise to some questions, which were addressed to the apostle Paul. The first of these was, ‘Is it good not to touch a woman?’ (7:1). Paul wrote back saying in effect, ‘Let a man and a woman live together in a monogamous marriage, and let sexual relations be confined to this marriage. Remaining unmarried is also good, providing this is God’s gift and you do not burn with passion’.

The apostle goes on to deal with marriage, separation, and divorce in a Christian marriage, and in the special case of only one person from a previously pagan marriage being converted. He assumed, as he taught, that Christians would only marry Christians- this is what marrying ‘only in the Lord’ means (7:39). We will come to this in more detail another time.

**1. Married to a believer**

‘Now to the married I command’ (7:10). Paul began by commanding, not giving advice that we can ignore. In fact, the command is from the Lord. It is not his command, issued under apostolic authority, but from the Lord. Paul had heard about Jesus’ teaching on divorce as recorded in the gospels, or else he was going back to the books of Moses and the creation ordinance. Jesus himself went back to the creation ordinance which gives no place for divorce (Mat 19:5, 6).

‘A wife is not to depart or separate from her husband’ (7:10). It is interesting that he refers to the wife first because under Mosaic Law only a man could give his wife a certificate of divorce; a woman could not legally divorce her husband. It is suggested that influential women in the Corinthian church consulted Paul about marital relations and divorce. Paul has already asserted equality within a marriage in verses 2-4.

In any case, Paul goes on to say that a husband must not divorce his wife- the Greek word for ‘divorce’ (*aphiemi*) indicates legally putting away or sending off (7:11, 12). Paul does not go into the exception clause of Matthew 19 because Jesus had already spoken to men about divorce- although in Mark 10:12 he also spoke about a woman who divorces (*apoluo*) her husband, and marries another, as committing adultery. On this basis, what the apostle says is that if she separates herself she has two options- remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband (7:11). To marry another would be to commit adultery. Separation is not good, yet it may be necessary for a time. But to divorce and remarry is to commit the sin of adultery.

**2. Marriage to an unbeliever**

The case of a believer being married to an unbeliever was not an issue among the Jews- they only married Jews. So Jesus did not speak on this issue, and hence Paul has no command from the Lord. He writes, ‘To the rest I, not the Lord, say’ (7: 12). Still he speaks as an inspired writer of Scripture and we dare not discard his words (2Peter 3:15). ‘The rest’ that he refers to are those converted after marriage, and whose spouse is not yet converted (the word ‘partner’ has been so corrupted I use the old word ‘spouse’). He speaks to a brother (a believer) whose wife does not believe (7:12), and then to a woman whose husband does not believe (7:13). What does he say to this brother and this sister in Christ?

If the unconverted spouse is willing to live with the believing spouse then the believer should not move to divorce them. You cannot divorce your wife just because she does not believe. You cannot divorce your husband just because he does not believe. Through love and faithfulness and prayer, the unbelieving spouse may, in the grace of God, be converted. Indeed, sometimes whole households were, and are, converted at the same time. Paul says that the believing person does not know if they will save their unbelieving spouse - not meaning that anyone can save another person but that God in his grace might save them (7:16).

Divorce in any situation has disastrous effects upon husband and wife, and especially upon children. It has effects on parents and other relatives. It has effects on the church. This is why we do all we can to counsel people against taking this tragic step. State law may allow easy divorce, and worldly friends may urge you to ‘leave him’ or ‘leave her’, but God knows, and believers should know, that the outcome will be widespread hurt and harm. Paul knew this also. That is why he told believers that the Lord had commanded them not to divorce a believing spouse, and why he commanded them not to divorce an unbelieving spouse either.

**3. Sanctify**

An unbelieving spouse is sanctified by the believing spouse (7:14). Again Paul makes it a matter of equality, referring to husband and wife by the same terms. For the first time children are mentioned- not that Paul ever pictured a marriage without children, certainly not by choice. But firstly we must look at this word ‘sanctify’. ‘Sanctify’ means ‘holy’, which means ‘set apart’ or ‘consecrated’. It does not mean that the unbelieving spouse is saved- see verse 16. It means that they are greatly blessed because their spouse has become a believer. That blessing may be immediate and marked. Many a wife has been blessed when her husband, after being saved, stopped coming home drunk and beating her. Husbands have also been blessed when a converted wife stops nagging them all the time, or stopped her closet drinking.

But the blessing goes further than this. The unbelieving spouse is sanctified. They come under special attention from the Lord. Calvin writes, ‘for the godliness of the one does more to sanctify the marriage than the ungodliness of the other to make it unclean’. Because of Christ’s power, the influence of a believer is often stronger than the influence of an unbeliever. Have you noticed this? Have you noticed when one spouse comes to Christ, the other sooner or later follows? This may, in the grace of God, also happen when a believer, contrary to the teaching of the Bible, marries an unbeliever- but sadly it is often the believer who falls away after such disobedience.

Children are greatly blessed when they have believing parents. Indeed, they come under the covenant promises of God, as indicated in baptism. Infants whose parents are members of the visible church are to be baptised (Westminster Shorter Catechism Q95). They become baptised members of the visible church. The apostle Paul’s reference to the children of one believing parent being holy is the reason we baptise a child even if only one parent believes in Jesus, and why we do not baptise children who do not have believing parents. It is not about sentimentality, but about what is written. Paul writes, ‘Otherwise your children would be unclean’ (7:14). ‘Unclean’ is a powerful word; it refers of course, to the heart, not the body. You, the believing parent, make your child clean or holy! How amazing!

**4. Seek peace**

Our final point is about the controversial matter of

the unbelieving spouse wanting a divorce, and about not being under bondage (7:15). Paul has already commanded the believing spouse not to divorce a believing or unbelieving spouse. Even a spouse that is a backsliding Christian is not to be divorced. Even if they break their marriage vows this is no reason for you to break yours. In any such situation, remarriage would be adultery. The only exception according to Matthew 19:9 is sexual immorality, and even then repentance and forgiveness should be encouraged.

What if the unbelieving spouse wants a divorce? In such a case the apostle writes, ‘let him depart’ - ‘let her depart’ being understood (7:15). The believing spouse has not provoked or encouraged them to depart because they have been living a pure and prayerful life in the family. The apostle Peter tells wives to be submissive, ‘even if some (husbands) do not obey the word… (As they) may be won by the conduct of their wives’ (1Peter 3:1).

The believing spouse is not ‘under bondage’ if the unbelieving spouse departs. What does this mean? If a slave is no longer bound they are free. If a husband or wife is free they are free from their marriage vow- as tragic as this is. Morris writes, ‘This seems to mean that the deserted partner is free to remarry’ (Morris wrote in 1958 before the word ‘partner’ was corrupted). Bruce writes, ‘the believer in such a case was in a state of what amounted to widowhood’. Kistemaker says, ‘Paul neither forbids nor advocates remarriage for the forsaken spouse’. He goes on to say that, ‘Paul wants the believing marriage partner to live in obedience to the gospel and oppose the forces of the evil one’.

Paul’s closing word in this situation, a situation largely out of the control of the believing spouse, is, ‘God has called us to peace’. Peace is rarely seen or heard in the family court, the place where divorces are determined. Most divorces are bitter and acrimonious. Paul calls for the believer to let the unbeliever depart if they want to- which is not often the case. They are, as the Bible says, to be a peacemaker (Mat 5:9, Rom 12:18).

However, we must not take these words out of the context and say that a believer can divorce their spouse for the sake of peace. This is not what the apostle says. If the unbelieving spouse wants to leave, after you the believer have lived a holy life in the family, then do not stop them from going. There will be all sorts of emotions and lots of things said, but you the believer will seek to imitate Christ and seek peace. If the unbeliever has only separated and not divorced the believer will ‘leave the door open’, as it were, for him or her to return- to the glory of God.

**Remain where you are** 1Corinthians 7:17-24

Sects tend to focus on the end-time with a doomsday mentality. Often it is some Christian whose goes down this path, declaring themselves to be a prophet and then gathering gullible people around them as followers. They withdraw from the world as they prepare for the end-time event. The self-proclaimed prophet and leader is not always convinced of his prophecy; most become corrupt and sexually immoral. They tell their followers to sell what they have and give it them. They tell wives and husbands to leave their spouse and family as they enter this community waiting for the end of the world.

The church at Corinth was just three years old when Paul wrote this letter. They were on a steep learning curve; they were vulnerable to false teachers. The gospel which the apostle Paul taught them included the doctrine of return of Jesus Christ. Jesus has ascended to heaven and can return at any time. This is what Jesus himself taught (Mat 24:42). They were living in the last days, just as we are. It may have been that some in the church were over-reacting to this doctrine in some sort of ‘over-realised eschatology’. Among the Jews there was the Qumran community living in the desert near Jericho; and Christian monastics would soon emerge. But Paul was not an ascetic. He was not a ‘world denier’ but a realist who believed that Jesus was returning, but that for now we should remain in the situation we are in.

The ‘present crisis’ in Corinth (7:26) may have heightened expectations of Jesus’ return or it may simply have been exuberance in new believers. Paul does not pour cold water on these expectations, but he does warn against over-reacting. The context of this letter points to false attitudes towards marriage. Were believers wanting to leave their marriage, especially if they were married to an unbeliever? Maybe some were advocating this. There is no marriage in heaven but we are still in this world in which God has ordained marriage.

In verse 17-24 we have a digression from the topic of marriage, although it is not unrelated. The digression is about remaining in the condition in which one was when called (7:17, 20, 24). Marriage is included under this directive which Paul taught in all the churches (7:17), along with other matters like circumcision and slavery. When a person was called and believed, they did not have to leave their family, their friends, or their jobs and become an ascetic or recluse. They did not all have to take on the same culture or particular social status. They did not all have to join the same ministry.

Even today, in some circles, new believers feel pressured into becoming missionaries or ministers in the church. ‘This is commendable but not necessary’ writes Kistemaker. On the other hand, we must not use these verses to argue that we cannot leave our job to become a missionary- as a friend of mine did. Paul’s teaching is, ‘accept where you are in life and be content in the Lord, because the Lord looks on the heart not outward things’. He illustrates this directive with reference to circumcision and slavery, and concludes that we are all slaves to Christ, not men.

**1. Circumcision**

The church at Corinth included believers from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. Prior to their conversion these people had nothing to do with each other, although quite a lot of Gentiles were attending the synagogue as God- fearers? Only a few would have gone under the knife of circumcision to become proselytes. In the church there was no pressure to be circumcised; or should not have been. Paul says, ‘circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing’ (7:19). He wrote the same thing to the Galatian churches: ‘For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation’ (Gal 6:15).

What is important is being a ‘new creation’, or ‘keeping the commandments of God’, as he writes to the Corinthians (7:19). By this he does not mean that we are saved by keeping the commandments but that being saved by grace through faith we focus on keeping the commandments from the heart. By ‘keeping the commandments’ Paul did not mean outward things like circumcision. He meant the commandments as summarised by Jesus; Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind, and love your neighbour as yourself.

Corinth was a city of commerce and Greek culture. In such a situation, some Jews may have sought to surgically undo their circumcision- as some did in Nazi Germany for other reasons. On the other side were Judaizers who followed Paul around telling Gentile converts that they had to be physically circumcised. They resented Gentiles coming into the church without being circumcised and made to obey the OT laws- even though the Jerusalem Council ruled against such demands.

Paul’s directive was for each one to remain as they were when they were called (17:17, 20). If you were circumcised then let it be. If you were not circumcised then that also is okay. It does not matter in the eyes of the Lord. Just accept your body as it is and get on with walking in the Lord. Presumably this refers to others ‘marks in the flesh’. Racial differences do not matter. Sexual differences do not matter. Disabilities do not matter; not that surgery to help with a disability is ruled out. The point is that God looks on the heart. This ‘remaining as you were when called’ does not refer to actions like wearing no clothes, as in some tribal cultures, or to sexual immorality, as was rife in Corinth.

**2. Slavery**

From the religious matter of circumcision, Paul turns to the social matter of slavery. In Corinth there were more slaves than free persons. Slaves were owned, and often mistreated by their masters. Romans were ruthless in the suppression of slaves rising up against their masters. Crucifixion was the penalty. When Paul writes, telling slaves not to be concerned about their situation, he was not approving slavery but being a realist. He was telling of another way to deal with this situation, the way of contentment in Christ. Rather than protest and fight, we can, in Christ, rise above injustice and oppression in this world.

‘Were you a slave when called? Do not let it trouble you’ said Paul (7:21). He does not say you should refuse freedom if it comes your way. Sometimes rich people would ‘redeem’ a slave and set him free. A Christian slave owner might well offer freedom to his slaves. The directive the apostle gives is for the slave to be content in their situation- ‘do not be concerned about it’ (7:21). Do not start rebelling and demanding your freedom. He tells the Christian slave to remember that in the Lord he is free- he is the Lord’s freedman (7:22). What a radical way of thinking! You can be free from bondage even while a slave! In the blood of Jesus Christ you are set free from the greatest bondage of all, the bondage of sin. The slave can be free while the master or free man can be a slave, a slave to Satan and sin.

Some Christians today tend to forget this essential truth. They go about protesting against poverty, against oppression by the rich, against destroying the environment, against climate change or whatever. Not so long ago some Christian group was in the news because the government turned down their offer to put solar panels on the Prime Minister’s residence. Where does the Bible say Christians should be making solar panels a political issue? There is a place for raising awareness of some issues, but is this what the Great Commission is about? Jesus said, ‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel and make disciples’, disciples of Christ. ‘The gospel is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes’ (Rom 1:16). It is not the power of God to change governments or change the climate. It is the power of God to change human hearts. When hearts are changed and taught to obey the commands of Christ, other things will fall into place.

I was listening to one of the world’s richest men being interviewed on the BBC. ‘Why did he want more money’ he was asked- was it about greed? ‘No’, he answered in his American accent, ‘it was about status’. Despite getting rich through capitalism he predicted the end of capitalism as the poor got more and more angry at the rich. ‘When has capitalism broken down in the past’ he asked- ‘when there is war’. What a terrible prognosis for our economic system! But this is the way of the ungodly. They are never content. When Christians truly follow the commandments of Christ to love God and love your neighbour surely the prognosis is much brighter. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ that the world needs today, so let us preach this gospel in all the world.

**3. Slaves of Christ not men**

As God’s people our focus is on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. We look above and beyond our circumstances in this world. Outward things like circumcision and slavery do not matter. In the gospel the slave is made free and the free is made a slave- Christ’s slave. ‘Likewise he who is called while free is Christ’s slave’ (7:22). Paul often referred to himself as a bondservant of Jesus Christ. He wrote to the Christians in Roman telling them that they were slaves of sin but now they were slaves of God (Rom 6:22). The church in Rome included quite a number of converted slaves; at Corinth is was the same. Slaves could be there worshipping alongside their masters because all are one in Christ- Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female (Gal 3:28).

Contrary to the teaching of men, this world is not ruled by the rich or by politicians. Satan is the one who rules in the hearts of the ungodly. Those who are called to follow Christ are set free from Satan’s rule to become slaves of Christ. So being a slave in Corinth, or being a free man in Corinth, made no difference. Whoever is called by God becomes a slave of Christ. Jesus becomes your owner and your master. He is Christ the Lord.

‘You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men’ (7:23). These words are familiar to us from chapter 6 verse 20, where the apostle was telling men to stay away from prostitutes. His focus was on the body being the temple of the Holy Spirit. You, as a whole person, were bought by the precious blood of Christ. Christ redeemed you from sin and death by paying the price for your redemption. The same principle applies to your relationships in this world. The believer belongs first and foremost to Christ the Lord. The believing slave, as well as the believing slave owner, belongs to the Lord. This is not philosophy or political rhetoric; it is a spiritual reality in Christ. The apostles said to their political masters, ‘We must obey God rather than men’ (Acts 5:29). They said this and they were prepared to suffer the consequences.

Let us today remember whose we are and whom we serve. You are not your own for you were bought at a price (1Cor 6:19-20). Your body belongs to the Lord. Do not abuse it by being joined to a prostitute- or by taking drugs or other harmful things. You are not free to do as you like with your body, in spite of what the world tells you. Do not become a slave to your body but make your body a slave to Christ. You are no longer a slave to sin, you are a slave to God. You must not become a slave to men but a slave to Christ. This is how it is for those who are a new creation in Christ Jesus.

Whatever you were when you were called by God, be content to remain in that situation. You do not have to start dressing like a Christian, although you should be modest. You do not have to start eating special food; some Hindus think that becoming a Christian means you have to eat meat. Some Christians make it mandatory to be a vegetarian- as well as keeping Saturday as the Sabbath. In the context of this chapter, being called does not mean you have to marry, or that you have to separate from an unbelieving spouse. It is the heart that is changed, and a changed heart will focus on keeping the commandments. A changed heart will focus on loving God, and loving your neighbour as Christ loved you and gave himself for you.

**To marry or not to marry (1)** 1Corinthians 7:25-31

Marriage is a very complicated business. It was not this way in the beginning when God ordained marriage between the man and woman that he created. Sin affected man’s relationship with God and it affected his relationship with God’s creation, especially his relationship with fellow man. And the marriage relationship was drastically affected by sin. It is amazing how two people can walk hand in hand down the aisle one day and the next day, or a few years later, be raising clenched fists at each other. We live in a day of crisis in marriage, but it is no different from first century Corinth. The apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth about sex, marriage and divorce. We must not think that he cannot teach us anything today. In this chapter Paul speaks to those who are married, including those in mixed marriages between a believer and unbeliever, and those who are unmarried, including virgins and widows.

The apostle writes about these things because of questions addressed to him by the church in Corinth. They came with the suggestion of ‘ascetical opinions about sexual intercourse’- ‘it is good for man not to touch a woman’ (7:1). Barnett refers to Jews of the Qumran community who did not marry and suggests some Jewish women in Corinth were being influenced for this, or some other reason, to think of sex as unholy- especially when an unbeliever spouse was involved. That was the first question. The focus was on married people, although he did have a word for the unmarried and widows: ‘it is good to remain unmarried as I am’ (7:8).

The second question Paul addresses is about virgins or young women: ‘Now concerning virgins’ (7:25). This may have come from fathers asking about giving their daughter in marriage. These questions came from a church surrounded by gross sexual immorality and other problems, and a church that was looking to the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul refers to ‘the present distress’ in verse 26 and then to, ‘the time is short’ in verse 29 and, ‘this world is passing away’ in verse 31.

Before looking at these points we note how Paul distinguishes between a commandment and his own judgment in verse 25. With the previous question he could answer, ‘I command, yet not I but the Lord’ (7:10). The matter about virgins marrying or not marrying is different. Paul finds nothing specific in the Scriptures or the teaching of Jesus. Paul does not go beyond what is written, even though he does have apostolic authority, and what he writes is no less Scripture than the rest of the Bible (2Peter 3:15-16).

It would have been easy to answer with a simple yes/no command but Paul the pastor discusses the issue so that the questioner can make a spiritually informed decision. Paul the apostle gives his own ‘judgment as one whom the Lord in his mercy has made trustworthy’ (7:25). Paul is deeply aware of God’s mercy towards him, calling him from being a persecutor of the church to a preacher of the gospel. He received the gospel by revelation, but went on to learn a lot about living the Christian life in this world. Paul did not go off to live in a monastery. He lived in this world and taught believers how to live in this world. He wrote to this church as one who is ‘trustworthy’, telling them what ‘I think’ about this matter (7:25, 26). We do not find any commands as such in this section.

**1. The present distress**

Paul begins, ‘Because of the present distress it is good for a man to remain as he is’ (7:26). Notice the continuation of his teaching about remaining in one’s present situation. New believers should not feel compelled to change their situation in life just because they have believed- be it slavery, marital status, studies or employment. A changed heart and obedience to the commands of Christ is what is important, not changes in one’s body, dress or outward circumstances. Virgins should not be told they have to marry, or told not to marry. But in the ‘present distress’ Paul thinks it is good not to marry.

What is this present distress or crisis? Was it something specific to Corinth; Paul assumed they knew what he was talking about. We can only speculate. Some think it was the distress of living a holy life in such a sexually immoral society, with its inevitable opposition and persecution. But Paul advised stable, lifelong marriage in this situation. Many think it was a severe famine in the region, because of record floods in the Nile delta, the food bowl of the Roman Empire (e.g. Barnett). With regard to the Lord’s Supper Paul writes that, ‘one is hungry and another drunk’ (11:21). Some think there was also a disease epidemic, again indicated in 1Corinthians 11 where, ‘many are weak and sick among you’. A famine certainly makes life difficult for women and children, as we often see today in Africa and other places.

So in this present distress it is good not to marry, says Paul. We need to understand that marriages in these days, as in many parts of the world today, were arranged. A father was in charge of getting his daughter married. We also remember that betrothal or engagement in those days was tantamount to marriage, at least in Jewish culture. When Paul asks, ‘are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be loosed’, the NIV translates, ‘Are you married? Do not seek a divorce’. But Paul has already spoken about marriage and divorce.

What he means here is, ‘are you betrothed to a wife?’ The Greek for ‘wife’ could be translated ‘woman’, although with betrothal the word ‘wife’ is not inappropriate (see Mat 1:20). Although we understand the word ‘virgins’ as referring to females, Paul speaks to men first here in verse 27. If a man is engaged to be married he should not start trying to break off the engagement just because of the present crisis. If he is not engaged Paul advises him to remain single- maybe more for the sake of the woman than himself (28b).

Yet to get married even in this present crisis is not a sin; for the man or the woman (7:28). All Paul is saying is that your troubles will increase if you get married; troubles in the flesh or in this world. He may be thinking about the pressures brought to a marriage by famine or sickness, just as marriages today come under pressure from financial hardship or sickness. He is not talking about not having enough money to have a lavish wedding. Paul may also have been thinking about children. Getting married means getting babies; caring for babies in times of distress increases the distress. Paul wanted to spare those in the church at Corinth the particular suffering that comes to families in difficult times.

We still have famines, and still see women with babies suffering the most in such disasters. Many a mother taken into a Nazi concentration camp would have wished she had no children. The KGB in Communist Russia was expert in targeting children in order to punish their parents. Such targeting of children is probably going on in North Korea today.

**2. Time is short**

The apostle moves on to a broader issue as he speaks about time being short (7:29). Times applies to people the world over, not just to Corinth. But what is the time he is referring to? Some are reluctant to see this as referring to the end of the age and the return of Jesus, but it is hard to see what other time is ‘short’. Whether we say it is time for doing the Lord’s work (NIV study note) or ‘the era that encompasses the time in which he lives’ (Kistemaker), it all means the same thing. It means believers or ‘brethren’ need to keep the return of Jesus in mind in all their decision making, not least in their decision about getting married. Calvin writes, ‘We ought to be living as if we might have to leave this world at any moment’. Barnett writes, “The onset of the New Age will herald a great reversal. He (Paul) introduces his ‘mini’ apocalypse authoritatively, ‘But this I say’…” (7:29). ‘The time is short’ is matched by ‘the form of this world is passing away’ at the end of this section (7:31).

What Paul says to the brethren at Corinth relates to broader issues pertaining to living in the last days. He starts with marriage but goes on to other aspects of living in this world. Being called by God and entering the kingdom of God we become citizens of heaven (Phil 3:20). We continue living in this world, remaining in whatever circumstances we are in, but we change our focus from worldly things to heavenly things. The apostle lists five aspects of life that come under this reversal of thinking when the kingdom of God comes. He does not say our circumstances materially change but that we must live ‘as though’ they have (words repeated five times in verse 29-30).

The first aspect listed is that of marriage: ‘From now on even those who have wives should be as though they had none’ (7:39). Paul is not saying a man is to divorce his wife, or leave her to live a celibate life. Marriage does not belong to the age to come, but it does belong to this present age. What Paul is saying is that a married man must put the Lord before his wife- and before his own interests. Jesus said, ‘If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple’ (Luke 14:26). The Lord must come first, but this does not mean leaving or neglecting one’s wife. In the next section Paul speaks about serving the Lord. This may be done more fully without a wife or husband, but it can also be done with a wife or husband.

Secondly, ‘those who weep as though they did not weep’ (7:30). A man weeps over different things when he believes in Christ. Thirdly, it is the same with rejoicing. We do not rejoice as the world rejoices. Screaming at the top of your voice at a football match, or a rock concert, is not how the believer rejoices. James writes, ‘Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he will lift you up’ (James 4:9).

A fourth aspect is about buying the things offered by this world. We hear about ‘retail therapy’ and ‘shopaholics’- but not in the church. Those who understand that the time is short will not be gathering up the things of this world, because such things will soon pass away. Rather, they will live with a loose hold on whatever they have. In fact, they will live as though they had nothing. As believers we will not find our fulfilment in the abundance of our possessions (Luke 12:15).

Finally, the apostle refers to a brother’s attitude towards the world; ‘as those who use this world, as not misusing it’, as in ‘not being engrossed in them’ (7:31 NIV). For the unbeliever this world is their only hope- if we can call it hope. They love this world and all that it offers because in their thinking that is all there is. Sadly some Christians live in the same way. But the believer must look at the world differently. This world is God’s creation and God put us in this world to be stewards of his creation. We are not to worship the things God created, nor are we to abuse them; that would be a wrong use of this world.

**3. The form of this world is passing away**

With these words Paul wraps up his poetic portrayal of how we are to live in this present world. This present world and everything in it is God’s creation. Man and woman are God’s creation, as is the institution of marriage. But sin came into this world and corrupted everything- including marriage. God ordained a new kingdom even there in the Garden of Eden. Jesus came to inaugurate this kingdom: ‘The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand’ (Mark 1:15). In Jesus Christ, the head of the church, we are to live preparing for the coming of this new kingdom. We pray, ‘Your kingdom come’. Such living affects every aspect of our life in this present world. We recognise that the things of this world, even our most intimate relationships, will pass away- ‘the form of this world is passing away’. Kistemaker writes, ‘The world of marrying and mourning, of exulting, expanding and expending… has no enduring form. Consequently, as Christians we should not set our heart on that which is fleeting but on that which is lasting and eternal’.

**To marry or not to marry (2)** 1Corinthians 7:32-38

Some years ago a man was jailed for allowing his twelve-year-old daughter to be married in a mosque in Newcastle. While this was a clear case of child abuse, such arranged marriages are common in many countries. I have been at a Hindu wedding in which the girl was barely in her teens, and the boy not much older. She did not seem to understand what was going on. I was told she would not go to live with her husband until she reached puberty. I was also told that in this way they ‘protected’ the girl from men.

While arranged marriage of minors is illegal, there is nothing wrong with an arranged marriage as such. Parentally arranged marriages are common among Indian Christians, and most are successful- even more so than in our culture of so-called love marriages, and easy divorce. When it came time for Isaac to marry, his father, Abraham, told his oldest servant to go and find a bride for Isaac; she was not to be from the pagan Canaanite community but one of his own people. So this servant brought Rebekah all the way from Mesopotamia to Canaan where she married Isaac (Gen 24).

We must keep these things in mind as we read this letter of the apostle Paul to the church in first century Corinth, where marriages were largely arranged by parents. Christian fathers make every effort to find a suitable match, meaning a man who will care for his daughter and keep her happy, but also a man who is a believer in Jesus Christ.

To marry or not to marry in the context of the present distress at Corinth was the question Paul was answering. He began this section, ‘Now concerning virgins’. In answering this question other matters came up, like the short time until the end of this age- the Parousia. With this in mind, it is better not to marry because marriage can be a distraction. This is no excuse of course, for leaving your husband or wife. Either way you must tread lightly in this world, and live knowing that the form of this world, its riches and its relationships, will soon pass away (7:31).

The passage before us today continues answering the same question, ‘now concerning virgins’. Paul firstly speaks to unmarried men and women explaining how marriage will affect the focus of their lives. He then advises fathers on what to do with their unmarried or betrothed daughters. Not all agree with the interpretation that Paul is advising fathers; we will discuss this when we come to the verses.

**1. Cares that come with marriage**

‘But I want you to be without a care’ (7:32). Other translations have ‘free from concerns’ or ‘free from anxieties’. Only a naive or foolish person thinks marriage will not affect their life. Even sleeping in the same bed as another person presents problems- not to mention eating habits, and the raising of children. If this union of husband and wife does not include spiritual union it can be very difficult- hence the command in verse 39.

The married man has special cares and concerns relating to his wife and family. Paul calls them worldly things, not in the sense that they are sinful but that they are basic to life in this world. He says a man’s focus is on pleasing his wife. He is concerned for her welfare, understanding his duty to feed and clothe her and give her shelter. He nourishes and cherishes her as his own body (Eph 5:29). ‘A man who does not provide for his own, especially those of his own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever’ (1Tim 5:8).

It is your responsibility to care for your wife and children, not the government’s responsibility. Paul in no way endorses separation or neglect of family. All he says is that a married man has these concerns, while an unmarried man does not. An unmarried man ‘cares for the things of the Lord’ (7:32). Paul actually refers to the unmarried man first because in this passage he is presenting the case for remaining unmarried. The unmarried man can fully focus on pleasing the Lord. Most translations have the words, ‘he is divided’ at the beginning of verse 34 as referring to the man of verse 33.

While this focus on pleasing the Lord, and not being divided or distracted by a wife or family is commendable, it must not be forced; ‘It is better to marry than to burn with passion’ (7:9). We are seeing the tragic outcomes of forced celibacy, particularly in the Church of Rome. Yet those who have the gift of celibacy and choose not to marry can be greatly used of the Lord- men like John Stott for example.

Verse 34, in a better translation than the NKJV, begins, ‘and his interests are divided’, referring to the married man. It then goes on, ‘and the unmarried woman or virgin cares about the things of the Lord’ (7:34, ESV has ‘betrothed’ rather than ‘virgin’). Paul turns his attention from the man to the woman, to the woman who is not married. Such a woman is anxious to serve the Lord. ‘That she may be holy both in body and spirit’ (7:34). This holiness is not about purity but about consecration. Holiness means to be set apart. An unmarried woman is free to serve the Lord in ways a married woman is not.

While referring to an unmarried woman as being ‘married to Christ’ is not scriptural, such a woman enjoys greater freedom in serving the Lord. You will have read of what single women missionaries have done in many places. We knew single ladies who travelled around India visiting colleges and universities to share the gospel. A married woman would not have been able to spend as much time on the road as they did.

It was unusual for a woman not to marry in India. It was also unusual for a Jewish woman not to marry. But in the church at Corinth it seems, some were despising marriage and even encouraging women to leave their unbelieving husbands. Paul Barnett writes, ‘Paul could easily have fallen in with these wives in Corinth who were ascetically minded and strongly discouraged the marriage of these young women’. But he did not do that. To remain a virgin is good but it must not be forced. The single woman has less cares about worldly things, like pleasing her husband and looking after children. She is better able to focus on serving the Lord. Still, it depends on your gift and personal calling. Either married or unmarried, you must accept, and be content, in the Lord’s calling (7:17).

‘And this I say for your own profit’ (7:35). Paul is not laying down a rule about celibacy. He is not trying to put anyone on a leash. He could easily have done so. Leaders of religious sects readily put people on a leash- often choosing their own young women to marry. Leaders of some churches also put members on a leash saying if they are to be ‘clergy’ they cannot marry. Some Protestant pastors go beyond this teaching of the Bible telling men and women they should get married. Some go so far as to ‘prophesy’ who they should marry.

The apostle Paul did not go down this path. He set forth the principles and the practical realities of marriage so that believers could make their own choice; a wise, Spirit-informed choice. He speaks about what is proper, or what promotes good order. Marriage is ordained by God and many people, indeed most, will marry. Marriage must be honoured by all, especially in the church. No matter how we feel about who our children or members of the church marry, we must honour their marriage. We must also accept if our child or a member of the church chooses not to marry. Such a person must be respected; indeed the unmarried man or woman is able to serve the Lord without distraction (7:35). Paul knew this from his own life; ‘I say to the unmarried and widows; it is good for them to remain even as I am’ (7:8).

**2. Advice to a father**

Paul’s comment about not putting anyone on a leash in verse 35 leads into what he says in verse 36. The decision to marry or not marry is a huge decision- as is the decision about who to marry. A man has to very careful in making such a decision. In verse 36 Paul addresses the man making such a decision. Some think this man is the one who is betrothed or engaged to be married. So the NIV translates, ‘If anyone thinks he is acting improperly towards the virgin he is engaged to’. This translation is possible and it certainly fits the context of our society but is not appropriate for the church at Corinth. It is better to understand Paul as speaking to a father who is arranging the marriage of his virgin daughter- as in the NIV margin and the NKJV.

Do you see marriage as a huge decision? Unbelievers may enter into marriage lightly, thinking they can leave when they feel like it, but for you the believer this is not the case. We may live in an instant-pleasure, throw-away society but marriage is not such an item. You must consider remaining as you are; certainly you must not rush into marriage. Writing over thirty years ago Michael Green said, ‘In the light of the sheer difficulty of living out the Christian ideal of marriage, and the appalling effects it has on others when Christian marriages fail, celibacy should come back into careful consideration as a live alternative to marriage’.

Paul is now dealing with the particular case brought to his attention in verse 25; ‘now concerning virgins’ or ‘the betrothed’. A father, it seems, had a daughter for whom he had arranged a marriage. She was engaged but not married. For some reason, maybe the ‘present distress’, he wanted to call off the wedding, but she was getting beyond marriageable age- probably about twenty. Morris writes, ‘to withhold marriage from a girl of marriageable age, and anxious to marry, would have been to court disaster, especially in first century Corinth’. This man in the church seeks Paul’s advice. And so the apostle advises this man who was about to give his daughter in marriage.

In the first place, there is no sin involved in going ahead with the marriage - ‘let them marry’ (7:36). Marriage, and sexual intercourse in particular, is not something unclean or unholy, as some in Corinth were saying. On the other hand, if this father who loved his daughter and knew her well, if he made the decision that it was best for her not to marry, then he should stick with this decision. In our culture we might object to the father having such authority- but this is not our culture.

Having assessed the present distress, having considered the desires of his daughter, and probably also facing flak from the other party in the arranged marriage, this father does well if he determines in his heart to keep his virgin daughter and not give her away in marriage. Verse 38 specifically says, ‘he who gives in marriage’ not ‘he who takes in marriage’, as we would expect if Paul was speaking to the potential groom. ‘He who does not give her in marriage does better’ (7:38).

And so Paul the pastor advises this man about marrying his daughter in the present distress in Corinth. He could have answered the question in a single sentence- ‘it is better not to give her in marriage’. But such an answer would not have helped this father to think through the matter and make own his decision. Moreover, it would have left us without the principles for making similar decisions today. This great pastor sets out the principles for making the decision to marry or not to marry. He outlines the practical issues involved, particularly relating to opportunities to serve the Lord in an undivided way. He has alerted us to the fact that we are living in the last days, and that the time is short for preaching the gospel in all the world.

These matters are especially relevant to you if you are not married. They are not relevant to you if you are married because you are bound to your husband or wife for life. They are relevant to the extent that you advise your child about marriage, and to the extent that you honour their marriage. In our culture a believing parent may strenuously oppose their child’s marriage, but if they go ahead and marry then that marriage must be honoured. We must never seek to destroy a marriage.

**Marry in the Lord**  1Corinthians 7:39-40

A young lady went to teach in a country school after finishing college. She found a local church and enjoyed attending worship each Lord’s day. She was a believer who was active in children’s ministry; she had lead a team at beach mission. She met a young man in this country town, a fine young professional. He took a liking to this young teacher and they went out together. She invited him to church and he came along. Eventually he asked her to marry him. But this fine young man with a good job did not profess to believe in Jesus, so the young teacher said no. That young teacher was my sister. She took seriously what is written in the Bible.

We come to the end of chapter 7 in which Paul deals with questions from the church in Corinth about sex, marriage and divorce. The New Bible Commentary Revised lists six questions:

1. Are couples to continue normal sexual relations after conversion? Yes, they owe it to one another to do so.

2. Should the unmarried marry? Paul commends celibacy- but only for those with that gift.

3. Is divorce permitted to a Christian couple? No

4. When one partner gets converted, should they continue with the pagan spouse? Yes

5. Ought Christian fathers give their daughters in marriage? Each father should make his own decision after considering the situation of this world and the passions of his daughter.

6. May a Christian widow remarry? Yes- with qualifications.

It is this last question that we consider today. Paul was aware that God ordained marriage and that marriage is good. He did not agree with those who saw marriage and sex with an unbelieving spouse as somehow unclean or unholy. He does not of course endorse sexual immorality or adultery- which includes sleeping together before marriage. Paul reminded them that God hates divorce. If an unbelieving spouse really wants a divorce it is different- let him/her depart peacefully.

Marriage is good but there is a place for celibacy and for remaining unmarried. Back in verse 8 he mentions the unmarried and the widows, saying it is good for them to remain as I am. Paul may have been a widower. A question from a father about getting his virgin daughter married prompted a lengthy answer about troubles that come with marriage, especially in the ‘present distress’ at Corinth. Moreover, in light of the Lord’s imminent return, the unmarried believer is better able to focus on serving the Lord. Paul judges it better that the virgin remains unmarried, but that if she does marry it is not a sin.

The last question, which arises out of this father’s question, is about widows. Widows are in a similar position to virgin daughters except that they are generally older and have to make their own decision about marrying- a virgin was under the guardianship of her father. What does the apostle have to say to widows? His words are few but are very important to widows and indeed all in the church today. His points about remarriage are, only after the death of a spouse, only in the Lord, and then the option of remaining unmarried.

**1. Only after death**

‘A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives’ (7:39 ESV- the word ‘law’ is not in the Greek). This is consistent with what Paul said previously- ‘A wife is not to depart from her husband’ (7:10). This is a command of the Lord. It means no divorce! But if her husband dies, or literally ‘falls asleep’, she is free to remarry; in the NT only believers ‘fall asleep’. She was married to a believer and not permitted to divorce him as long as he lived. It was a matter of ‘till death do us part’. Not that she was permitted to divorce an unbelieving husband either.

Death ends a marriage. This is the law, as Paul states again in Romans 7:2: ‘the woman who has a husband is bound by law to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies she is released from the law of her husband’. If she remarries after her husband dies she is not committing adultery, which would be the case if she remarried while her husband was still alive. How many women are living in such adultery today- and men also?

A widow is free to remarry after her husband dies- but marry who? And is remarriage desirable? We look at the first of these questions under this second point.

**2. Only in the Lord**

‘She is free to marry anyone she wishes’ (7:39 NIV). The widow, it seems, makes the choice about who she will marry- unlike the virgin whose marriage was arranged. There are many good reasons for arranged marriages, especially when young people are involved. Young people in our society might reject the idea but their counterparts in other societies, such as in India, feel relieved of the burden of choosing their marriage partner. They may face problems if their parents try to arrange marriage to an unbeliever- we were able to counsel and pray with young believers in situations like this.

Widows being permitted to remarry may have been revolutionary in pagan Corinth- widows may have ended up in prostitution or begging. This is the case in India where widows do not remarry. Young Hindu women who became widows were consigned to a life of begging and poverty- if not prostitution. Paul encourages widows to remain unmarried, as we will see, but he does not prohibit remarriage. In fact, in giving pastoral advice to Timothy he says that he, ‘desires younger widows to marry, and have children and manage their homes’ (1Tim 5:14). He advises against putting young widows on the list of widows in the church.

In terms of remarriage, we can go back to women who are deserted by an unbelieving husband. We understood from verse 15 that ‘not under bondage’ means they are free to remarry. It is important for the church to remember widows and deserted wives. Even if government welfare provides for such people, family should be first to provide for them (1Tim 5:8). Failing this, the church community should provide for such people, as seen in Acts 6.

So the widow is free to remarry, but who? Paul’s answer is ‘whom she wishes, but only in the Lord’ (7:39). The NIV translates, ‘but he must belong to the Lord’, and this is how most scholars and readers understand these words ‘only in the Lord’. There are some however, who take these words as adverbial rather than adjectival, meaning they refer to the verb not the noun. And so they understand the meaning to be that the marriage is conducted in a Christian manner, not that the husband is necessarily a Christian. But as Hodge writes, ‘This interpretation includes the other’. I was surprised to find John Gill, a commentator I was once told to read and agree with, wrote of this verse, ‘not that it is absolutely necessary that her husband should be in the Lord, a converted person, a believer in Christ, though such a one should be most desirable and eligible’. Similarly, Gordon Fee also calls this ‘good sense’, but most understand Paul’s words as more than just good sense, or sound advice.

This is not the only place in the Bible where marrying a fellow believer is demanded. Paul writes in a second letter to the Corinthians, ‘do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers’ (2Cor 6:14). This command is widely understood as referring to marriage, even if it does not mention marriage. It applies to other relationships but must surely include marriage. The picture of being unequally yoked together comes from the OT. It is that of an ox being yoked to a donkey (Deut 22:10). Under the Old Covenant Jews only married fellow Jews. Esau upset his father Isaac by marrying a Canaanite woman, and then other women (Gen 28). Nehemiah severely rebuked the returned exiles for marrying women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab (Neh 13:23f). Marrying pagan women was a great evil, a sin against God.

We could also look at Ephesians 5 where Paul draws parallels between husband and wife, and Christ and the church. Michael Green comments, ‘This hardly works if an unbeliever is involved. The NT insists that a Christian should marry a Christian’. Many ministers insist on this, though I have never had to refuse to marry anyone on such grounds. I would add a word to young believers struggling with this command and tempted to rationalise their decision to marry an unbeliever; ‘remember that marriage is not a God-ordained method of evangelism’.

Even if not all agree that marrying an unbeliever is wrong, all do agree that Paul’s words, ‘only in the Lord’ is good advice. ‘Experience shows that much pain will accompany such a decision’ writes Barnett. Imagine a believer in Corinth marrying an unbeliever; they would probably be an idol worshipper, if not a ‘sexually liberated’ person. Imagine having a grotesque idol set up in your lounge room. ‘But what about a man with high moral standards who will not interfere with my religion’ you ask. I will answer, ‘How will you pray with this person? And what will you teach your children- what you believe or what he believes?’ Many men and women have put love for a person above love for Christ. By the grace of God some have seen their unbelieving spouse saved. But many live with a troubled conscience, knowing they have forsaken the Lord, while others have turned their backs on the Lord to walk in the ways of the world.

**3. Option to remain unmarried**

But what if this widow is getting on in years and the only option for marriage is an unbeliever? Please note, we are not talking about Christian denominations here. It is not a matter of marrying a Protestant or a Roman Catholic, a Presbyterian or a Baptist- the latter has its own difficulties! We are talking about those who believe in Christ and those who don’t. So what options does the widow have? She has the option to remain unmarried. This may not be her preferred option but let her consider what the apostle says.

Paul gives his considered judgment, as one who has the Spirit of God (7:40). This is not just the opinion of another man; it is the judgment of a man whose heart is illuminated by the Spirit of God. It is a carefully considered and prayerfully considered opinion that we should listen too. This judgment is that ‘she is happier if she remains as she is’ (7:40).

When we walk with the Lord we do not walk alone. As believers we have the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, as our companion, comforter and counsellor. While it is not good for a man to be alone, it is not good for him to be unequally yoked either. Being unmarried we can focus on the Lord, remembering the time is short and the things of this world, including marriage, are passing away. Lots of married people are lonely, especially if they are unequally yoked. But in the church there are no lonely people, or should not be. Let married and unmarried, singles and widows, be welcomed and included in the church which is the body of Christ.

**Food offered to idols** 1Corinthians 8

The church has always grappled with the question of what issues are essential or fundamental and what are not essential. I use the word issues to include principles or doctrine as well as practices. Early on the church struggled to settle matters of doctrine like the Trinity and the two natures of Christ. More recently it has been concerned with the virgin birth and the bodily resurrection of Christ. Creeds and confessions have sought to clarify and confirm these truths. Paul the apostle would not for a moment tolerate any distortion or perversion of the doctrines of grace which were delivered to him (Gal 1:7, 8). Nor would he tolerate distortions our perversions with regard to idolatry or moral issues like sexual immorality, theft or drunkenness (6:9, 10). But when it came to the issue of what we eat he was indifferent: ‘Food does not bring us near to God’ (8:8 NIV). He gave liberty or freedom to eat, ‘whatever is sold in the meat market’ (10:25). He does of course, condemn gluttony (11:22).

Some Christians revelled in this new found freedom. As Jews they had been subject to strict food laws, or as pagans they were taught that eating or not eating certain foods was an essential part of worship. Do you realize that the Christian religion is the only religion that does not have strict food laws- unless some preacher tries to impose such laws that is! Even secularism, the religion of freedom regarding sex, drugs and dress, has its food laws. There are libraries filled with books about diets, about taboo foods and ‘miracle’ foods.

New believers entering the church whether Jew or Gentile often carry deep-seated ideas about food. The church at Corinth, like that at Rome (Rom 14:2), and that at Antioch (Gal 2:12), brought together people who would never previously had social contact; they would certainly not have eaten together. Eating pork was a revulsion to some, and eating any meat a revulsion to others. Some from a pagan background could not eat food that had been offered to idols, and were offended when fellow believers openly ate such food.

Concerns about food were adding to the divisions emerging in the church at Corinth. So the question concerning food offered to idols was raised in a letter brought to the apostle Paul (8:1). As in his answer to the question about marriage (7:1), Paul tries to get into the mind of the questioner(s) and establish a principle rather than making a new law. It seems they were being guided by pithy statements, which is okay if those statements are true. Some pithy statements that people cling to today are not the whole truth. At Corinth they were saying, ‘All things are lawful for me’ but Paul qualified this motto saying, ‘but not all things are beneficial’ and ‘not all things edify or build up’ (6:12, 10:23). As Christians we do have freedom but it is responsible freedom; Paul would emphasise the word ‘responsible’.

Let us look at how the apostle deals with this concern about food offered to idols, primarily with meat from animals sacrificed as part of pagan worship. Corinth was a pagan city ruled by Rome. It had idols and temples on almost every street corner. Archaeologists have discovered some temples with rooms set apart for dining. When an animal was sacrificed a third was burnt, a third was given to the priest and a third taken by the worshipper to share with family and friends. The priest often sold his portion in the open meat market (10:25). Our subheadings are: ‘Knowledge is good but…’, ‘An idol is nothing but…’, and, ‘Eat anything but…’

**1. Knowledge is good but…**

As mentioned, Paul tried to get into the mind of the questioner. This person or persons appears to be among the ‘elite’ within the church, those who knew everything. They were proud of their knowledge and looked down on those less educated than they were. This was the nature of Corinthian society- people telling and hearing something new (cf. Acts 17:21). Note the word ‘puffs up’ which means proud and arrogant (8:1). Back in chapter 5 ‘knowledge’ and freedom led to them applauding the incestuous behaviour of a church member. Paul contrasts knowledge with love, or at least the outcomes of each. One puffs up and the other builds up or edifies (8:1). Knowledge and love are not mutually exclusive of course, it is just that knowledge without love is useless (13:2).

More important than what we know is what God knows about us (8:3). Paul was more concerned about wisdom, the wisdom of God, than he was about general knowledge or even theological knowledge. Knowing God is more important than knowing about God, and being known by God more important still. ‘We only know God in his knowing of us’. The person who God knows and loves is the person who loves God and also loves his brother in Christ (1John 3:10, 4:10). Having put knowledge in its place and elevated love, Paul proceeds to deal with the matter of eating food offered to idols.

**2. Idols are nothing but…**

Paul condemns the pride and arrogance associated with knowledge but does not condemn knowledge itself. He does not promote ignorance, as is done in other religions and even in sections of the church. The Hindu elite in India hate Christian missionaries teaching outcastes how to read and write; they rule through ignorance. The Roman Catholic Church did the same when it kept people from having a Bible in their own language and promoted ritualism. They feared the very thing that happened in the Reformation, namely that a man like Luther might study the Bible and expose the false teaching of the church.

So knowledge is necessary. Knowledge of the Scriptures enables us to say that an idol is nothing. In the ‘Shema’ Jews declare, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one!’ (Deut 6:4). Gideon was told to tear down the altar of Baal and smash the wooden image beside it (Judg 6:25). He was not to fear because the idol was only a lump of wood. ‘An idol has no real existence and there is no other God but one’ (8:4 ESV). Such knowledge however, does not belong to all, as Paul goes on to say.

Year ago a lady who had turned from Hinduism to believe in Jesus was one day confronted by a Hindu holy man who gave her some holy beads. She came to our house afraid of the power of these beads. Even some Christian students who were in our home at the time were afraid to touch these holy beads. So I took them and flushed them down the toilet, knowing that an idol is nothing in the world.

But this declaration about idols must be qualified. Many people believe in the reality of ‘so-called gods’ and ‘there are many gods and many lords’ writes Paul (8:5). What does he mean? Idol worshippers make their idols at the suggestion of Satan. Satan is real; he tempted Jesus and he inspired Judas to betray Jesus (Luke 22:3). Paul will soon condemn the Corinthians who were participating in the worship of idols by eating at ‘the table of demons’ (10:21). He also tells of how he was sent by Jesus to turn Gentiles from the power of Satan to God (Acts 26:18). When we ‘smash idols’ or refuse to acknowledge other gods, we do so knowing that those who worship such gods are held in fear by these so-called gods.

‘Yet for us there is one God’. The Father and the Son are one. In Corinth it was dangerous to be monotheistic; as it is becoming dangerous for us to be monotheistic in our city. ‘Hate speech’ laws are being drafted to prevent anyone saying there is only one God. Paul goes on to define the characteristics of this one God. Firstly, he is ‘the Father’ (8:6). Jesus teaches us to pray, ‘Our Father in heaven’. Christians are unique in calling their God ‘our Father’. This Father created all things including people like us; he also loves and forgives those who repent and come to him. He made us and forgives us that we might live for him, live to glorify his holy name. This Father God has one Son who is equal to and one with the Father. Through one Lord Jesus Christ all things exist and through him we are reconciled to God; through Jesus Christ we live (8:6). In Christ we are made a new creation (2Cor 5:17). ‘There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all’ (Eph 4:4,6). No other religion speaks of their god or gods in such terms.

Returning to the issue at hand, namely eating food offered to idols, the apostle reminds them that not everyone in the church had such knowledge about idols, or if they did it had not affected their conscience. They could not bring themselves to eat food offered to idols, something they did in former idol-worshipping days. To do so might again bring them under the influence of that god. As we know and as they know, the idol is nothing but still their conscience would not allow them to eat such food. ‘Their conscience being weak’ says Paul, but weak conscience or not they are still a brother or sister in Christ.

**3. Eat anything but…**

‘Beware’ says the apostle, ‘lest somehow your liberty becomes a stumbling block to those who are weak’ (8:9). Liberty is great but it is not the last word in Christian living; love is greater. Worldly people demand their rights no matter the cost but Christians do not exercise their rights at the cost of the conscience of fellow believers. Paul goes on to explain how much harm can be done to a brothers conscience but not before declaring, as we have already noted, that ‘food does not bring us near to God’ (8:8 NIV). What we eat or don’t eat is of no concern to God. Food has nothing to do with faith. Hindus often think that in becoming a Christian they must eat meat. One convert thought that it was meat that Christians ate in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper; clearly she had heard false (Roman Catholic) teaching regarding this sacrament.

Briefly, the explanation is this: if you go to eat with pagan friends, or maybe in a temple dining room, you will be eating food offered to an idol. If a weaker brother sees you, what will they think? You may say, ‘It is none of his business’ or, ‘Let her get knowledge’. But how we live is God’s business, and so is the business of God’s people in the church. The weaker brother, who sees you as a strong brother, will be ‘emboldened to eat those things offered to idols’ (8:10). There is irony here because the word ‘emboldened’ is the same word translated ‘build up’ or ‘edify’ in verse 1. But far from being built up, this weaker brother will be torn down by your action. ‘Because of your knowledge’ the weaker brother will perish (8:11).

This is a serious matter. You have not sinned in eating meat sacrificed to an idol but you have sinned against your brother if his conscience is wounded or his faith in Christ is shattered (8:12). And sinning against a brother is the same as sinning against Christ who died to save him. At his dramatic conversion on the Damascus road Paul learned this lesson: he was persecuting Christians but the risen Christ said he was persecuting him (Acts 9:4). There is rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents, so be careful not to stop that rejoicing by causing that brother or sister to stumble and fall.

We have great liberty in the gospel of Jesus Christ. We can eat what we like, dress as we like and go where we like, but remember firstly, that whatever you do, do it in the name of Christ. And secondly, do nothing that may cause a weaker brother or sister stumble in their walk with the Lord. If you join a church in India you may have to give up smoking because Christians there associate smoking with paganism. If the church consisted of Hindu converts you may also have to give up eating meat. Paul declared that he would never eat meat again if it made his brother in Christ stumble (8:13).

**Rights of an apostle or preacher** 1Corinthians 9:1-12

Are you paid a fair wage for the work that you do? Employers want more work for less pay, and employees want more pay for less work- so the story goes. One thing is for certain, we no longer have a system of slavery, of working for no pay at all. Yet some churches do not believe their minister should be paid- at least not by them. They like the idea of a ‘tentmaker’ ministry; the minister has a secular job and preaches in his spare time. The idea of tentmaker ministry comes from the life of the apostle Paul, but is not what the Bible teaches as the norm. Some churches have a policy of no minister as such but they pay full-time workers. In some churches the minister controls the whole show, including finances; no one knows how much the minister pockets for himself and his family. Celibacy for clergy has no biblical basis but it does limit corruption in this regard. Some churches think the minister should be paid like a company CEO, while others operate on the principle, ‘Keep him poor, keep him humble’.

The ministry of the apostle Paul was not a settled ministry as such, but he did spend one and a half years in Corinth, and continued ministry to them through at least four letters and three subsequent visits. Paul, like every human being, needed food, clothes and shelter. Who was responsible for providing these basic necessities to him as a preacher of the gospel? This is the issue that arises in this chapter.

Some readers wonder why he deals with this issue at this point in his letter; some think this chapter is out of place. Chapter 8 was about idols and eating food offered to idols, but the point of Paul’s teaching was rights and responsibilities, about forgoing one’s rights out of concern for the spiritual well-being of brothers and sisters in Christ. Having just declared that he will not eat meat if it causes a brother to stumble, Paul begins this chapter, ‘Am I not free!’ He will not be subject to food laws. He is also free when it comes to being supported in the ministry, but not free when it comes to preaching the gospel: ‘Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel!’ (9:16). Even so he does point out his right to receive material support for spiritual services rendered to the Corinthians. Whether he accepted such payment was another matter, but no one was offering him any remuneration.

This matter of material support was to some extent tied up with recognition of Paul as an apostle. So this chapter begins with a flurry of rhetorical questions, the first of which is, ‘Am I not an apostle?’, the second about rights to remuneration with ‘Arguments from society’ and, ‘Arguments from Scripture’.

**1. An apostle with rights**

Some in the church questioned Pauls’ status as an apostle and hence his authority and rights (9:2). Paul Barnett says this question was coming from Judaizers who had not yet reached Corinth but clearly this question has arisen in the Corinthian church. So Paul mounts a brief but vigorous defence of his status as an apostle. He does so with rhetorical questions. ‘Am I not an apostle? (9:1). The unspoken answer is, ‘Of course you are!’ When, after the ascension of Jesus the apostles decided to replace Judas, they said this man had to be someone who was ‘a witness with us to His resurrection’ (Acts 1:22).

As a Pharisee, Paul started persecuting the church, but the risen Jesus appeared to him and spoke to him one day when he was on the road to Damascus. On this basis he declared, ‘Have I not seen Jesus our Lord’ (9:1, 15:8). Paul usually refers to Jesus by the title ‘Christ’; using the name ‘Jesus’ points to his humanity. The risen Jesus spoke to Paul saying he was ‘Jesus of Nazareth’. Paul never forgot this special revelation given him by the Lord (Gal 1:12), and on this basis claimed to be an apostle. At that time the Lord appointed him as apostle to the Gentiles; hence his ministry in Corinth.

The Corinthian church itself provided Paul with his second proof of his status as an apostle, his seal of apostleship (9:2). He came there preaching the gospel, as he was called to do by the risen Jesus, and the Lord blessed his ministry. The church was established during the eighteen months he stayed there. ‘You’ he says to the church just three years after leaving, ‘You are my work in the Lord’ (9:1) and then, ‘You are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord’ (9:2). How could they, of all people, doubt his authority as an apostle! Others who did not know Paul might have their questions, but not these folk. They heard him preach and came to believe in the Lord; these people were incontrovertible evidence of Paul’s apostleship. We might recall what Scripture says about a prophet: if what he says does not come true, he is not a prophet (Deut 18:22). God does not bless the work of imposters. On these two points, Paul defends his claim to be an apostle: he had seen Jesus, and his ministry, especially in Corinth, was evidence of his being sent by the Lord- ‘apostle means ‘sent one’.

Paul goes on to list some of the rights of an apostle, rights given to other apostles but not to him or Barnabas (9:6). Barnabas was not actually an apostle, but he ministered with Paul on his first missionary journey. He must have been known to the church at Corinth. It appears that, like Paul, he did secular work to support himself in gospel ministry. Paul stayed with and worked with fellow tentmakers when he first came to Corinth. When Silas and Timothy came they brought support from the Macedonian churches.

The Corinthian church did not support Paul’s ministry among them in any way, although he closes his letter with reference to a ‘collection for the saints’ in Jerusalem (16:1, 3). Was this church supporting the poor while their minister struggled to put food on the table? Some Christians are very generous when it comes to helping the poor but not so generous when it comes to supporting their minister.

Paul was not asking for special treatment when it came to personal support; he was asking, in the first instance, for fairness or equity with regard to other apostles and preachers. There is no let-up in his use of rhetorical questions, a very effective way of arguing. Paul was ready to give up eating meat for the sake of a weaker brother but to give up eating and drinking altogether was another matter! And it was not as if this church did not have the resources to provide for his necessities of life; they were ready help the other apostles, like Peter, and preachers, like James, the brother of Jesus (9:5). We have already been told about factions in the church, one aligned with Peter and another with Apollos (1:12). It seems that factionalism extended to personal support. In general, the quickest way to get rid of a minister is to stop paying him, but with Paul this didn’t work!

Peter, unlike Paul, had a wife who apparently accompanied him on his travels and was supported by the church (9:5). One popular preacher, when asked to give a series of lectures, demanded that his wife travel with him and be funded along with him. The college inviting him was taken aback because it was only a week of lectures they were asking for. There are not many preachers jet-setting around the world at the moment!

The church, of all places, should be concerned about equity. Some of course, argue that top dollar must be paid to get top men, just like the commercial world, but this is not an argument from Scripture. Jesus said that the labourer is worthy of his wages, and Paul picked up on this in his letter to Timothy (Luke 10:7, 1Tim 5:17, 18). Paul considered himself worthy of support from the Corinthian church, but got none or very little.

**2. Argument from human society**

Paul’s claim about his ‘right to eat and drink’ extends beyond the matter of equity with other apostles. He goes to the basic rules of society. The man who plants a vineyard naturally gets to eat of the fruit of that vineyard. In one of his parables, Jesus speaks of the owner of the vineyard demanding a share of the harvest (Matt 21). Similarly, the man who looks after a flock of sheep has the right to drink from the milk he collects (9:7). In Australian terms, graziers often take a sheep and slaughter it for themselves. This is only natural.

If you cannot understand his arguments from a rural society, listen to what he says about soldiers (9:7). The king selects his army and ensures the soldiers are paid from the taxes he collects. Being in the army is a very secure job in many countries- in terms of pay if not of life expectancy! In our society teachers are paid for their teaching. So Paul argues that preachers should be paid for their preaching, paid by the church of course, although in some countries preachers are paid by the State- after they collect a church tax. Just like any other worker in society, preachers of the gospel have a right to be rewarded for their labour - and not just in heaven!

**3. Argument from Scripture**

Adding to these three examples from society regarding workers having the right to a reward for their labours, Paul comes to what for him is the clinching argument, the argument from Scripture. It may be that his previous arguments resonated with believers from a Gentile background and this argument from Scripture resonated with those from a Jewish background, but in the end the rule of faith and practice is the Bible. Arguments from Scripture, from what is written, were irrefutable for Paul, just as they were for Jesus. To claim ‘it is written’ always triumphs the claim, ‘the Lord told me’.

In referring to the law in verse 8 Paul refers to the Pentateuch in particular, drawing on a verse from the Book of Deuteronomy: ‘You shall not muzzle the ox while it treads out the grain’ (9:8, Deut 25:4). What does this command mean? During my first year in India I joined a college tour to interior parts of Eastern India; it was on a later tour that I met tribal people hunting with bow and arrows. In one village the millet crop was laid out on a threshing floor while three cows tramped over it. They were tied to a beam anchored at the centre of the circle. They occasionally grabbed a mouth full of straw as they went around and around threshing out the grain.

Did Moses write this as a law about the care of animals in Israel? Yes he did. But it is interesting that it does not occur in the context of laws about oxen or animals. Moses gave various laws about treating animals ‘humanely’ and this law is no different. But Paul saw it in a larger context, the context of all the law being fulfilled in Christ. This is why he asks if this law is only about oxen (9:9). He says that it is in Scripture for our sakes, meaning it is for the Corinthians to learn from, and for us to learn from today- even though we have no oxen to muzzle. This law has its fulfilment in Christ and the church, and is relevant, indeed authoritative, in the matter of materially supporting men who are set apart for spiritual ministry (9:11).

Paul returns to the rural setting as he brings his argument to a close. The man who plows should plow in hope, and the man who reaps or threshes the harvest shares in this hope (9:10). Paul plowed and sowed the gospel in Corinth. He saw some harvest but presumably the church had grown since he handed the work over to others. Even so, he was still sharing in the ministry at Corinth and expected support when he visited. Sometimes plowing and sowing is tough work, in which case other churches should support the initial stages of the work. But it was not that the Corinthians lacked resources; they were just lacking in love and respect for the apostle Paul. They were not fulfilling their duty towards him as laid down in the Bible.

Paul’s conclusion is, ‘If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you?’ (9:11). He concludes this from Scripture, and also from what Jesus said, ‘The labourer is worthy of his wages’, words that are now in our Bible (cf.1Tim 5:18). Paul also teaches, ‘Let him who is taught the word share in all good things with him who teaches’ (Gal 6:6). Are you receiving spiritual blessings in this church? Are you sharing in the ministry of this church through your tithing and your spiritual gifts? With so much online preaching these days, and appeals to help the poor and needy, let us be careful not to neglect the teaching and ministry of the local church.

**Rights of an apostle relinquished** 1Corinthians 9:12-18

I spoke last time of a popular preacher who insisted on bringing his wife when he came to give a series of lectures, and that the college pay her expenses as well as his. By contrast, another popular preacher came to the college to deliver a series of lectures and the college offered to pay his expenses. But he refused to accept the cheque that was handed to him. He had come a long way at considerable personal expense but felt so blessed by his time among us that he refused any payment for his ministry. Putting aside the matter about paying for a wife, this I believe is how spiritual ministry should be undertaken. The college or church should offer to pay for services rendered, and if the preacher refuses to accept payment then that is his prerogative.

Paul’s experience in Corinth was somewhat different. He was a pioneering missionary. Even so, the church was soon established and were able to support him; they apparently supported other preachers. It is argued that pioneer missionaries must present the gospel free of charge, but when Christians are not taught to tithe from the outset the church may be still be unable to support their minister decades later. Sure, there are charlatan preachers but they are rarely pioneer missionaries.

Besides, both Jews and Gentiles are familiar with the practice of making offerings to the Lord, or to their god, as Paul indicates here in verse 13. Hindus go to the temple with a bowl of puffed rice and a coconut, which the temple priest consumes of course- if he likes coconut! I like puffed rice and coconut but found these hard to buy outside the temple precincts. Once, after preaching in a village church, I found the pulpit being surrounded by bags of grain and boxes of vegetables and fruit as the people came forward with their offerings to the Lord. It was pleasing to see that these poor villagers had been taught to tithe. I still remember a widow giving me garland of biscuits strung together.

In Corinth the apostle Paul faced a special problem in that not everyone recognized him as an apostle. He began this chapter assuring them that he was an apostle: ‘Have I not seen Jesus our Lord’ (9:1, cf. 1:1, 4:3). When he came to Corinth he started working as a tent-maker while preaching in the synagogue or the house next door each Sabbath- he had to eat! He did not assert his right as an apostle to be supported by the church. He was generous, and anxious not to ‘hinder the gospel of Jesus Christ’ (9:12). But the people did not see it this way. They thought, so it appears (2Cor 11:7), that by not demanding support Paul was indicating that he was not an apostle. Working in a dirty, smelly tent-making business did not help his cause; to them this was the work of slaves not an apostle or preacher.

Paul struggles to explain his action. Those who were out to discredit him could have done so either way, of course; accusing him of preaching for profit if he demanded payment or, as was the case, of not being an apostle because he took no payment. While dealing with the matter of food offered to idols, and teaching the ‘weaker brother’ principle in chapter 8, Paul found opportunity to explain why he did not exercise his right to material support while ministering in Corinth. It was not that he was not an apostle, or that he had no right to receive support. Here in chapter 9 he argues from the natural rule of society and from the Bible, and now from precedent set in temple worship, that the spiritual worker is entitled to material support (9:11). In the passage before us Paul goes on to explain why he did not insist on his right to support even when others did (9:12). Our first subheading is, ‘Right by precedent’ our second, ‘Right relinquished’, and our third, ‘Reward’.

**1. Right by precedent**

Our passage today begins half way through verse 12 with the word ‘Nevertheless’ or ‘But’. ‘But we did not use this right’ is how the NIV begins a new paragraph. ‘Why not?’ you ask. Because ‘we’, the way Paul often refers to himself, ‘we’ did not want to ‘hinder the gospel of Christ’ (9:12). He chose to endure the filthy work of a tent-maker rather than hinder his ministry of preaching. We will come back to this as Paul does in verse 15.

Paul returns for a moment to Scripture and further proof concerning the rights of an apostle or preacher to material support. His words, ‘Do you not know’, points to the fact that Paul taught this church about the practices of the temple, the temple in Jerusalem (9:13). Those from a Jewish background would have seen temple worship in Jerusalem first hand, while those from a Gentile background, like us, would have learned about such practices from the Bible. Paul does not specify the temple in Jerusalem so it is possible to understand pagan temples as included.

The practice in the temple from the earliest days was for priests to take a portion of the offerings for themselves: ‘The priest who offers it for sin shall eat it’ (Lev 6:26). Remember the sons of Eli doing this, but not according to the rules (1Sam 2:13-17). Paul argues from Scriptural precedent, as well as from commands in Scripture, that apostles and preachers have the right to expect material support in return for their ministry of the word.

In addition to this biblical precedent, Paul refers to a command of the Lord Jesus: ‘Those who preach should live from the gospel’ (9:14). We do not find these exact words coming for the lips of Jesus but we do find similar words. When Jesus sent seventy disciples two-by-two into every place in the land, he told them to stay in the house where they were welcomed and eat whatever they were given. Why? Because ‘the labourer is worthy of his wages’ (Luke 10:7, cf. Luke 9:1-6). Paul picked up on this command given by Jesus when writing to Timothy (1Tim 5:18).

**2. Right relinquished**

Paul did not use his right to material support but chose to ‘endure all things’, even the despised and dirty work of tent-making, ‘lest we hinder the work of the gospel’ (9:12). The word ‘hinder’ comes from a military practice of blocking or blowing up a road to stop the enemies advance. Paul wanted ‘full speed ahead’ for the gospel of Jesus Christ. He reasoned that asking new believers to support him in gospel ministry might be a stumbling block. He did not exercise he right to support in the beginning, and he was not doing it now (9:15). But he needed to clear up any misunderstanding in this matter. He was aware of people in the church seeking to undermine his apostolic authority on the basis of him not demanding support from them (2Cor 11:7f).

Does talk about tithing and support for the minister hinder the presentation of the gospel? Many think so; they request visitors not to put money in the collection bag. A church that advertises in my local paper stresses, ‘All are welcome- No collection taken’. There are of course, people who think the church is out to get their money. We had an elderly lady who thought that becoming a member meant giving all her money to the church- not the same one who thought it was meat that we ate in the sacrament! No one, member or not, is compelled to give, but on the basis of what we read in this chapter, and elsewhere in the Bible, we strongly encourage you to bring your tithes and offerings to the Lord. We do not have a policy of ‘no collection’ for visitors, but we do not make anyone feel uncomfortable. We simply remind everyone of what Jesus said: ‘The worker deserves his wages’.

**3. Reward**

Paul did not want to ‘hinder the gospel of Jesus Christ’, but that is not all? He had personal reasons for not demanding his right to material support. What he says is that, ‘it would be better for me to die than that anyone should make my boasting void’ (9:15). What was that again- talk about dying, and boasting! Greek experts say this sentence, ‘It would be better for me to die than’ is left hanging and not completed. Paul vigorously defends his right, but equally strongly defends his reason for relinquishing this right. He would ‘die’ if anyone said he was preaching for profit! He would also ‘die’ if anyone deprived him of his boast. What was his boast? He did not boast in his abilities or accomplishments. He did boast in his infirmities (2Cor 11:29).

Paul goes on to say that he preached out of necessity, so this was not his boast (9:16). A servant does not boast or claim some reward when all he does is the job given to him. Paul was called by the risen Jesus to preach the gospel to the Gentiles and that was what he was doing in Corinth. He was not there to draw a crowd of followers or get well paid for eloquent preaching. He was not preaching for profit or to make a name for himself. He was preaching because, as he famously said, ‘Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel’ (9:16). He echoes the words of Jeremiah the prophet: ‘But His word was in my heart like a burning fire, shut up in my bones, and I was weary of holding it back, and I could not’ (Jer 20:9). Paul preached because of his calling; if he failed to preach he would answer to Christ himself, a daunting prospect for anyone who knows Christ. It is sad to see preachers who forget their calling in Christ- assuming they had such a call in the first place.

In verse 17 and 18 Paul speaks about a reward. ‘What is my reward then?’ he asks. He actually answers this question saying that to preach the gospel free of charge is his reward (9:18). To preach the gospel was his duty. He could not even contemplate not preaching the gospel because he was bound to do so by Christ. A servant receives no reward for doing his duty, as we mentioned. But a servant or slave could choose how he did his work. He could do it willingly, do it with a smile, do a little bit extra, and go the extra mile, as Jesus said. The slave could then boast in this ‘freely-given’ work; it was like his reward.

Similarly, Paul had to preach, but he did not have to take payment. It was his right to choose to forego this right. This was his choice, and this was boast and his reward. This was his boast, not theirs. Let no one think he was naive or foolish in preaching the gospel free of charge (2Cor 11:7); he chose not to burden them. Let no one say Paul had no right to receive payment because he was not an apostle, but let them understand that he chose not to exercise his right, or use it to the full; the words ‘not abuse my authority’ at the end of verse 18 is better translated, ‘not use my rights to the full’. ‘His voluntary relinquishing of his right in this respect is on a par with his voluntary limitation of his liberty in matters of food’ writes F.F. Bruce; ‘in either case he paramount consideration is what will best promote the interest of the gospel’.

Paul was a true apostle and he was practicing what he preached in the previous chapter. He had rights but also responsibilities towards a weaker brother. He had the right to receive payment and the right not to receive payment. He was compelled to preach but not compelled to exercise his rights as an apostle or preacher of the gospel. He did not accept payment because this would remove his only ‘boast’ to the Lord on the Great day. In a sense ‘his pay was to receive no pay’.

Too often money matters hinder the gospel of Christ. So let us take heed to this command established by the apostle Paul with reference to what is natural in society, what is written in Scripture, and what was practiced in the temple of the Lord: ‘The worker deserves his wages’. Do not make the preacher or minister beg for his bread. And let preachers be faithful in their ministry as men called by the Lord, men serving the Lord not men. If they choose not to receive payment for some reason then let them do so. And let everything be done openly and in order: ‘Let all things be done decently and in order’ (14:40).

**Slave to all so as to save some** 1Corinthians 9:19-23

To be a Jew you had to be circumcised in the flesh. As a Jew you had to keep the Mosaic Law, including the food laws. In the gospel of Jesus Christ the apostle Paul declared freedom from these external regulations. In the strongest of terms, he ruled them out as a means of salvation. He would not be ‘forced’ by the Jews circumcise a Gentile called Titus because circumcision had nothing to do with salvation. ‘In Christ neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working itself through love’ (Gal 5:6). But when Paul took Timothy on as a fellow worker he had him circumcised. Timothy was a Jew by birth anyway and being circumcised would make him more acceptable in that culture; his mother was a Jew and his father a Greek. Is was not a sign of his salvation but a sign of him being a Jew- a cultural sign if you will. The circumcision of Timothy was a matter of expediency, while the circumcision of Titus would have been capitulation to those who preached ‘another gospel’, a gospel of works, or of grace plus works.

Paul enjoyed liberty in the gospel of Jesus Christ. He was no longer bound by rules of men or by outward regulations. He was free to circumcise or not to circumcise, free to eat meat or not eat meat. ‘All things are lawful for me but not all things are helpful’ (10:23). He was not free to sin against the commands of Christ of course, not free to bring shame to the name of his Lord and Saviour. Some at Corinth did not understand the freedom they enjoyed in Christ and were bringing shame to the name of Christ. Our freedom in Christ is real, but remember, it is freedom in Christ not freedom to sin. It is freedom to serve, just as Jesus himself came not to be served but to serve (Mark 10:45). So we are called to serve and not be served. Paul’s desire, and yours I trust, was to imitate Christ (11:1).

Paul the apostle had the freedom to eat meat but would not exercise this freedom or right if the conscience of a weaker brother was harmed (8:13). He had the freedom or right to material support from the church in Corinth but chose not to exercise this right; he did not want to ‘hinder the gospel of Christ’ (9:12). In the passage before us he continues on this theme of forgoing his rights for the sake of the gospel. He would not be like other teachers wanting to make a name for themselves but would humble himself before people, becoming all things to all men in order to save as many as possible.

**1. to the Jews**

As a young Jew, Paul was a proud and zealous Pharisee. He was from the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, circumcised on the eighth day. He was educated in a top school and was a top student. No one dared argue with this zealot. He was, in today’s terms, a militant, ready to destroy anyone who opposed his religion.

But when the risen Jesus met Paul the persecutor on the road to Damascus he was brought to his knees, literally and spiritually. His proud hard heart was broken. It was changed into a humble loving heart. This ‘chief of sinners’ became the Lord’s chief preacher of the gospel. He became a humble servant of the Lord, the chief qualification of any preacher of the gospel. Each and every day Paul remembered how much the Lord Jesus suffered to set him free from sin. He himself spoke of once being a slave to sin but now being a slave to God (Rom 6). ‘I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me’ (Gal 2:20). These were not just words to Paul, this was how he lived.

Paul the Pharisee was zealous in persecuting Christians. Paul the Christian was zealous in winning people for Christ. He was ready to give up his freedoms and indeed, ready to suffer in order to bring the good news of ‘Jesus Christ and him crucified’ to the ears of as many as possible. This was his calling in Christ Jesus. Is it not the calling of every Christian?

People who are still slaves to sin are zealous, zealous for their rights, zealous for personal power and privilege, just like Paul the Pharisee. We see this in the world today. As people abandon the fear of God, and even the knowledge of God, they embrace a fear of man; they embrace the thinking of ‘me first’, and of standing up for ‘my rights’ and the philosophy of a world that revolves around them. I hope that as a born-again Christian you are not living by this philosophy. Do you know what it means to be a slave of Christ, to be living to please your saviour and Lord, to be telling others the gospel of Christ Jesus that they might be saved?

The church at Corinth was plagued with division. The society in Corinth was plagued with division, division between Jew and Gentile, between slave and free, between haves and have nots. If there was ever a time in history when human society was not divided it was not in Paul’s day, and it is not today! Democracy, as we are learning, is not the answer to these divisions, which often turn violent. What is the answer? The answer is truth and love. ‘Speaking the truth in love’ was Paul’s motto (Eph 4:15). Love, of course, comes from knowing the truth, from knowing that Jesus Christ laid down his life for us (1John 3:16).

The apostle Paul was no longer a Pharisee, and no longer a Jew by religion. He writes here in this letter, ‘to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews’ (9:20). He was circumcised of course, but that did not necessarily make him a Jew. He was no longer under the law as the Jews understood the law because he writes, ‘to those under the law I became like one under the law’ (9:21 NIV). As already mentioned, he circumcised Timothy so as not to offend the Jews. He would eat only kosher food so as not to offend the Jews. We even see Paul shaving his head in some Jewish vow, and go to the temple to please the Jews in Jerusalem- a gesture that, in the providence of God, backfired (Acts 21:26).

Why did Paul go to such lengths to keep the Jews happy? Because he wanted to win them for Christ. He wanted his ‘countrymen according to the flesh’ to turn from their legalistic, Christ-denying ways and believe in Jesus Christ, who alone could save them. Where ever Paul travelled he sought out the Jews first, but he never stopped at witnessing to Jews only. He went on to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, as in Greeks, Romans and whatever other race there was in society.

**2. to the Gentiles**

We do not find the word ‘Gentiles’ in this text but we do read ‘to those who are without law’ (9:21) which is the same thing. He does not mean ‘lawless’ in the sense of wicked people breaking the law, but people without the law of God. The liberty of the gospel gave Paul the freedom to interact with Gentiles in a social setting. He could not of course, participate in the worship of idols but could eat meat sacrificed to idols without asking questions (10:25). If those Gentiles were vegetarians, like Hindus, then he would give up eating meat altogether- as a friend of mine did as a missionary in a city in North India.

If his dress somehow offended Gentiles, Paul would have been ready to change his dress code. In India I ditched the necktie and shorts, while my wife got a new wardrobe of Indian-style dresses. Some missionaries however, insisted on the locals changing their dress code, even when they dressed with modesty. Becoming ‘all things to all people’ does not of course mean adopting an immoral dress code, or a culture of drinking or drug taking. The gospel will bring about cultural changes, but not all culture will be changed by the gospel.

Paul was willing to eat whatever the Gentiles ate and wear what they wore. He would have learned their language if need be. He was willing to attend open forums like that in Athens (Acts 17) and may well have attended Olympic-style games held in Corinth. He certainly studied the writing of Gentile poets. To this extent he became as one ‘without law’. But he was not prepared to step outside the law of God or the law of Christ. Christ came to fulfil the law (Mat 5:17), and this is the law to which Paul was committed. Some point to the two ‘love’ commandments by which Jesus seems to have summed up the Decalogue, while others point to all the teaching of Jesus. What Jesus taught was not new of course; it was the law as fulfilled in him, him who is the Son of God, him who is the Lord of the Sabbath, him who is the light of the world and the judge of all men.

Paul was free to become like a Gentile or pagan but not free to step outside or change the law of Christ. In India we saw some Christians actually participate in Hindu worship; I am not sure if they trying to win them for Christ or learning from them about worship- as Christians holding a liberal theology, I suspect it was the latter. The other day I heard a lady telling how on a mission station the Methodist ministers welcomed Aboriginal customs and ways of worship, but I doubted her assessment given the faithfulness of Methodists back in those days. In taking the gospel to heathen people you will be confronted by immorality, just as Paul was in Corinth. In no way did he condone sexual immorality or prostitution that was rampant among the Gentiles in Corinth; he was under the law of Christ.

Paul gave up personal freedoms and rights and took on the customs of others in order to win them for Christ. He became all things to all men that he might by all means save some (9:22). He had shown his willingness to forego his rights with regard to a weaker brother in the faith back in chapter 8: ‘To the weak I became as weak that I might win the weak’ (9:22). Paul was extra careful not to put a stumbling block in the way of anyone, whether a weaker brother or an unbeliever.

It is all too easy to get caught up in discussion or dispute about insignificant matters while trying to win someone for Christ. Remember the woman at the well wanting to argue with Jesus about the place of worship (John 4). Satan uses every means possible to steer the discussion away from matters of the heart to matters of food, clothes or places of worship. Remember, pagans are focused on such matters and are ready to argue on this basis, but are not ready to argue on matters of the heart, matters of personal sin and salvation.

Paul was ready to ‘bend over backwards’ as we say, in order to win a soul to Christ. Christian ministry is not about convenience; it is about commitment, commitment to Christ and commitment to people, to souls destined for hell. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost. Contrary to cultural norms, Jesus went to the home of tax-collectors and sinners, men like Zacchaeus and Matthew. He went out of his way to help a Roman soldier, a despised invader according to popular opinion.

**3. To share in the blessings of the gospel**

Paul became all things to all men… for the sake of the gospel (9:22, 23). Knowing the wages of sin is death, he wanted everyone who belongs to the human race to hear the gospel and be saved. He also had a personal, even selfish, reason for reaching out as he did. Paul selfish you say! See what he writes: ‘that I may be a partaker of it with you’ or ‘that I may share in its blessings’ (9:23 NIV). The first word is ‘I’. It is wrong to be jealous but not to be jealous for your wife. It is wrong to be selfish but not selfish for fellowship in Christ.

As believers we have a friend in Jesus, who will never leave us or forsake us. Paul knew this, but he still desired Christian fellowship. God made us to have fellowship with himself, and also with other people. The church is ordained by God, just like the biological family. When people leave the church they find they have no place to go for fellowship, no ‘home’ to go to. The tragic effects of such ‘homelessness’ are being seen more and more in our society. Christians in Paul’s day gathered together for teaching, for prayer, and for fellowship (Acts 2:42). They did so to worship God but also to build one another up in the faith (Heb 4:25). Do you ‘covet’ the fellowship of believers? Paul wanted to share in the blessings of the gospel. What fellowship do you desire?

**The race of your life** 1Corinthians 9:24-27

Corinth, like Athens, was a major Greek city in NT times. The apostle Paul went there because of its strategic importance as a city of commerce and trade. It was also the home of the famous temple of Aphrodite. Yet another claim to fame was the Isthmian games held in Corinth every two years. These were not a big as the Olympic Games held every four years in the city of Olympia to the southwest of Corinth but they attracted competitors from across the Greek speaking world. Historians tell us that Corinth hosted these games in the year AD51, not long after the apostle Paul arrived in this city. Paul was not an athlete, as far as we know, but he would have heard about these games and may have attended, even though they were held in honour of the Greek god, Poseidon. Foot races, field events like javelin and discuss, gymnastics, horse racing and boxing were all part of the program. Apparently, there was also a poetry competition. Winners of these events were given a crown made of wild celery, or later on, of a twig from the fir tree.

Australia is regarded as a sporting nation. Our daily news bulletins feature sort of one kind or another. We see men and women performing phenomenal physical feats. For myself, it is a cricketer hitting a six or taking a diving catch. For others, it is watching someone break the record for the 100m sprint or win the marathon. The name ‘marathon’ comes from another city in ancient Greece. How do they manage these seemingly impossible feats? The apostle Paul delves into this question, not out of any interest in sport but out of his interest in the gospel and the Christian life.

Jesus often used rural scenes as the basis for his teaching, his teaching through parables. Here, and in other places, the apostle Paul uses images from these games in his teaching. Jesus said, ‘The kingdom of God is like a man who sowed good seed in his field’ (Mat 13:24f). Paul says the Christian life is like a man running a race. Let us see the lessons he draws from what was seen at these Isthmian games. His first point is ‘focus’, his second point ‘fitness’, and his third, ‘the finish’.

**1. Focus**

Have you ever watched people trying to race crabs? They let them out of the box, and they go in all directions. Watching toddlers race is much the same. You point them towards the finish line but they run towards mum or dad, or the table of sweets. Paul did not see anything like this at the games. What he saw was men focussed on the finish line, shutting out all distractions. They were focussed on the crown they would get if they crossed that line first. The race Paul pictures is more of a marathon than a sprint, but whatever the race the focus must be on crossing the finish line and getting the prize given to the winner.

One of the first things I was told when I ran a race was not to look around to see what the other runners were doing. They were usually ahead of me, but I remember the advice: ‘Look straight ahead with your eyes fixed on the finish line’. This is the way we are to run the race of life. In Hebrews 12:2 we read, ‘looking unto Jesus’. Jesus endured the cross because of the joy set before him, the joy of sitting down at the right hand of the throne of God. Future glory awaits you if you are in this race and you finish it. Future glory far outweighs any suffering involved in running the race set before us. There will be suffering; it cannot be avoided but it can be overcome if we keep our eyes focussed on Jesus and the glory that awaits us.

What things might cause us to take our eyes of the finish line or off Jesus? Where do I start? We mentioned toddlers running to their mum or dad, or to the sweets table. It is not just toddlers that get distracted. Many a Christian in this race has been seriously distracted by friends or family, by the cares of this world, as Jesus said in the parable of the sower- ‘the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches’ (Mat 13:22). The prize that worldly people look for in life is riches or honour or both, and too many Christians start looking to the same rewards, rewards here on earth rather than rewards in heaven. They want rewards now and are not prepared to wait, not prepared for the long haul, the race of endurance and the crown that Jesus gives.

There is a running track near my place. When I go for a walk I often see arrows chalked onto the track telling runners the way to go. What if those arrows were changed? The runners would end up… who knows where; there is a river nearby! But who would change the arrows? I don’t know but I know of one who will change the arrows in the race of your life. Satan loves putting obstacles in our way. Satan has his agents in false teachers who sneak into churches to teach false doctrine. Paul had to deal with such people at Corinth and in other churches; libertarians or antinomians saying we are not under law, and with legalists who said we have to keep the law to be saved. Satan continues his work in the church today with even greater vigour; Paul did not have to contend with the internet and social media.

Along the sides of the track you are on are many distractions, many things to tempt the flesh. John Bunyan pictures his pilgrim going through ‘Vanity Fair’ and being confronted by many temptations of the flesh. Jesus faced such temptations so do not think you won’t. Jesus was tempted by hunger and by the ‘pride of life’. Beware the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (1John 2:16). Jesus resisted the temptations and completed the race set before him because his focus was on ‘the joy set before him’. Remember Abraham, our father in the faith, who saw the promises afar off, was assured of them, and embraced them as a pilgrim and stranger in this world (Heb 11:13). Paul was running the race with his eyes fixed on the finish line and the prize; ‘Run in such a way as to get the prize’. He did not run aimlessly or with uncertainty; he knew where he was going (9:26).

**2. Fitness**

We are amazed at the feats accomplished by athletes in the Olympics just as Paul was by the athletes in the Isthmian games. But we do not necessarily realise the strict training schedule that these athletes have put themselves through. They go on a strict diet and train for hours every day, and that for months and years before the games. I heard that one Indian batman spends six hours in the nets every day. Olympic swimmers are in the pool training at five or six in the morning, and often back in the pool after work. They deny themselves the fun of parties and even time with family. There are no short cuts to Olympic glory. Half-hearted training will not do if you want to win.

It is the same with heavenly glory; there are no shortcuts, and no easy way according the Paul. You must go all out to win, and that means self-control and self-discipline are paramount. There is no let up, no holiday, if you are in this race. The moment you say, ‘I don’t feel like running today’ you have lost, just as surely as the cyclist who stops pedalling falls off, and the swimmer who stops swimming drowns.

Jesus warned his disciples to watch and pray because ‘the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak’ (Mat 26:41). They were drowsy because it was midnight. But in the race of life there is no place for drowsiness. We must sleep of course, but even then we seek God’s protection. Satan takes no rest, so neither can we. Thankfully, the Lord does not slumber or sleep (Ps 121).

Focus and fitness are both essential if you want to win the race. I enjoy watching tennis, as well as cricket. I see the disastrous effects of a player losing focus; often a temper tantrum leads to a loss of focus but sometimes it is just the lack of an earnest desire to win, what is crudely called a ‘killer instinct’. The other thing I see is players not able to go the distance; they are simply not fit. Athletes must be self-disciplined in putting their bodies through rigorous training schedules. When their body says, ‘no more’, they must tell it, ‘yes more’.

Paul speaks of disciplining his body and bringing it into subjection (9:27). He is speaking about his body but not only his physical body. He is speaking about self-control and self-discipline in every aspect of his life. He does nothing without a clear purpose, that purpose being to win the race of life. He was not a fitness fanatic; he kept himself fit for a purpose, the purpose of preaching the gospel. In writing to Timothy he says that physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things (1Tim 4:8). All around the suburbs I see signs that say ‘Fitness First’. I should get one for our church! We must ‘strengthen hands that hang down and feeble knees and make straight paths for our feet’ (Heb 12:12, 13) and run the race with perseverance just like Jesus, and just like Paul. ‘Imitate me just as I imitate Christ’ he said (11:1).

What does it mean to be spiritually fit, to put a ‘Fitness first’ sign on the church? It means to be fit and ready to follow Jesus. Jesus has blazed the trail for us and has set our feet upon this trail. But Satan keeps throwing obstacles in our way so we must be ready for these. He cannot touch us unless the Lord allows, but you must know this and not be scared of his threats or be seduced by his temptations. He can ‘transform himself into an angel of light’ offering you an easier way (2Cor 11:14). Like Jesus you will answer, ‘It is written’, as long as you know what is written. Paul speaks of ‘not beating the air’. The fights he observed were brutal and sometimes deadly. You dared not underestimate your opponent. You dared not go into the ring having made short cuts in your training. ‘Put on the full armour of God, for we do not wrestle against flesh and blood’ says Paul (Eph 6:11f).

I know that some of you are up at five or six in the morning to read your Bible and pray. You lead your family in prayer each day and are in the Lord’s house each Sunday. This is the way to keep spiritually fit. This is what Paul is encouraging the Corinthians to do. They must get back to the gospel that he preached, and turn away from the lusts of the flesh and the pride of life that led to immorality and divisions in the church. They were in a race and we are in a race. We must exercise self-control in all things and be disciplined in our spiritual life- all the more as we get closer to the finish line.

**3. The finish**

Paul saw winners in the games go to a podium to receive the winner’s crown, a wreath of wild celery, as we mentioned. They felt proud as the crowd applauded them loudly. But that crown was very short lived. Today winners get a gold medal which lasts much longer but still can get lost or perish. In the race of life, the crown is imperishable (9:25). It is the crown of life (James 1:12, Rev 2:10), the crown of righteousness given by the Lord (2Tim 4:8).

If you are wondering about only one getting the prize remember that this is an illustration. All who compete according to the rules and who have fought the good fight and finished the race, and who have ‘loved his appearing’ (2Tim 2:5, 4:8) will receive the crown. Paul had seen some who started out in the Christian life but did not continue, just like the seed sown among rocks or in shallow soil. They thought they were in the race, and maybe others did also, but the Lord is not fooled, ‘the Lord knows those who are his’ (2Tim 2:19).

You may also be wondering about Paul’s fear of being ‘disqualified’ (9:27), disqualified for what? The NIV adds, ‘for the prize’. Finishing the race is certain but it is not automatic, if that makes sense. Paul was running because he was certain of the prize given to winners, to those who finish the race according to the rules (9:26). The rules are set, and the Lord Jesus had shown the way. In his grace the Lord sets us on the path, and in his grace he upholds us each step of the way. Yet while ever we breathe, we have not yet finished the race, the race of life. And while ever we are in this body, we are subject to temptation and to attacks of Satan.

Let us not be like some that the apostle describes as being saved ‘yet as through the flames’ (3:15). He seems to distinguish between the gift of eternal life which we receive when we believe and the reward for those whose life and work pass the test. This verse cannot be used to argue that we can be saved and then lost (Arminianism), but it does come as a solemn warning to you and me and every believer, ‘to make your calling and election sure’ by godly behaviour (2Peter 1:10), and by rigorous self-discipline’.

**Warning from the history of Israel** 1Corinthians 10:1-13

In the church at Corinth were converts from an idol-worshipping background as well as converts from Judaism. Conversion involves repentance, confession of sin, and belief that God forgives sin through the blood of Jesus Christ. Repentance means turning away from sin and sinful ways, including idolatry and sexual immorality: ‘But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God’ (6:11). Being justified by grace through faith, and being baptised into Christ does not make us immune from trials and temptations.

Members of the church at Corinth would be tempted as they went about their work in this city full of idols and prostitutes. It is apparent from this letter that some were not only succumbing to temptation and falling back into old ways, but were taking pride in doing so because of false teaching about Christian liberty. Paul was made aware of a man ‘who had his father’s wife’, and the fact that some teachers in the church approved of such ‘freedoms’. Paul was then asked about eating food offered to idols because some ‘puffed up’ people in the church were back participating in idol worship. They went from taking the Lord’s Supper in the church to ‘partaking of the cup of demons’ in the temple down the road (10:21).

The apostle spoke of the Christian life as a race, the race of life, and of running this race according to the rules unto the very end. Only those who finish this race receive a crown. He was concerned that these Christians finish this race; indeed concerned that he himself not become disqualified (9:27). There is no place for arrogance or complacency in the race of life, in the race for the crown given by Christ. In delivering this warning, Paul turns to the history of God’s dealing with their fathers, with the generation God delivered out of slavery in Egypt, the generation Moses led through the wilderness towards the Promised Land. He urges them to ‘look at history’ and the ‘lusting after evil’ of their fathers. Our third subheading is, ‘learn from history’ and our fourth, ‘look to God when tempted’.

**1. Look at history**

All believers, whether of Jewish or Gentile background, become spiritual descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Abraham is ‘the father of all who believe’ (Rom 4:11). So those who Moses led out of Egypt are ‘our fathers’ (10:1). Their story is our history, or ‘His-story’. Paul raises this matter of our history to throw more light on the matter of being ‘disqualified for the prize’ (9:27). ‘Moreover’ or ‘But’ is how he begins this chapter. The Jews knew this history well but converts from paganism were also taught it; they would learnt it from singing the Psalms in worship.

The crossing of the Red Sea, and the provision of food and water in the desert, were features of this history. Paul speaks of the first as being ‘baptized into Moses’ and the second as eating spiritual food and drink (10:2, 3). Probably based on references to God providing water from the rock at the beginning (Exod 17:1-7), and at the end of the journey (Numb 20:2-13), the Jews spoke of this rock as accompanying them through the wilderness wandering. God of course, supplied manna from heaven during their forty-year journey. Moses sang of God as ‘the Rock’, and spoke of the angel of the Lord accompanying Israel in the desert; was this the pre-incarnate Christ? Paul says that this ‘spiritual rock’ which followed them, and from which they drank, was Christ (10:4).

Jesus was born into this world, but this was not the beginning of his existence. John writes that, ‘the Word became flesh and dwelt among us’ (John 1:14). Jesus was with God in the beginning, the eternal Son of God. This sounds strange to the ears of some Christians but not to you I trust. Jesus did not call himself the ‘Rock’ but he spoke of himself as giving ‘living water’ (John 4:10, 6:35). The apostle speaks of him giving this water to ‘our fathers’ in the desert. Christ is more than simply another prophet or the second Moses (John 7:37f).

The mention of baptism and of spiritual food and drink points to the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper as practiced in the church at Corinth and elsewhere (1:16, 11:20). Like many today, it seems these Christians thought these sacraments were efficacious in themselves, that they acted a prophylactics against sin and ensuing judgment. They twisted Paul’s teaching regarding Christian liberty and the assurance of salvation to conclude that holiness of life was not necessary (cf. Rom 6:1). In drawing these comparisons between the old and new covenants, Paul delivers a stern warning about turning away from Christ through idolatry and sexual immorality in particular.

In referring to these sacraments, Paul emphasises that ‘all our fathers’ participated in them. Five times he repeats the word ‘all’: all passed through the sea, and all ate and drank the food and drink given by God- both material and spiritual. Then he drops a bombshell! ‘But with most of them God was not well pleased’ (10:5). All were delivered out of slavery in Egypt and all were fed by God in the desert, but God was not pleased with the majority of them. In fact, only two, Joshua and Caleb, lived to enter the Promised Land. These two trusted in God and he was pleased with them, in contrast to the other ten spies who convinced the people not to trust and obey the command of God. What happened to that generation of men? Paul reminds us of the alarming facts of history; their corpses lay scattered in the wilderness (10:5).

Alarms are meant to wake us up. If you fail to pay heed to the alarm you will get washed off the rocks, or get taken by a shark. The Corinthians were in dangerous water, spiritually speaking. They must get out and get back on solid ground before it was too late, before they ended up perishing like their fathers. If God is not pleased with the way you are living be warned! ‘If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him’ (1John 2:15). You cannot serve God and mammon (Matt 6:24). The Corinthians had not finished the race, and neither have you. Take heed to the warnings: ‘Flee from sexual immorality’ and ‘Flee from idolatry’ (6:18, 10:14).

**2. Lusting after evil**

The apostle goes on to explain why God was not pleased with most of the Israelites. He takes them back to their history, not just as a literary exercise but as a living example of how God deals with men and women with whom he is ‘not well pleased’. He points out that our fathers ‘lusted after evil things’, as these selected incidents from history demonstrate. They turned to idols and to sexual immorality, the very things Paul was dealing with in this church. They grumbled and complained, the very thing that Paul was putting up with from the Corinthians. They wanted him out of their church, just as Korah and his friends wanted Moses out of their lives. They were rejecting leaders appointed by God.

Paul firstly recalls the incident of the golden calf at Mt Sinai. Aaron made an idol, a golden calf, which the people worshipped. They made offerings to this god, ‘sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play’ (Exod 32:6); this play is understood to be an orgy. The Lord was going to destroy all except Moses but Moses pleaded with the Lord. Idolatry almost led to their immediate destruction.

The second incident was one of gross sexual immorality associated with pagan worship; this was at Baal of Peor in Moab. At this place ‘our fathers’ were seduced by Moabite women/prostitutes during a pagan sacrifice (Num 25:1,3). In fierce anger, God ordered the offenders be put to death. Moreover, a plague came upon them killing a total of 24,000; Paul writes of 23,000 being killed in one day (10:8).

The third incident of divine discipline upon ‘our fathers’ in the desert was when they ‘tested Christ’ (10:9). Travelling around the land of Edom they got discouraged and spoke against Moses and against God (Numb 21:5). This was one of at least seven times that they grumbled, wanting to go back to Egypt; the Lord sent fiery serpents which bit and killed many.

The fourth incident recalled by Paul was another time they complained and were ‘destroyed by the destroyer’ (10:10). While at Kadesh Barnea they twice grumbled and complained. The ten spies discouraged the people with their report and they complained against Moses; a plague killed these ten spies (Numb 14:37). After this, Korah led a rebellion to remove Moses as their leader. When the Lord buried these rebels alive, the people complained to Moses. The Lord sent a plague killing another 14,700 (Num 16:41-50). In referring to ‘the destroyer’, Paul is probably alluding to the destroying angel of the tenth plague to hit the Egyptians.

Those in Corinth complaining about the leadership of the apostle Paul would be wise to look at the history of God’s dealing with people who complained about a leader appointed by God. Is it not the same in the church today? God has appointed leaders and expects his people to listen to those leaders (Heb 13:17). Most church leaders today know that rebuke for sin of any kind will lead to that person leaving the church. The history of God’s dealing with his people is a warning against such behaviour.

**3. Learn from history**

‘Now these things are written down as warnings for us’ says Paul (10:11 NIV). These incidents are recorded that we might learn from them. They are examples or ‘types’ that speak to us today- or should do! We live in the last days, as people upon whom ‘the ends of the ages have come’ (10:11). Jesus’ death and resurrection marked the fulfilment and end of the old covenant and the being of the new covenant, the beginning of the end.

In the days of Moses they could say, ‘Messiah is yet to come’. We know, as the Corinthians knew, that Messiah has come, and that when he comes again it will be judgment time, and the end of this world as we know it. We cannot rest secure in anything that must happen before Jesus returns. The gospel ‘will be preached in all the world …and then the end will come’ (Mat 14:14). Jesus warns us to be ready. Paul warns us not to rebel. Too many Christians spend more time rebelling than they do getting ready for the return of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Moreover, too many Christians have a false sense of security about a place in heaven. Paul warns, ‘Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall’ (10:12). Assurance comes from the truth of divine election and divine preservation, election and preservation by grace through faith. This is quite different to assurance base on rituals or good works. Baptism is a mere ritual when faith is not involved; it is not a saving ordinance anyway. All the Israelites were baptised, all partook of the same spiritual food and drink, yet many never entered the Promised Land. The apostle wanted the Christians in Corinth and in all the churches, including churches today, to look at this history and learn from it.

This is written that you might take heed to yourself and to the way you are running the race of life. What idols have entered into your life? Are you overtaken by sexual immorality? Are you given to grumbling and complaining? Tragically, there are Christians who have fallen into sinful ways yet still think they stand in the faith; some even think they possess the crown promised by Jesus. Ignorance of the Bible, and arrogance regarding sin and salvation, are a fatal combination.

**4. Look to God when tempted**

If you answered ‘yes’ to any of the questions just asked, there is still hope. Paul ends this lesson with a word of hope, a word to which most believers have turned at some time in their life. Temptation or testing will come to every believer. The question is how do we deal with this? ‘It is not helpful to think that God has cursed us or singled us out for special punishment’. Paul reminds us that there is ‘nothing new under the sun’. Reading about Job is a salutary exercise. Reading the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is even more salutary.

‘But God is faithful’ says Paul, ‘who will not allow you to be tempted or tested beyond what you are able to bear’ (10:13). You will have learned this by reading about Job. God set a limit beyond which Satan could not afflict Job. If you are similarly a child of God, then he will be faithful in upholding you also. Job did not know what God was doing but we are told, and we are told again here in this verse that God will not allow us to be tested or tempted by more that we can cope with.

Whatever the temptation or test, be it sickness or sex, family or finances, God knows, and as we read here, he will open a way of escape (10:13). God can open a door in the darkest room of suffering; God can lift us out of the hottest place of our passions. Paul is not necessarily talking about miracles; it may well be a fellow believer who helps you escape (Gal 6:1). Do learn this verse because you will need it at some time as you run the race of life.

**Flee from idolatry** 1Corinthians 10:14-22

In dealing with the problem of sexual immorality in the church at Corinth, the apostle Paul concluded, ‘Flee from sexual immorality’ (6:18). He was amazed and even angry that these people who first heard the gospel and had believed through his ministry were so quickly falling back into pagan ways. How could they even think of uniting to a prostitute their body that now belonged to Christ (6:15, 16).

Another problem in this church, something they wrote to Paul about, was eating food offered to idols (8:1). Meat in the market place in Corinth most likely came from animals sacrificed to idols (10:25). Paul reasoned that idols are nothing so eating such meat is okay, as long as no one asks questions, or a weaker brother is made to stumble. But to think that Christian liberty allowed them to participate with friends in an actual sacrifice in a pagan temple was another matter. Paul had just reminded them of the incident with the golden calf at Mt Sinai and the ‘wrath of God that burned hot’ against ‘our fathers’ (10:7, Exod 32:10).

Idolatry remains a sin under the new covenant in the blood of Jesus Christ. ‘Flee from idolatry’ urges the apostle as he continues to focus upon this question of eating meat offered to idols, and its broader implications. Our first subheading is ‘symbolism in the Lord’s Supper’, our second, ‘sacrifices in the temple’ and our third, ‘stronger than God?’

**1. Symbolism in the Lord’s Supper**

Paul spoke the truth in love (Eph 4:15). Despite their rejection of his authority, he continued pleading with them not to turn away from the truth, and not to turn back to old ways. In Christ the eyes of their hearts had been opened. Having ‘the mind of Christ’ (2:16) they were able to discern between truth and lies, between good and evil. It was one thing to say ‘an idol is nothing’ and ‘there is no other God but one’ (8:4), but another to start participating in the worship of idols. Doing this was tantamount to condoning pagan worship, making it difficult to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ as the only way of salvation.

If we agree to the validity of all worship, saying that it is sincerity that counts and that ‘all roads lead to heaven’, we cannot claim the uniqueness of Christ and teach what Jesus teaches in John 14:6. The gospel is not illogical; it is not for the uneducated or ill-informed, as many assert. It is perfectly logical, consistent and sensible. Faith is involved in belief of course, but the theories and philosophies devised by men require faith, and are actually inconsistent and illogical.

The apostle directs the attention of the Corinthian Christians to the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, sometimes called ‘communion’ because of what is written here in verse 18. The Greek word is ‘*koinonia*’, which is also translated ‘fellowship’, ‘sharing’ or ‘participation’. Jesus himself instituted this sacrament while sharing his last Passover with his disciples (Luke 22:14f). The Passover involved the sacrifice of a lamb, the eating of unleavened bread, and drinking of wine from a cup. Jesus became the Passover lamb when he was crucified. At the last supper he spoke of the bread being his body and the wine his shed blood, but obviously as representing or symbolising his body and blood ; he was not inviting the apostles to be cannibals as he sat with them! The words of the apostle Paul in this text cannot be used to support the teaching of transubstantiation, any more than the words of Jesus in John 6:53.

‘The cup of blessing which we bless’ is often taken to be the third cup of four cups shared during the Passover. This cup was set apart with a blessing or a word of thanksgiving. The wine did not undergo any chemical change but it did convey a blessing to believers who drank it. That blessing came not from anything inherit in the wine, blessed or not blessed, but from participation in the blood of Christ or the death of Christ. Calvin writes, ‘the soul has a truly communion in the blood as we drink wine with the mouth’. Blessing flows into the heart and life of the believer as he or she remembers Jesus Christ who took their sin as he died on the cross.

Jesus had to die because the penalty for sin is death (Rom 6:23). God forgives our sin and cleanses us from all unrighteousness in the blood of Jesus Christ. Paul told the Corinthians that when they believed they were ‘washed and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God’ (6:11). The communion cup symbolised the spiritual relationship that believers have with Christ their saviour.

When Paul gives instructions for celebrating the Lord’s Supper he places the bread before the wine, the loaf before the cup (11:23-26). Here he refers to the bread second because he goes on to teach how this ‘one loaf’ pictures not only unity with Christ but also the unity of the church. ‘Is this not the communion of the body of Christ?’ (10:16). The bread which is broken symbolises the body of Christ, torn by nails and by a spear as he hung upon the cross. In the Passover it was unleavened bread, and it was probably the same in the early church, but this is not specified. What is specified is that there was one loaf (10:17 NIV).

In breaking a piece from this one loaf the believer remembers, and indeed symbolises, the breaking of the body of Jesus upon the cross; it was a real body, a flesh and blood body and not a phantom. His suffering was real and his death was real, as was his resurrection. We must not over-spiritualise the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. On the other hand, we maintain that the benefits or blessings we receive are primarily spiritual, although the final resurrection will again be a bodily resurrection.

The body of Christ is a real body but Paul gives it a symbolic sense in calling the church ‘the body of Christ’. ‘Now you are the body of Christ and members individually’ (12:27). The church is not an institution but an organism. The one loaf from which we break bread in the Lord’s Supper represents the body of Christ. In eating this bread we express unity with Christ and unity with fellow believers who belong to the same body of Christ. We are many, we are men and women from different cultures and different languages brought together by our communion with Christ. We are members of the one body of Christ. Recall the divisions that had arisen in this church at Corinth, and Paul saying, ‘Is Christ divided?’ (1:13).

If we all come together around the table of the Lord and all partake of the one loaf, how can we go away divided? Jesus tells us to be reconciled with our brother and sister before we bring our offering to the Lord (Matt 5:24). It is impossible to sit at the Lord’s Table while having an unresolved difference with someone else at the table. That said, examining ourselves as we come to the table (11:28), and focussing upon the Lord as we partake of the sacrament, helps us in any reconciliation needed in our lives. Remember the cup of blessing, and remember the one loaf. The symbolism is powerful and the reality more powerful because it is the Lord’s Supper, the sacrament of Holy Communion. ‘The sacrament springs from unity and creates unity’ writes Leon Morris. I always leave the Lord’s Table with a sense of joy in the Lord, and indeed of wanting to hug you each one with a ‘holy kiss’!

**2. Sacrifice in the temple**

In urging the Corinthians to be sensible and have nothing to do with idolatry, the apostle Paul makes a second point in verse 18: ‘Consider the people of Israel after the flesh’. The Jews were still making sacrifices in the temple in Jerusalem. Paul considered the church the true Israel of God, hence his reference to ‘Israel after the flesh’ (10:18, Gal 6:16) - and hence my objection to the mission called ‘Christian Witness to Israel’ which has just changed its name to ‘International Mission to Jewish people’.

What happened to the animals brought for sacrifice on the altar in the temple? Some were completely burnt, but with others some meat was given to the priest and to the worshipper to be eaten in a fellowship meal (10:18). This act of eating the meat of a sacrificed animal was part and parcel of worship at the altar, of entering into fellowship with Yahweh under the old covenant. This should have been clear to Jewish converts and to Gentile converts also- to sensible and intelligent men. They knew that joining in the sacrifices and eating sacrificed meat was part and parcel of worship of Yahweh, or indeed of other gods. So how could they now think they could join in such worship without entering into fellowship with the god whose name was associated with that temple or altar?

Paul was aware of what he had told them about an idol being nothing, and that there is no other God but one, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He was not now saying that an idol is anything, but that there is something else to consider, namely that demons are behind these idols. Jesus was acutely aware of demons or evil spirits and their power, power to control men like the Gadarene demoniac (Luke 8:26f). Demons are real and are not to be played with, even by, and especially not by those who belong to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Even to enter a Hindu temple as a tourist is oppressive; to enter into worship is to put oneself into a spiritually dangerous situation. It is to step into the den of a lion, as it were. ‘Your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour’ (1Peter 5:8). To those stepping into the arms of a prostitute Paul shouts, ‘Flee from sexual immorality!’ To those stepping into a temple dedicated to another god Paul shouts, ‘Flee from idolatry!’

**3. Stronger than God**

The apostle concludes, ‘You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord’s Table and the table of demons’ (10:21). To do so is to put your foot into waters where sharks or crocodiles are on the prowl- to change Peter’s metaphor. In fact, even more dangerous than a shark is the box or Irukandji jellyfish. I saw one of these the other night on the TV. They are translucent and very small but their sting is deadly.

An idol is nothing but the unseen demon behind it is a real spiritual being, a being out to cut you off from Christ. Moses warned the people of God not to practice witchcraft, and to stay away from sorcerers, mediums and spiritists. Pagan worship inevitably involves such practices, practices which are an abomination to the Lord (Deut 18:10-12). Remember how the people of God were to destroy all pagan idols and temples in the land of Canaan.

To support pagan worship in any way or to participate in pagan worship is spiritually dangerous, and renders impotent any preaching of the gospel. But more than this, it makes the Lord jealous: ‘Do we provoke the Lord to jealousy?’ asks Paul (10:22). Our God is a jealous God; he will not give his glory to another (Exod 20:5, Isa 48:11). To participate in pagan worship is to arouse the jealous anger of God and to forget that He is stronger than us.

These ‘puffed up’, libertarian Christians at Corinth were ‘playing with fire’ as we say. The demons themselves are stronger than mere human beings (Eph 4:12), and God is even stronger than the demons. At the cross, Jesus defeated Satan, and in Christ we share in this victory. So we must have nothing to do with the works of Satan. If we pray, ‘deliver us from the evil one’ (Mat 6:13) then let us flee from idolatry in all its forms.

**Conditions on Christian liberty** 1Corinthians 10:23-33

In ancient Greece many gods and goddesses, including Apollo, Zeus, Demeter, Artemis and Aphrodite were worshipped. Ancient Corinth was marked by a huge temple to the goddess Aphrodite, and an estimated one thousand temple prostitutes. The daily life of everyone in this city was impacted by idol worship; even meat sold in the market place came from sacrifices made in the temple. In India we were impacted by idol worship in Hindu temples located on almost every street corner- or in one place in the middle of the street. We bought meat from a Muslim man who came to our door; I presume it was all halal meat. We have a lot of halal butchers in our market places. Do you buy halal meat?

Sometimes we were invited to the home of a Hindu friend, and ate what ever was put before us; Hindus do not eat meat of course. One day we invited a Hindu friend to our house for a meal. As my wife was serving him a piece of cake she suddenly remembered she had made it with eggs. The guest was grateful and put the cake to one side. High caste Hindus don’t even eat eggs. If nothing had been said he would of course, have eaten the cake and been none the wiser. But having been told it contained egg he do not eat it because of his religious scruples.

What the apostle Paul counsels Christians at Corinth to do when eating in an unbeliever’s house is somewhat similar. ‘Eat whatever is set before you’ he says, ‘without asking questions’ (10:27). But if anyone says the meat came from a sacrifice in the temple do not eat it (10:28). The meat would still have tasted the same to you, but the person who made the comment was obviously concerned about its provenance- like my wife and her cake. This person may be the unbeliever host, or a fellow believer, a weaker brother (8:12, 13). In this case, do not eat the meat lest you cause this person to stumble. If you went ahead and ate you might harm the conscience of that person.

We have taken a dive into the middle of this passage. Let us go back to the beginning and see where the apostle is up to in this letter. Since the beginning of chapter 8 he has been dealing with their concern about ‘things offered to idols’. Meat bought in the market place may well have been offered to idols, but as liberated believers you are free to eat this in your home. What about eating such meat in the temple itself? Paul has just ruled this out saying, ‘you cannot partake of the Lord’s Table and the table of demons’ (10:21). What about going to the home of a pagan friend for a meal? A Jew would never go (cf. Peter and Cornelius- Acts 10), but as a believer, Paul felt free to go and to eat whatever he was given. Even so, some in the church, it appears, were asserting their liberty as Christians to the detriment of others in the fellowship, and to the cause of the gospel. Christian liberty comes with conditions; there are other principles to consider in the Christian life.

**1. God’s gifts**

Considering his background as a Jew, indeed a Pharisee, Paul was remarkably liberal when it came to food laws. He no longer held to laws about kosher food. He reprimanded Peter for siding with the legalist Jews in refusing to eat with Gentile believers at Antioch. Legalistic Jews held that a person had to be circumcised and obey Mosaic food laws in order to be saved. As a Christian, Paul rejected this doctrine and practice. He felt free to eat anything given by God. He condemned teaching which calls for us to abstain from certain foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving (1Tim 4:3). Here in this letter to the Corinthians he writes, ‘Eat whatever is sold in the meat market’, for ‘the earth is the Lord’s and all its fullness (10:25, 26). God made everything and everything is good when received with thanksgiving. In writing to the Romans on the same issue Paul said, ‘The kingdom of God is not about eating and drinking’, despite what some in the church today tell you (Rom 14:17).

Neither eating nor not eating commends us to God. It is not for the strong Christian to assert his rights to eat whatever he likes, any more than it is the weak Christian’s right to demand certain foods not be eaten. We are free to eat anything with thanksgiving, but more important principles than personal freedom come into play. ‘Everything is permissible but not everything is beneficial; everything is permissible but not everything is constructive’ (10:23 NIV). As I assert my rights or freedoms I should ask, ‘Is my action helping or hindering other believers? Is my action building up the body of Christ?’ You will recall Paul asking the same things with regard to the other matter troubling the church at Corinth, sexual immorality (6:12) - not that he permitted sexual immorality for a moment, but he did acknowledge sexual passion, and marriage as the place for satisfying such passions. In that context he again asked if exercising one’s freedoms was helpful, and indeed, warned of coming under the power of anything other than Christ.

In our society unbelievers see personal rights as paramount. People who refuse to bend to the desires or needs of others are applauded as strong leaders. Sometimes church leaders can be like this; some claim their way is God’s way. You have heard about the man who, in agreeing to differ with his brother said, ‘You do it your way and I will do it God’s way’. It seems there were like-minded men in the church at Corinth. Brother and sisters weak in the faith were given no consideration as these people exercised their Christian liberty.

**2. Good of others**

‘Nobody should seek his own good but the good of others’ (10:24 NIV). This passage has no connecting word to the previous passage because it is Paul’s concluding word for chapters 8-10. But in the previous passage he spoke about the body of Christ, a term he uses for the Church. Elsewhere he writes about ‘all suffering when one member suffers, and all rejoicing when one member rejoices’ (12:26). If one member is ‘riding roughshod’ over the feelings, and indeed conscience, of another he is not building up the body of Christ (10:23).

The church is the body of Christ, and Christ himself will deal with any who teach or act in any way to destroy his church. We are all accountable to the Lord for our words and our conduct, especially leaders in the home and in the church. Paul was determined to do all he could that some might be saved through his preaching. He did not want any Jew or any Gentile or any believer taking offense at his Christian freedom (10:32). Jesus never asserted his human rights, or indeed divine rights, as he preached the kingdom of God. Compassion and understanding were features of his ministry (Matt 9:35, 36).

Paul returns to the case at hand, answering the specific question brought to him, namely eating meat sacrificed to idols. Joining pagans in worship that involved eating such meat was not on, unless you want to arouse the jealous anger of God (10:22). But when buying meat from the market, don’t ask questions about its provenance because it is just meat (10:25). I don’t believe what the local fishmonger says anyway! If you go to Asia just remember, people often answer according to what they think you want to hear.

What about eating meat in the home of an unbelieving friend or colleague? (10:27); we looked at this in the introduction, but let’s recap briefly. You are free to eat whatever is dished up - unless, unless someone says to you, ‘This meat was offered to idols’ (10:28). Paul does not indicate who this someone might be. Some think him to be the host and others a fellow believer. Either way, it is clear that this is not the time or place to launch into a lecture on Christian liberty. It is time to think why this matter was raised. If it was the unbeliever host he might think that knowingly eating meat sacrificed to an idol meant you were acknowledging the god to which it was sacrificed and endorsing idol worship, even if you thought you were asserting that an idol is nothing. Out of respect for the host who was informing you, and a desire that he might be saved say, ‘Thank you for telling me; I will not eat this meat if it causes you offense’. If the person telling you about the meat was a fellow believer, regard him as weaker brother and consider his conscience (8:12).

The second part of verse 29 is not a contradiction. The RSV Bible has verses 28 and 29a in parenthesis, which is not necessary but it does point to the ‘for’ in verse 29b as linking back to verse 27. The conscience Paul was thinking about was not his, because he had no scruples about eating such meat in the house of an unbeliever. Moreover, he did not want others judging him for the freedom he had in Christ. If told the meat had been offered to idols he would voluntarily limit his liberty, but he would not have others judging him for his liberties or have them making their conscience his standard. Converted Jews might be ready to judge him for breaking kosher rules, or the declaration made at the Jerusalem conference (Acts 16:20).

**3. Glory of God**

‘Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God’ (10:31). This is the conclusion drawn by the apostle to this question of Christian freedoms; this is the overriding principle in all our conduct. Yes, you can eat whatever you want, do what you want, and go where you want, but remember the Lord in everything you do. Remember you are not your own, you were ‘bought at a price’. Remember whose you are and whom you serve. Paul said, ‘For me to live is Christ’ and again, ‘it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me’ (Phil 1:21, Gal 2:20).

Our Shorter Catechism begins with the question, ‘What is the chief end of man?’ and gives the answer, ‘Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him for ever’. Verse 31 is the first text cited by the Westminster divines. It is encouraging to see teachers and preachers focus upon this central tenant of the Christian life, even if they think they have discovered something new. Yet sadly, many are yet to rediscover this most important truth. They are still acting like many in Corinth, and indeed like unbelievers, as they assert their rights and freedoms to the detriment of others and to the church, the body of Christ.

‘Puffed-up’ men who ‘know everything’ were asserting their rights in the church at Corinth. They even, and especially, refused to listen to the apostle Paul. Paul calmly but firmly shows them a better way, the way of Christ. He asks for the interests of others to be put before self-interest, something he also urged upon the Philippian church, pointing to Christ as our example (Phil 2:4). He lamented that ‘all seek their own, not the things of Jesus Christ’ (Phil 2:21). His message to the Corinthians is the same, and his message to us in the church today is the same. Are we each one seeking the glory of God in all that we do and say? Are you putting others before yourself, as Jesus himself taught, and indeed demonstrated?

**3. Imitate me as I also imitate Christ**

Earlier in this letter the apostle wrote, ‘Therefore I urge you, imitate me’ (4:16). He was writing with passion to his beloved children; he was their spiritual father. He was their shepherd, protecting and feeding them as they grew in their faith. But ‘hungry wolves’ had come among them, men driven by lusts of the flesh, men looking out only for themselves, men who cared nothing for the conscience of others. They were antinomian or libertarian.

In this letter the apostle Paul urges them to remember how he lived among them during the eighteen months he preached the gospel among them. These ‘wolves’ were attacking Paul in his absence and drawing the flock into their own sinful ways. They might attack Paul but in doing so they were attacking Christ, because as an apostle appointed by the risen Christ, Paul was imitating Christ.

Paul not only preached grace, he lived by grace. Justification is by grace alone, and so is sanctification. There is no place for pride or self-interest in the Christian life. If Paul had acted out of self-interest he would have walked away from this troublesome church. If Christ acted out of self- interest he would have walked away from the cross! ‘For even Christ did not please himself’ (Rom 15:3). He went to the cross out of obedience to the Father and out of love for you and me, lost and helpless human beings. Christ humbled himself, even to death on the cross (Phil 2:8). Let us listen to, and heed, the apostle’s call to, ‘Imitate me, even as I imitate Christ’.

**Propriety in worship- head covering** 1Corinthians 11:2-16

I entered my teenage years not long after ‘the Beatles’ hit the world music stage. These men decided to let their hair grow, probably out of a sense of rebellion, or maybe just to be different. So their fans started to let their hair grow, relatively speaking. When a young man in the church let his hair grow, almost to his shoulders, the verse about a man growing hair long being a disgrace (11:14) was made known to all the youth. At the same time young women started asking why they had to wear hats to church, and this same passage of Scripture was made known, even though it makes no mention of hats as such. Hats are more about fashion than about propriety in worship.

Paul begins this section referring to traditions (11:2). Some Christians think they have no traditions in worship and that all they do is biblical. Well, here in the Bible we are reading about traditions. When we start worshipping with believers from other cultures it becomes obvious we all have traditions. There is nothing wrong with traditions as long as they conform to the teaching of the Bible. Each generation and each culture will assess their traditions in the light of God’s word. Those who criticised the young man for his long hair overlooked the fact that the Reformers and Puritans had long hair by our standards. Moreover, women’s dress has changed over the generations. The matter of modesty remains, as does the matter of the relationship between men and women. Under Mosaic Law a woman was not allowed to wear man’s clothing, and vice versa (Deut 22:5).

God created mankind male and female. He created woman from the man’s rib, and made her to complement the man, as Paul points out in this passage. So while dress styles change over the generations and across cultures, the Bible teaches that men and women should dress differently. We live in a day when some women want to dress like men, and some men want to dress like women. The ungodly want to blur gender differences. Paul was informed of a similar push by some in the church at Corinth- people from Chloe’s household, or Stephanas and his friends, must have informed him (1:11, 16:17). It seems some ‘liberated’ women were not conforming to the culture, or the custom of the churches in regard to hair style and/or head covering. Feminism is nothing new!

This passage of Scripture is notoriously difficult to translate and understand. Most preachers avoid it, although a friend of mine is completing his PhD on this passage. Paul Barnett is critical of the Anglican lectionary for preachers because it omits this passage. Even experts in Greek language and culture, of which I am not one, cannot agree. When Paul uses the word ‘head’ we have to decide if he means a literal head or a metaphorical head, as in a boss, or both.

What does he mean by the word ‘covering’? He is not talking about hats, as we said, but does he mean a veil or just a covering of hair, long hair that is ‘bound up’ as Barnett says? (11:15); yet in the preceding verses ‘covering’ seems to refer to a veil of some kind. Greek and Roman women usually wore their hair tied up and with a veil over it. Indian women simply pull the top of their sari over their head to pray. In villages they pull this right over their head when men approach.

If I have already confused you I am sorry, but we are going to press on and try to understand what the apostle was teaching the church in Corinth in the first century AD, and what we can learn from this portion of God’s word today.

**1. Creation order**

Saul the rabbi studied the Bible- our OT; Paul the Christian continued to hold to the OT as Holy Scripture. As an apostle he was given further revelations but nothing that contradicted what was written in his Bible. Paul, like Jesus, but unlike many in the church today, often drew upon the first three chapters of the Bible. He believed these to be literal and historical. If you don’t believe these chapters you will not understand the apostle’s teaching regarding this matter of propriety in worship.

We are not free to worship however we like because the Bible, particularly Genesis 1-2, teaches an order or propriety in relation to men and women in worship. Christian women were given much more liberty in worship than their counterparts in other religions. In some religions and sects women are only saved through marriage, through their husband. Jesus treated women as equals when it comes to hearing the gospel and believing. The apostle Paul wrote, ‘There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all are one in Christ Jesus’ (Gal 3:25).

But equality does not mean identity. Becoming a Christian does not remove the order God set in place at creation for the relationship between men and women, particularly between husband and wife. Greek uses the same word for ‘woman’ and ‘wife’ but has two words for ‘man’: ‘*anthropos*’ is the general word, while ‘*aner*’ means male. When Paul talks about a ‘woman’ he is referring to a ‘wife’ because women were either a wife or a widow in his day.

In dealing with the matter of some departing from traditions in public worship, Paul goes first to biblical teaching about headship or authority (11:3). Some understand ‘head’ as referring to ‘source’ in this verse. Man’s life is sourced in Christ; in Christ, God gives us eternal life (John 3:16). But the same cannot be said of Christ being ‘sourced’ in God because Christ is eternally the Son of God. God is the head of Christ precisely because of the Father-Son relationship. Christ is the head of man because he is the Son of God, the only begotten Son of the Father.

Paul speaks of ‘growing up into Christ who is the head’ (Eph 4:15). Christ is the head of the church. He has given gifts to believers and appointed men, the apostles, as leaders in his church. Paul wants us to know the order which God has instituted in creation and in his church, namely: God, Christ, man, woman. He calls this order ‘headship’. It is order based on authority and submission to authority. It is also based on love of course. The Father loves the Son, the Son loves us, and the man loves the woman. Love does not preclude authority, despite what some parents believe. When Christ or God is removed from this order we do of course, find men who abuse their God-given authority and women who refuse to accept the God-appointed head of the family. Relationships in the family are carried over into the house of God.

The apostle applies this creation order to public worship. He writes of ‘men praying or prophesying’ with their head covered (11:4). He goes on to speak of women doing the same thing, praying and prophesying (11:5). He does not say that women should not pray, yet later in this letter he writes, ‘Let women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says’ (14:34). Is Paul contradicting himself? Various explanations can be found. Paul Barnett maintains that while only male elders led and preached from the Scriptures and traditions in worship, praying and prophesying was open to all because the Spirit is given to both man and women. He writes, ‘Those who prophesied did so on an occasional basis as the need arose’. Whose perceived need we might ask- the Spirit, the person or the congregation?

Barnett asserts that this matter of women praying got out of control, with the husband-wife relationship being ‘subverted’. I suggest the praying does not necessarily mean speaking. Do we not all pray when one person leads us in prayer? Indian women cover their heads when they walk into the church. They are praying when someone else is actually speaking. Barnett goes on to suggest that some women in Corinth had adopted an ‘over-realized eschatology’; in other words, they thought that the new age had come, the age in which there was no more marriage and we are all like the angels (Matt 22:30).

In worship men should not cover their head- literally ‘having down from the head’ (11:4). To have such a covering ‘dishonours his head’. While the first ‘head’ in verse 4 is literal, the second is more figurative as in, ‘the head of every man is Christ’ (11:3). He later says that man ought not to cover his head, ‘since he is the image and glory of God’ (11:7). God made man in his image; he made woman by taking one of Adam’s ribs (Gen 2:22). Adam rejoiced when he saw this woman, this ‘helper comparable to him’ (Gen 2:18). This is what is written, and this is what Paul believed. From this creation order he taught that man is made in the image and glory of God so should not cover his head in worship, or have long hair like a woman (11:14). I once spoke to a man about wearing his cap in church; he was bald and did not agree with me. I asked if he took his cap off for the queen, or out of respect when he went into the war memorial.

On the other hand, a woman should not pray with her head uncovered. To do so dishonours her head, her husband (11:5). The apostle says that to do so is as shameful as shaving her head. In those days, and some places today, a woman’s head was shaved if found guilty of adultery; in an Indian village she would also be stripped naked to walk down the street. Other women with shorn heads or short hair were fugitives or lesbians. So a woman or wife should at least have a covering of hair if she is to give due respect to her husband in public worship. Indeed, the woman is the glory of man, of her husband (11:7). In rejecting this simple sign of authority she is rejecting her husband, the man whom God made first, and the man to whom she was given in the wonderful and perfect purposes of the Creator.

Headship, as we said, means authority, and authority implies submission by the one under authority. We all live with authority every day, yet when it comes to marriage, headship and submission are widely rejected, even by people who accept the Bible. Again we say, men and women are equal before God, but as God has created us and created marriage, men and women have different roles; they are not identical. If God wanted men and women to be identical men would not grow hair on their face- not to mention the matter of childbirth (1Tim 2:15)!

While God created the male before the female (11:8, 1Tim 2:13), it is also true that man is born of woman. Paul adds this qualification saying, ‘Nevertheless’, men and woman are dependent on each other in the Lord (11:11-12). Husband and wife stand as equals before God; neither is superior or inferior before the Lord. What Paul teaches, based on the order established at the time of creation, is that man, the husband, is head of the family, that his headship carries into the church, and that his headship is reflected in the relative length of hair, or head covering worn by his wife. After all, long hair is the glory of a woman and, like a veil, is a symbol of authority on her head, ‘because of the angels’ (11:10). Angels, as God’s messengers, apparently take notice of how we worship.

**2. Custom and something natural**

Having finished his argument from the creation, Paul concludes his teaching about propriety in worship with respect to women covering their heads with two further points. Firstly, he calls upon church members to judge for themselves what is right and proper (11:13). Nature itself teaches that a man with long hair is a disgrace, not least because it makes him look like a woman. Long hair is part and parcel of a woman’s beauty. The apostle Peter tells wives to cultivate inner beauty, while accepting that they will attend to their hair and their clothes- as is well known (1Peter 3:1-5).

Our grandson was born following two girls in his family. He was surrounded by dolls and dresses, but does he like such things? No. He is a boy, as he says, and wants to act like a boy. His sisters want long hair and love beautiful dresses. This is natural, despite what feminists try to tell us. Attempts to condition boys into being girls, or vice versa, are evil and generally fail anyway. ‘Long hair’, writes Paul is a woman’s glory; it is given to her for a covering in place of ‘a handmade mantle’ (11:15).

Paul’s concluding argument is brief and to the point. He saw the rejection of long hair and veils for what it was, a rejection of God-given authority. Those challenging this tradition or custom were being contentious. They were ‘puffed up’ women, and probably supportive men, who wanted to be important, to be changing things in the church simply for the sake of change. They had no concern for unity and the advance of the gospel. They had no good reason for departing from the custom delivered by the apostle Paul, and accepted in all the churches, including churches established by the apostle Peter in Judea.

**Propriety in worship- the Lord’s Supper** 1Corinthians 11:17-34

Years ago I heard of church in which the split was so acrimonious that one group locked the other out of the church building. They had to bring bolt cutters to church to get in the door! Tragically there are churches in which differences develop to the extent that rival groups do not talk to each other and keep on fighting for years, sometimes forgetting what sparked the fight in the first place.

The church at Corinth had its divisions. Based on reports from Chloe’s household, there were serious divisions over leaders (1:11-12). The effect of such divisions on the fellowship are not detailed but the apostle continues to hear of other problems in this church. Divisions in the church are often symptomatic of other problems- in Corinth many failed to understand the headship of Christ. Division affects the life and witness of the church, and can lead to the death of the local church, but sometimes it leads to revival, as Paul alludes to in verse 19 of this chapter.

Fighting over who was the best leader, and who baptised me and my children, was not the end of divisions in the church at Corinth. Paul got news, probably from Chloe’s household again, of divisions occurring during Holy Communion. As if trying to drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons at the same time was not bad enough (10:21), their drinking of the cup of the Lord was a most unedifying part of public worship.

As Paul turns to this second corruption of the worship service that he established in the church at Corinth he has no words of praise whatsoever. This second matter was more serious than the first, the discarding of a head covering by some women. This matter related to conduct at the Lord’s Supper, or more specifically, at the meal that was associated with this sacrament- sometimes called a ‘love feast’. Conduct at this meal was so lacking in love that the apostle says they were not actually eating the Lord’s Supper (11:20). After reminding them of the precise words he gave them for conducting the Lord’s Supper, which we looked at previously, the apostle continues with a warning about inviting divine discipline by taking this sacrament in an unworthy manner.

**1. Conduct surrounding the Lords’ Supper**

In the early church communal meals were common; they were a vital part of fellowship (Acts 2:46, 2Peter 2:13, Jude v12). Just as a family sits around a table to eat together, so the church family often ate together. In fact, a so-called ‘love feast’ was associated with the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. Clear preaching of the gospel was also associated with this sacrament. People must know what the sacrament means, and they must examine their hearts and confess their sin before coming to the Lord’s Table (11:28). It is thought that an elder in the church presided over this sacrament but there is no indication of church ordination being essential. When this sacrament is seen as a literal sacrifice then ‘priests’ become necessary. Reformed churches do not have priests.

Paul’s ‘first of all’ is not followed by a second point so these words must mean that this is a priority issue. He had heard a report and believed the essence of what he heard; he accepted some bias in a verbal report (11:18). It was members of Chloe’s household that reported the first cause of divisions to the apostle, and they may have reported this second cause of division also, division surrounding the Lord’s Supper.

Divisions are not good; what was happening at Corinth was ‘for the worse’ (11:17). Yet divisions have unintended consequences- unintended by the participants that is. Divisions serve as a test, revealing those who are approved by the Lord (11:19). Paul uses the word ‘*haeresis*’ meaning a separatist but not necessarily a heretical group at that time. Just as people turned back from following Jesus on earth (John 6:66), so they will turn from following the risen Jesus and from continuing in the church which is the body of Christ (1John 4:1). Some will fail tests that will inevitably come. In the time of the Reformation men were put to the test. Division occurred and the church was purified. Division in the Presbyterian Church in the late 1970’s served a similar purpose. F.F Bruce writes, ‘Such divisions anticipate the final division of judgment day!’ We seek unity in the church but sometimes purifying the church is more important.

What were these divisions about? The divisions became evident when the members came together as a church (11:18). They came together for the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, and a love feast that was held in connection with this sacrament. The church would gather, probably in a meeting hall; Gaius was able to host the whole church in his place (Acts 18:7, Rom 16:23). The Christians may have had house meetings, but Paul stresses that this was a coming together of the church in one place (11:7, 18, 20). The church gathered for worship and for fellowship. Worship involved the sacrament and fellowship involved sharing in a meal together. Of late we have had to worship through the internet but clearly this cannot be the norm for a church.

Both aspects of this ‘coming together as a church’ were corrupted because they are related. They are related through the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. Paul first focusses on corruption of the love feast, and then on corruption of the sacrament itself- our second point. This meal seems to have been something like a present-day potluck lunch. Members brought food from home which they shared in this love feast. Such an arrangement is fraught with danger even today; some bring food and then go off in corner to eat it by themselves. The whole point of this meal is sharing, of eating from a common table.

The church is the most heterogeneous gathering of people in any society. People from all walks of life hear the gospel and are saved: Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, rich and poor. ‘All are one in Christ’ (12:13, Gal 3:28), and this oneness should be evident to all. This love feast was a place for this oneness to be demonstrated. At Corinth however, divisions in society were being carried into the church, divisions between slaves and freemen, between rich and poor. At this fellowship meal some were taking their ‘own supper ahead of others’ (11:21) instead of ‘waiting for one another’ (11:33). It is probable that the slaves were the last to gather for this meal because of their duties. Some may have been so poor that they could not bring any food. When they arrived at this love feast the food was all gone and they were left hungry (11:21). Moreover, some drank so much wine they got drunk. Jude writes of ungodly men being ‘stains’ at love feasts because they served only themselves.

The apostle judged such conduct in the church of God unacceptable and indeed, reprehensible. It went against everything that this meal stood for. Paul condemned the gluttons and drunkards in no uncertain terms. ‘What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink it? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? (11:22). He again tells them that he has no words of praise for them in this matter. The apostle who was always looking for something in the church for which he could give praise (11:2), could find nothing to praise them for in the way they conducted themselves at this love feast. It would have been better not to have had this fellowship meal at all than have it in the way reported.

The declaration, ‘I do not praise you’ is an *inclusio* that concludes this section (11:17, 22), but in concluding the larger section Paul returns to this matter, urging them to wait for each other when they come together for this meal (11:33). If they are hungry they should eat at home. There is a place for the church to be feeding the hungry (Acts 6:1) but this was not that place. Members of the church are one in Christ. In the original church at Jerusalem members shared everything and the Lord blessed them, but here at Corinth they could not even share a meal (Acts 2:45). Rather than blessing, Paul warned of judgment, divine judgment (11:34).

**2. Conduct at the Lord’s Supper**

While the Lord’s Supper was associated with this fellowship meal and conducted as a part of public worship, the focus of this sacrament is upon the individual as he or she comes to the Lord’s Table. After explaining the significance and solemnity of the Lord’s Supper in verse 23-26, Paul warns those in the church at Corinth not to take the Lord’s Supper in an ‘unworthy manner’ (11:27, 29). What does he mean? He is not saying that we can be worthy in the sense of being good and having no sin. The Lord’s Supper is for sinners, but only sinners who have examined their own hearts and repented of their sin. It is for sinners who confess their sin and believe that the blood of Jesus Christ ‘cleanses us from all unrighteousness’ (1John 1:9).

We come to the Lord’s Table when invited by the Lord. To be ‘worthy’ we must examine ourselves before coming. We are not coming after confessing to a man dressed in robes but coming after confessing our sin to the Son of God. This means we must ‘discern the body of the Lord’ (11:29). What ‘body’ is the apostle referring to? When we take the consecrated bread we remember the physical body of Christ as he died upon the cross in our place, taking our sins upon himself. Even at this table of the Lord, and especially at the love feast, we remember the church of which Jesus is the head. We must be reconciled to God through the cross of Christ, and be reconciled to one another in the Lord, to be ‘worthy’ in the manner commanded by the apostle.

Some suggest ‘the body’ Paul is referring to in verse 29 is the physical body of Christ that was hung on the cross and others the church, the symbolic body of Christ. In fact, the apostle is probably thinking of both. We cannot understand one without the other because there is no church where the death of Christ on the cross is not discerned, and there is no meaningful cross in a church where there is no discernment of Christ as the head of the church, which is his body. These are serious matters; Paul has already told them that it was not the Lord’s Supper that they were eating (11:20). Would their church no longer be a church?

The apostle warns this church of the Lord himself stepping in to discipline or chasten those not discerning the body of the Lord. Paul was not physically present but he was present in spirit (5:3). He was not demanding anyone be put out of the church regarding this matter, but he does warn that when the Lord is offended he may take action himself. In fact, Paul writes, ‘For this reason many are weak and sick among you and many sleep’ (11:30). I was wanting to say ‘some’ but Paul writes ‘many’! Here was a church in which many were sick and some had died because the Lord was judging them! Readers of the OT will not be surprised, but many in the church today will be surprised to hear of this direct divine judgment.

By way of clarification, Paul says that such judgment is ‘chastening by the Lord’, not ‘condemnation with the world’ (11:32). The Lord chastens those whom he loves (Heb 12:6). He chastens us that we might turn from our sinful ways. Such chastening may include sickness. This does not mean all sickness is chastening of course. Job was not chastened over a particular sin but many at Corinth were, the sin of not discerning the Lord’s body. Even death can be divine chastening, destruction of the flesh but salvation of the spirit in the day of the Lord (5:5).

The father disciplines his son that he might turn from the way that he is going. It is the same with our heavenly Father. The Christians at Corinth could avoid God’s chastening if they examined their own hearts, or judged themselves- the apostle includes himself in this instruction so we must do the same (11:31). The Lord had to judge or discipline because they were failing to do so.

Repentance and reform was urgently needed in conduct at worship services in Corinth, especially in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper and the associated fellowship. Such reform is needed in many churches today. Let us examine ourselves and come to the Lord’s Table with hearts ready to receive the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

**The Lord’s Supper** 1Corinthians 11:23-26

The apostle Paul, who founded the church at Corinth, received news of divisions and other problems that had arisen in this church since he left. Their conduct at the Lord’s Supper was one of these other problems. In dealing with the matter of food offered to idols he touched on the Lord’s Supper, explaining that it symbolised communion or participation of the body and blood of Christ, as well as communion with fellow believers (10:16,17). From the news he received about their conduct at the Lord’s Supper, Paul concluded that what they were participating in was not the Lord’s Supper at all (11:20). While condemning them for the way they were conducting this sacrament, he reminds them of the instructions that he gave them when he first preached the gospel in Corinth.

It is generally accepted that in the early church a ‘love feast’ was an integral part of the Lord’s Supper- it certainly appears to have been the case at Corinth (cf. Jude v12). It was fellowship, or the lack thereof, that was being displayed at this feast that leads to the strong words of the apostle. He generally begins any teaching with a word of praise, as in 11:2, but in this matter he has no word of praise (11:17). He concludes, ‘if anyone is hungry let him eat at home’ (11:34), but this does not mean he wanted no more ‘love feasts’. Even so, the practice of having a fellowship meal in conjunction with the sacrament has been abandoned by most churches. This may have occurred with increasing ritualization of the Eucharist.

The first Lord’s Supper was in fact the last supper of our Lord Jesus Christ. He was in the upper room in Jerusalem, celebrating Passover with his disciples, when he was betrayed, then arrested, tried, and hung on the cross the next day. As we look at the words of institution given to the church by the apostle Paul we will first look back at the Passover, then at the practice given to the church, and thirdly, at the purpose of the sacrament.

Before this we note that this is one of two sacraments in the church according to a Reformed understanding of the Bible; the Roman Catholic Church has seven sacraments. Only two protestant churches or groups do not keep these two sacraments to my knowledge, the Salvation Army and the Quakers. Luther and other Reformers protested against the Mass as it was celebrated in the Church of Rome, along with other matters of doctrine and practice. The Roman Mass is not the Lord’s Supper as it was instituted by Jesus and then by the apostle Paul.

**1. Passover**

Jesus was in the upper room celebrating the Passover when he instituted the Lord’s Supper, as it is called here in 1Corinthians 11. The Greek for ‘Lord’s’ is also found in connection with the Lord’s Day (Rev 1:10). The table at which we gather for this Supper is ‘the Lord’s table’ (10:21). It is not the church that has established this sacrament and it is not for any church to modify this sacrament. Take note of what Paul says in verse 20: ‘It is not to eat the Lord’s Supper’.

In each of the Synoptic gospels were find a record of what Jesus said and did at his last Passover meal. The Passover itself was an annual memorial meal instituted after the Exodus (Exod 12:14). At this meal a lamb was sacrificed and eaten, along with unleavened bread. In the first Passover the lamb’s blood was sprinkled on the doorposts of their houses. At this Passover in the upper room there is no mention of a sacrificed lamb because Jesus himself is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world through his own blood (John 1:29). Jesus ‘fervently desired’ (Luke 22:15) to eat this, his last Passover, because he knew that it was about to be fulfilled in his own blood. He knew that only through his shed blood would sins be forgiven and the kingdom of God come. This Passover became the last Passover, giving way to its fulfilment in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper given to the church.

**2. Practice**

During the last Passover Jesus took some bread, gave thanks and broke it, and then gave it to his disciples saying, ‘Take eat, this is my body’. Luke does not use the word ‘eat’, and some MSS do not have Paul including this word either, but it is understood; what else does one do with a piece of bread? Clearly, the bread does not become his body because Jesus was sitting there giving it to them! Roman Catholics are taught, by the doctrine of transubstantiation, that, as if by some sort of magic, the bread becomes the body of Jesus; in this they again offer up the body of Jesus for the forgiveness of sin. Luther went half way in holding a doctrine of consubstantiation: the body and blood are present ‘with, in and under’ the bread and wine instead of replacing them. Zwingli opposed Luther in this teaching, saying that the Lord’s Supper was simply a memorial meal. The sacrament involves grace but only so far as it is received by faith, as indicated by Paul here in this passage.

The second element of this sacrament is the cup. Luke mentions two cups; there were four cups in all at the Passover. The cup which all writers refer to is the cup taken ‘after supper’ (11:25, Luke 22:20). In giving thanks, and then passing this cup to his disciples, Jesus said, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood shed for many’ (Matt 26:28, Mark 14:24), or ‘for you’ (Luke 23:20). Paul does not include the words, ‘shed for you’, although he otherwise uses words similar to those of Luke. Paul’s account is probably the earliest written record of the words of institution although Matthew was actually present at the last supper.

Paul begins his formula for the Lord’s Supper saying that he received from the Lord what he also delivered to them at Corinth (11:23). Some think he received them directly from the Lord by divine revelation, but he may have received them through an apostle (Gal 1:18). It seems that the church in Jerusalem was remembering the Lord in the way he instituted before Paul was dramatically converted, even if it was not called the Lord’s Supper.

Jesus did not speak of the cup as being his blood in the same way as he did with the bread, even though Paul writes of him taking the cup ‘in the same manner’. He does not say, ‘Take, drink, this is my blood’, at least not in Luke’s account or Paul’s’. Instead he said, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood’ (11:25), words also recorded by Luke. Paul and all the gospels record Jesus’ words about ‘a new covenant in my blood’. Jesus announced a new covenant, a covenant that was about to replace the old covenant that God made through Moses. That old covenant was ratified by Moses sprinkling blood on the people (Exod 24:8). The new covenant was ratified by Jesus shedding his own blood on the cross ‘for you’. Neither Moses nor Paul speak of drinking the blood of Jesus. In fact, drinking blood was forbidden under the old covenant, and even in the early church (Acts 15:20).

What did Jesus mean by ‘the new covenant’? The prophet Jeremiah spoke of this new covenant in the clearest of terms (Jer 31:31), so it should not have come as a surprise to any Jew that Jesus uses such words. Jeremiah spoke of coming days in which the Lord would make a new covenant. A covenant is an agreement that the Lord makes with his chosen people. For the Lord’s part, this covenant would involve the forgiveness of sins, and all his people knowing Him directly and intimately; another prophet speaks of God pouring out his Spirit on all flesh (Joel 2:28, Acts 2:17f).

The old covenant became obsolete when Jesus instituted the new covenant in his own blood (Heb 8:13). This is what we are to remember when we drink the cup at the Lord’s Supper. It was most probably wine that Jesus drank but, since it is symbolic, grape juice can also be used. The wine or juice is set apart with thanksgiving; it undergoes no chemical change. Matthew and Mark have Jesus giving a second thanks for the cup but not Luke or Paul. They also tell us that the disciples drank from the cup given them by Jesus, while Paul says as much in saying, ‘as often as you drink it’ (11:25). Both bread and wine were given to the disciples and consumed by them.

**3. Purpose**

Paul is very particular in telling us that in taking and eating this ‘consecrated’ bread and wine we are doing so ‘in remembrance of Me’, of Jesus (11:24, 25). Luke has Jesus using these words in relation to the bread (Luke 22:19). For this reason we, like the Reformers, understand the purpose of this sacrament of be remembrance of the death of our Lord Jesus Christ upon the cross, and acknowledgement that he died or shed his blood for the forgiveness of our sin. We can remember this truth without partaking of the sacrament of course, but this is what Jesus gave to us, and when we partake, having examined our hearts and confessed our sin, we receive grace from the Lord. The elements are powerful aids to our remembering, as the Lord intended. Thankfully, the people of God have not forgotten this sacrament as they did with the Passover; although it has been corrupted as we have noted

The second purpose of this sacrament, according to Paul, is the witness that occurs when it is celebrated in the church. Paul brought the gospel to Corinth and many other cities through his preaching. We are to continue preaching the gospel until the whole world hears, and the end comes (Matt 24:14). In a similar way this sacrament is to be a witness to the world. And what a powerful witness it is when we explain why we break and eat a piece of bread, and drink wine together. A Hindu lady thought that it was meat Christians ate at this sacrament, possibly because of the teaching of transubstantiation. How wonderful that she now partakes of this sacrament as a believer in Jesus Christ. In a letter to the Emperor in Rome, Pliny, a Roman governor, describes as ‘a depraved and extravagant superstition’ a meal which the Christians share when they meet together; he asks if this was something punishable by death. Can believers give up partaking of the Lord’s Supper under threat of persecution or death?

This sacrament is not only a remembrance but a proclamation, a proclamation of ‘the Lord’s death till He comes’ (11:26). Clearly, this sacrament is not meant to taken individually as some sort of spiritual medicine, despite the words of Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, who referred to these elements as ‘the medicine of immortality and the antidote to prevent us from dying’. Taking a piece of bread and a sip wine in our home is hardly a witness to the world. Moreover, the sacrament is to be celebrated in the context of the preaching of the word. Listen to all that Jesus spoke to his disciples in the upper room (John 13-17).

Someone said that in the Lord’s Supper we **look up** in thanksgiving, we **look back** in remembrance, and we **look forward** to our Lord’s coming again- as well as **looking inward** in self-examination and **looking around** to those with whom we are in fellowship. Jesus said he would not drink of the cup again until the kingdom of God comes (Luke 22:18). Paul picks up on this in saying we ‘proclaim the Lord’s death till he comes’. While ever the church exists it is to keep this sacrament. ‘By sharing in the Lord’s Supper we keep the Lord Jesus Christ’s death central in our thinking, and we give public evidence to all who will observe us that the gospel centres on the Lord Jesus and his saving work’

We conclude with mention of the words, ‘as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup’ in verse 26. The Passover was an annual feast and some think the Lord’s Supper is the same. Yet the first believers meet daily for prayer and teaching, and some think, for the Lord’s Supper (Acts 2:46). But it seems the custom became a weekly meeting for worship on the Lord’s Day (16:2). There is evidence that the sacrament was part of this weekly worship, but nowhere in the NT is this made clear. Calvin was ready to have the sacrament every week. But Paul says no more than the words found here. Many churches have settled on a monthly celebration, while reformed churches often have this sacrament every two months. Paul seems less concerned about how often this sacrament is celebrated than about exactly how it is celebrated in the churches.

**Now about spiritual gifts** 1Corinthians 12:1-11

The apostle Paul brought the gospel to this cosmopolitan city of Corinth. Over a period of eighteen months he established a church, and then he left. The church began as usual in the synagogue, but some Jews objected to him teaching that Jesus is the Christ and threw him out. Many Gentiles also believed. It seems that they became the majority. Paul heard of many divisions that came into the church after he left, more along the line of social status than the line of Jewish or Gentile background. He also heard of sexual immorality in this church, and misconduct at worship services. Some actually wrote to Paul with questions about marriage and about food sacrificed to idols (7:1, 25; 8:1). The next concern in this correspondence was that of spiritual gifts (12:1). As with the other concerns, Paul deals with this subject in detail; he does not resort to legalism. This subject covers the next three chapters, which include the well-known chapter about love. He writes of love in the context of spiritual gifts, urging the church to pursue love before spiritual gifts, the spectacular gifts in particular (13:8). “These chapters are devoted to establishing the limited worth of the ‘spiritual things’, that is of tongue speaking, in the assembly of believers” (Barnett).

The apostle taught that every believer has received the Spirit of God; indeed, unless the Spirit had quickened our dead heart we would not be saved. The Spirit dwells in our hearts -he does not come and go- comforting us as Jesus said (John 14:16), and confirming that we are the children of God (Rom 8:9, 16). The Spirit also gives spiritual gifts to every believer, gifts to be used in the congregation or church. This is what the apostle taught; he did not deny the gifts of the Spirit or their use in the church, but he did demand that worship be orderly (14:40). It is apparent that speaking in tongues, a spectacular gift, was causing problems in the church at Corinth (see chapter 14). Paul takes his readers back to the ‘biblical’ basis of spiritual gifts, to their source, to their outworking, and to their purpose.

**1. All believers receive the Holy Spirit**

Paul addresses the folk in Corinth as ‘brethren’, as brothers and sisters in Christ (12:1). Some of these brethren had informed him about what was happening in their church, hoping he would help them solve these problems that had arisen in the three years since he departed. He focusses on brethren from a Gentile background (12:2). Transition from worshiping dumb idols to worshipping the person of Jesus Christ is a huge transition or transformation. It is a transition from ignorance to knowledge with regard to life and worship. It is a great tragedy that many Jews reject Jesus as the promised Messiah.

Gentiles take their hand-made idols seriously, although for many money is more important- sadly it is the same with some Christians! It was the silversmiths who fomented a riot in Ephesus because they were losing trade. It was the owners of the slave girl who had Paul and Silas thrown into prison at Philippi because they cast the demon out of her (Acts 19:24, 16:19). Gentiles who worship idols are led to do so by demons. It is hard for us to comprehend the sight of educated men and women bowing down to an idol. The truth is that anyone not following Christ is following Satan (John 8:44). They are being led by Satan whether they know it or not, and hence their ignorance (12:1).

Is it Jews that Paul has in mind when he writes in verse 3 of those who say, ‘Jesus be cursed’? In the Bible it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’ (Deut 21:23). But most commentators think the reference is to a cry of, ‘Jesus be cursed’ being heard in a pagan temple. Just as Demetrius and his mates screamed, ‘Great is Diana of the Ephesians’, some probably screamed, ‘Cursed be Jesus’.

Persecuted Christians were forced to curse Jesus if they wanted to stay alive (Acts 26:11). However, the reference to this person not ‘speaking by the Spirit of God’ points to such cursing being heard in the church. Maybe in the excitement of a dramatic utterance, the words, ‘Jesus be cursed’ were heard. If so, this means the Spirit of God is definitely not in that person. Spiritual gifts must conform to the nature of the Spirit, and of God himself. It is not possible to say or do something while ‘in the Spirit’ that is contrary to God’s word. You cannot claim ‘the Spirit told me’ to divorce my spouse.

Paul balances, ‘no one speaking by the Spirit of God calls Jesus accursed’ with, ‘no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit’ (12:3). ‘Jesus is Lord’ was the earliest confession of Christians (Acts 2:36, Rom 10:9). To say this in a society that was hostile to the gospel meant something; it meant that the person was born again of the Spirit of God. Such words can be voiced without sincerity, but the threat of persecution removes any insincerity regarding one’s confession. Are you ready to confess, ‘Jesus is Lord’ outside your home and outside the church? The days are coming when doing so will mean persecution and imprisonment.

To confess, ‘Jesus is Lord’ by the Spirit of God is to confess Jesus has come in the flesh (1John 4:2). One of the gifts of the Spirit is that of discerning the spirits (12:10). If anyone says, ‘Jesus is Lord’ but does not believe in his humanity, or divinity, they are children of the Antichrist not Christ (1John 4:3). Moreover, those who confess, ‘Jesus is Lord’ must bow to his authority; they must listen to his commands as written in the Bible and obey them.

**2. Allotment of different gifts**

Although the word ‘gifts’ is not in the Greek text of verse 1, it is here in verse 4. It is the word ‘*charismata*’, gifts of grace. In verses 4-6 Paul emphasises two things; firstly, the diversity of gifts, which he lists in the following verses, and secondly, the source of these gifts. They are gifts of the one Spirit. There is only one Holy Spirit, as there is only one Lord and one God (Eph 4:3-7). But there are three persons in the Godhead, which the apostle refers to here in the order of, Spirit, Lord or Son, and God or Father. He does not countenance individuals or churches that speak only of the Spirit, any more than he does individuals or churches that speak only of Jesus or only of God the Father.

In these three parallel verses Paul refers to differences or diversity in what is given or allotted, in contrast to the sameness of the giver. He refers to different kinds of gifts or ‘*charismaton*’, different kinds of ministry or service or ‘*diakonon*’, and different kinds of activities or workings, or ‘*energon*’. In short, the Spirit gives gifts to be used in the church, the body of Christ, in the strength given by God, and to the glory of God. These gifts are not innate talents. No gift can be used without strength given by God. A preacher cannot preach unless empowered by the Spirit of God. Spiritual gifts are given for service within the body of Christ. They are not bestowed for self-serving ends. The gifts are diverse and are given to each and every member of the body, the church. Some may have more than one gift, and gifts may be given for a particular situation or congregation. They are not really a personal possession. Paul clearly states that the ‘manifestation of the Spirit’, that is the gifts of the Spirit, are given to each one for the profit or benefit of all (12:7).

**3. A list of gifts of the Spirit**

Having referred to ‘a diversity of gifts but the same Spirit’ the apostle goes on to list nine particular manifestations of the Spirit. This list of nine is not exhaustive. We can compare a similar list in Romans 12 where he calls them gifts of grace, or ‘gifts differing according to the grace that is given us’ (Rom 12:6). Some choose to categorise these gifts by their focus on teaching, on the supernatural, or on communicating, but we will take each one as it comes and try to understand it. With his aim of downplaying the importance of speaking in tongues, Paul may be listing these in order.

‘Through the same Spirit’ one is given ‘the word of wisdom’, another ‘the word of knowledge’, and another ‘faith’ (12:8, 9). These are certainly spiritual qualities, qualities which in one sense all believers will have. We all have wisdom, knowledge and faith, yet by describing these as gifts of the Spirit, Paul is pointing to special qualities given to some individuals in the church. Wisdom often comes with maturity or age, but not necessarily. Jesus is the embodiment of wisdom, divine wisdom of course, not worldly wisdom (James 3:17). People came to Jesus seeking wisdom, as well as healing. So they will come seeking wisdom from a gifted man or woman in the church. Knowledge is often linked to wisdom. Knowledge of God and his word, as well as the fear of the Lord, leads to wisdom. We expect a teacher to have the gift of knowledge.

The gift of faith probably refers to a person who again is knowledgeable but particularly gifted with a deep trust in the Lord. Paul refers to faith that moves mountains in the next chapter (13:2). Such a gifted person will encourage the church during challenging times, or into challenging ministries. Paul’s faith in God, aided by a word from God, encouraged the sailors and soldiers as they battled a terrible storm in the Mediterranean Sea (Acts 27:25).

‘Gifts of healings’ and ‘the working of miracles’ are given by the same Spirit- note the use of the word ‘gifts’ (*charisma*) with regard to ‘healings’, and that this gift is distinguished from that of miracles. ‘Healings’ could indicate the gift, along with training, that some have for medical ministry. Faith is required in any medical ministry. James says that if anyone is sick, ‘Let the elders of the church be called to pray over the person, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord’ (James 5:14). This gift of healing is not independent of, or contrary to, help from a medical doctor.

The apostles, including Peter, John, and Paul, had the gift of healing (Acts 3:6, 5:16). The apostles and deacons, like Stephen, performed signs and wonders among the people in the early church. Healing was one such sign, a sign to strengthen faith and assist in the growth of the church. ‘God bearing witness both with signs and wonders, and gifts of the Holy Spirit according to his own will ‘(Heb 2:4). The gift of healing was not necessarily used simply for the well-being of the sick person- Paul was not healed of his ‘thorn in the flesh’- and is not necessarily a gift of the Spirit in our time or place. Certainly, it is not a gift to be paraded in so-called ‘healing services’, services that are more like the outpatients department at a hospital than a worship service. God is powerful to heal and powerful to perform miracles of course, but not at the direction of men or women. Our church does not exist in a society like that of first century Corinth.

The gift of prophecy was seen in the early church outside the band of apostles. A prophet called Agabus told Paul what would happen to him if he went to Jerusalem- but Paul did not take any notice (Acts 21:10). The church at Corinth did not have the NT as we have it, the full and final revelation of God to man (Rev 22: 18, 19). The prophet’s primary task was to convey the word of God, to forth-tell rather than fore-tell. Any prophecy must accord with the written revelation we have. Those who preach the gospel as the word of God are in a sense prophesying. Discerning of spirits is again something that every believer should do (1John 4:1), but some in the church are gifted by the Spirit of God for this ministry. Too often no one discerns a false spirit or false prophet entering the church until it is too late.

Finally, we come to the spectacular gifts, to ‘different kinds of tongues’ and ‘the interpretation of tongues’ (21:10). Is Paul referring to ecstatic utterances or to speaking in an unknown language- the Greek is ‘*glosson*’? Barnett and others insist it is the former and not a foreign language. But Paul insists on interpretation, so it is not just a matter of ecstasy. Besides, what is the difference if he insists on interpretation? Who knows what the person is saying if no one interprets. Paul goes on to ask who is edified by unintelligible words (14:5, 9).

The apostle will deal with the gift of tongues more fully in chapter 14 because this was the gift that was being misused in the church at Corinth. For now, we note that the only case of speaking in tongues recorded in the Bible is that of the apostles speaking in actual languages or tongues at Pentecost (Acts 2:8, 11). The apostle concludes this section by reminding us that spiritual gifts are all given by the one and only Spirit of God (12:11). They are given to each and every believer in the church for the benefit of the whole church.

**One body, many members, many gifts** 1Corinthians 12:13-21

The church is not an organisation where people come because of social or family obligation, or to further their own career, or to find an outlet for their hobby. It is not a collection of individuals each doing their own thing. It is not just a place where people come and go without concern for anyone else. There are para-church organisations in which teach or do social work but the church is not such an organisation. The church is not an organisation but an organism. We say this because the apostle Paul calls the church the body of Christ (12:27). Elsewhere he likens the church to a building (3:9f, Eph 2:20-22).

In the passage before us Paul describes the human body with its many parts all working together, and pictures the church as such a body. He uses the human body as an analogy for the church. In our body we do not have arms that work independently of, or in opposition to our legs, our arms pulling one way and our legs another. In fact we have a head that controls the whole body. In letters written some years later, Paul develops this analogy to make Christ the head of the body or the church (Eph 4:15, 16, 5:23). Here his emphasis is on the oneness or unity of the body.

Unity was desperately needed in the church at Corinth. It was divided along various lines, including preferred leader (1:12), poor and rich or slave and free (11:22), and Jew and Gentile (12:13). It was also divided with regard to spiritual gifts, with those who spoke in tongues thinking they were super-spiritual. Those without this gift may have been made to sit separately from those who did! Already in this chapter, the apostle made it clear that the same Spirit, indeed the same Triune God, is the giver of every spiritual gift. There is no reason for any member of the church to be proud of his or her gift, and no reason for them to be using their gift for self-serving purposes. God-given gifts are for the benefit and the building up of the whole church.

It is apparent that believers in Corinth did not understand the nature of the church. Paul compares the church to the human body that they might understand the nature of the church. It is a simple, yet profound analogy. Our subheadings are: drink the same Spirit, diversity within unity, interdependence of all members, and delineation of ministries.

**1. Drink the same Spirit**

The apostle begins his ‘body analogy’ of the church saying that it has many members but that all members belong to the one body. In fact, in the one verse he says this same thing three times (12:12). How did the members become part of the one body? Unlike a human body, they were not born a member of the body. They became members through new birth, through being born again of the Spirit of God (John 3:6). Again Paul emphasises the one Spirit of God saying, ‘By one Spirit we were all baptized into one body’ (12:13), the body of Christ, the church- the invisible church. Baptism suggests water, so Paul speaks of ‘all drinking of the one Spirit’.

Jesus said, ‘If anyone thirsts let him come to me and drink’ (John 7:39). John comments, ‘He spoke concerning the Spirit whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given’. The Holy Spirit was given at Pentecost; he is given to all who believe when they believe (Acts 2:38, Rom 8:9). To teach a second baptism as a baptism of the Holy Spirit is false teaching. Sure, there were twelve disciples at Ephesus on whom Paul laid hands and they received the Holy Spirit but they had not even heard of the Holy Spirit up till this time (Acts 19:2). I presume you were baptised in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

In the church at Corinth everyone was doing his or her own thing, leading to all sorts of divisions. Paul alludes to two of these here in verse 13, namely, Jews and Greeks, and slaves and free. The latter would have overlapped with poor and rich. There were differences in religious background and in culture, as well as differences in socio-economic status. But all such differences are of no consequence in the church. In the body of Christ, the Spirit allots gifts to members according to His will, not according to social status, family heritage or religious background. In some churches you will find a dynasty operating, with the father handing over his ministry to his son!

**2. Diversity within unity**

‘The body is not one member but many’ writes the apostle as he details various members or parts of the human body (12:14). He speaks from the viewpoint of a particular part which thinks it is not part of the body; in the next section he speaks from the viewpoint of the other parts. Just because a foot is not a hand it must not say it is not part of the body- it is! Both foot and hand have vital functions in the body- just try walking up the street on your hands, or imagine doctors transplanting a foot onto the end of your arm! Paul goes on to say the same thing about an eye and an ear; they are different but are equally parts of the same body. Equality is not the same as identity- something to remember in other contexts!

If the whole body was an eye, how would we hear? The apostle makes sure that the message is getting through. One would have to be blind not to see the picture he is painting of the church. And one would have to be deaf not to hear his conclusion: ‘There are many members but one body’ (12:14, 20, and 27). God made the human body, but more importantly God established the church and set members in this ‘body of Christ’ as he pleased. No one member constitutes this body (12:19). In too many churches you will come across a member who regards himself or herself as indispensable. At the same time you will find members who think they have no spiritual gift and wish to play no part in the ministry of the church. Is this why we see so many ‘crippled’ churches?

In the next section, as referred to, Paul envisages one part saying to another that they are not needed (12:21). He is probably getting to the truth of what was happening at Corinth with regard to ‘tongue speakers’. The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’ (12:21). The eye can do nothing without the hand and vice versa- they are interdependent. God has designed the human body in this way, and he has designed the church in a similar way.

Members of the church are not independent but interdependent. In fact, those members that are weaker are the most necessary. I read of a man losing his big toe in an accident and being unable to continue as an elite athlete. Even your little toe is important. In terms of weaker members of the body Paul turns to ‘unpresentable parts’, parts that we hide out of modesty. Our presentable parts have no need be covered. By analogy, Paul is referring to members having spectacular gifts as not requiring special honour. It is those using their gifts in an ‘unseen’ way that should be honoured in the church. We might think of those who are earnest in prayer- in their own rooms! (cf. Mat 6:6). As missionaries, a lady in a wheel chair regularly prayed for us. There are members whose ministry includes fixing things around the church building.

‘But God’ writes the apostle in an emphatic conclusion, ‘But God composed the body, having given greater honour to the part which lacks it’, which, when applied to the church, means there should be no schism or division in the body over spiritual gifts. No gift is superior or inferior to any other gift of the Spirit (12:25).

**3. Interdependence of all members**

Rather than division with regard to the exercise of gifts within the church there should be care for one another (12:25). We should be encouraging one another in the exercise of our individual spiritual gifts. Let us not be ‘forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but let us encourage one another’ (Heb 10:25).

The words of verse 26 are profound and moving. They describe the sort of fellowship that the Lord wants to see in the church. The church is not an institution, as we said. It is not a club either, although some clubs show more concern for their members than some churches. The words of this verse have given me a guilty conscience more than once. I have been forced to ask myself, ‘Am I suffering when a fellow member suffers?’ Years ago I was pick-pocketed while boarding a train in India. This was not unusual, but on this occasion a fellow Christian was saying goodbye. Seeing that I had just lost my wallet, he took out his wallet and gave me some money. He wanted to share in my loss!

‘If one member suffers, all the members suffer’ (12:26). What a blessing it is to belong to a church which truly is the body of Christ. Are we such a church? Are you sharing in the suffering of other members? Families are important of course, but this goes beyond the biological family to the family of God represented here. This is something outsiders notice when they look at the church. This is what attracts people to the church, and what encourages people to continue in the church. It is not diminishing the importance of teaching the gospel; it is the very outworking of the gospel. If the Lord says he cares for us, as he does (1Peter 5:7), then let us care for one another. Besides, God’s caring for us usually comes through the hands of a fellow member of the church. Sometimes such care requires organisation such as that by the deacons in Jerusalem (Acts 6). But even then it will not happen unless there is a sharing in the suffering of others.

On the other hand, the whole body should rejoice when one member is honoured or blessed in some way (12:26). As parents, we rejoice when our child comes home with an award from school. The other day our daughter sent a photo of her detective husband getting a medal; she failed to say what is was for, but rejoiced with him anyway! As a church we rejoice when you get a job, when you get married, or when you get a contract to play football. The church should be a sharing and caring community because we are ‘the body of Christ and members individually’ (12:27).

**4. Delineation of ministries**

We now understand the church as an organism, so Paul returns to details regarding spiritual gifts given to its members. As the body of Christ, each member is a vital part of the body. No member is to be regarded as more important than another, certainly not because of the particular gift God has given them. Even so, the apostle now lists in order those ‘whom God has appointed in the church’ (12:28). While there is some overlap with the list earlier in this chapter- see the gift of healings (12:9, 28) - he begins with ministries that are actually offices in the church. Gifts are needed for such offices but these are appointed by God. God appointed some to be apostles (cf. Eph 4:11); here Paul writes ‘first apostles’. ‘Apostle’ simply means a ‘sent one’ but in the NT it means the Twelve, or one qualified by witnessing the resurrection. So there are no apostles today, but we do have the teaching of the apostles here in our Bible.

‘Second prophets, third teachers’ (12:28). Prophets convey messages from God to the people. As Spirit-inspired writers, the apostles were prophets. Prophets today convey what is written in the inspired Scriptures. We believe that the office of prophet ceased after the apostolic age. Barnett does not agree, but strangely says, ‘God only raises up such inspired leaders occasionally’. However, we agree with this scholar when he writes ‘Teachers, however, are the staple of ongoing Christianity’. In Ephesians we read of pastors and teachers whom the Lord has given ‘for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ’ (Eph 4:12).

There is no ‘fourth’ in this list but rather, ‘after that’ and ‘then’. Paul moves back to the spiritual gifts described in verse 9-10, with ‘miracles, then gifts of healings’ (12:28). He then adds, ‘helps and administrations’ unspectacular gifts essential to the church. Those with the gift of ‘keeping the books’ must be acknowledged along with every other gift. Again Paul refers to ‘tongues’ last; he seems to be making a point!

Paul moves on to rhetorical questions to reinforce his teaching. Not all are apostles, or prophets, or teachers. Not all work miracles, or have gifts of healings. So not all speak in tongues, or interpret tongues (12:30). Such teaching is ignored by churches that demand everyone speak in tongues or at least eagerly seek this gift. This gift is not the mark of a Christian. The mark of a Christian is love, which the apostle turns to in the next chapter. Without love, the love of Christ who sacrificed himself to save us from our sin, without love no spiritual gift can be effectively exercised in the body of Christ, which is the church.

**Love** 1Corinthians 13:4-7

The church at Corinth was torn by divisions. There was division over the leadership, division over social status, division between rich and poor as evidenced at fellowship meals, and there was division in the matter of spiritual gifts. These divisions arose from a failure to obey the word of God delivered to them by the apostle Paul. I was going to say ‘arose from poor teaching’ but this church had the apostle Paul as their teacher! As a Reformed church we enjoy excellent teaching from the Bible and the Confessions handed down to us. So how come we see so much division in the church today? We see division because we fail to obey what we are taught from the Scriptures!

We might ask the questions that Paul Barnett asks: ‘Did the Corinthians mend their ways, and learn the more excellent way of love?’ Some perhaps did but many did not. After writing this letter, the apostle made an urgent visit that was a painful visit (2Cor 12:20). They gave evidence of repentance before Paul’s third visit but this was short-lived according to a letter written by Clement of Rome to this church towards the end of the first century.

It was towards the end of the first century that the apostle John, the ‘apostle of love’, wrote his first letter, a circular letter explaining that God is love, that Jesus laid down his life for us out of love, and, ‘if God so loved us we ought also to love one another’ (1John 4:11). I am sure that if Paul had had this letter at hand he would have sent a copy to church at Corinth. But here in 1Corinthians 13 we find similarly powerful teaching about love. Paul urges this divided church to adopt the ‘more excellent way’, the way of love, because this is the only way out of the depths to which division had sunk this church.

The Greek word translated ‘love’ is ‘*agape*’, one of four Greek words for love. It is the word adopted by the apostles to refer to the love of God as expressed in John 3:16. John goes on to tell us that God is the very definition of love: ‘God is love’ (1John 4:8). God’s love is seen in his giving his only begotten and beloved Son to die on the cross for unworthy sinners like you and me. Matching John 3:16 is 1John 3:16 where we read, ‘This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us’. John then says, ‘And we also ought to lay down our lives for our brothers’. There is no hint of this sort of love in the church at Corinth, and sadly no hint of it in many churches today.

The apostle Paul writes of the love of God in his letter to the Romans saying, ‘God demonstrates his own love towards us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us’ (Rom 5:8), and ‘The love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit whom he has given us’ (Rom 5:5). The love that we as believers are to show towards God and towards one another is the ‘love of God’, nothing more and nothing less. It’s easy of course, to love God, or to say we do, although as Jesus says, ‘If you love me you will obey my commands’. But loving fellow believers is another matter, even though Jesus also commands us to ‘love one another as I have loved you’ (John 13:34). Loving one another is essential to fellowship in the church and to the witness of the church to the world. ‘The church at Corinth never amounted to much in the unfolding years of church history’ writes Barnett.

*Agape* love is self-sacrificing rather than self-seeking love. It looks out for the interests of others, not only self-interest (Phil 2:4). Paul lists numerous other features of *agape* love in the verse before us today. We will now look at these, firstly under the negatives or what love is not, and then under the positives or what love is.

**1. Love is not…**

The first negative is, ‘Love does not envy’ (13:4). Paul does not pause to expand on these features; he just shoots them out like bullets from a machine gun. Envy or jealousy is an obvious feature of a sinful nature, the nature we are born with. The Greek word means ‘zeal’ but here it is zeal for self or self-interest. The world applauds such ‘zeal’ calling it a ‘competitive spirit’ or ‘ambition’, but such things are the antithesis of *agape* love. Unbelievers know nothing about this sort of love anyway, and the believers in Corinth knew very little.

Paul told the Corinthians that they were still carnal because of envy, strife and divisions (3:3). Wherever we look in the Bible we find jealousy leading to hatred, and worse. Cain was jealous of his brother Abel. Joseph’s brothers were jealous of him, and Saul was jealous of David being given greater honour than him. The Jews were envious of Jesus and of Paul (Acts 17:5). Envy arises when we think others are getting more things or more honour that us. Envy undermines Christian fellowship like nothing else.

‘Love does not parade itself’ (13:4). This is the opposite side of the coin we might say. This is the person gloating or boasting over what they have achieved. It is being arrogant or haughty, or in the words of the apostle being puffed-up; we speak of a person having a ‘swelled head’. Paul spoke of puffed-up people in this church many times (4:6, 18, 5:2, 8:1). I had an aunty who never stopped talking about the money her son made and the huge house he had just moved into- her son was actually an ordinary fellow with an ordinary job. I suppose mothers or fathers can boast about their children but often their children start boasting about themselves, and this even in the church. I have heard a leader say, ‘I am the only one who understands these things’. For everyone who says such a thing, there are lots who think they are the only ones who can do certain things’. There are spiritual gifts given to individuals of course, but these are not for the purpose of boasting or getting a swelled head!

‘Not unto us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness’ (Ps 115:1). Should we not be singing these words every day? Morris concludes, ‘There are many ways of manifesting pride, and love is incompatible with them all’. If we turn this negative into a positive we would be talking of humility, and of considering others more important than ourselves.

‘Love does not behave rudely’ (13:5). Rudeness or bad manners often accompany a ‘me first’ attitude, and of parading oneself in public. Rudeness can be shown in speech or conduct. At Corinth some were eating ahead of others, and leaving others to starve (11:21). Some were showing no consideration for the weaker brother (10:24). Their rudeness was also seen in disorderly meetings (14:40). We can only imagine how these people were speaking to one another- or not speaking, as the case may be. We have seen an explosion of rude speech with the coming of texting and Facebook. Sadly, this sort language is entering the church. Remember to stop and ask yourself, ‘Is it true, is it kind, is it necessary’ before you say anything. Remember, love is the more excellent way.

‘Love is not self-seeking, is not easily angered, and keeps no record of wrongs’ (13:5 NIV). Self-seeking is at the heart of our failure to love. *Agape* love, remember, is specifically not self-seeking but self-sacrificing. It is thinking of the physical and mental well-being of others. Love is not overly sensitive or easily upset by what others say or do to us. Provocation may be part of your defence in a human court, but not in God’s court. Why is this? Just look at Jesus. He was provoked by all manner of false accusations but did not respond in anger. Why not? Because he knew where he had come from and where he was going (John 13:3). If you know where you are going, and that the only one you will have to answer to is God himself, you will not be provoked by the ‘accuser of the brethren’ or his agents (Rev 12:10).

Nor will you keep a record of wrongs if you love someone. Not so long ago I saw a marriage destroyed by this huge ‘NO-NO’. I think it was the wife who had done something very hurtful, and whenever they had a ‘fight’ the husband would bring this up- even years later. They regularly prayed, as most of us do, ‘Father… forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us’, but clearly the husband failed to hear the conditional clause of this prayer. God forgives our sin because of his love for us, love demonstrated in the cross of Jesus Christ; so if we love others as commanded, we will forgive them as commanded. If we keep a record of their wrongs then clearly we have not forgiven them. Love does not say, ‘I forgive you but…’!

‘Love does not rejoice in iniquity or evil’ (13:6). Tragically, this was happening in the church at Corinth in the matter of sexual immorality (5:1-2), and it happens in too many churches today. Too many rejoice in telling lies, in being tolerant of sin, and being successful in the worldly terms.

**2. Love is …**

The apostle’s list of positive features of love is not as long as that of negatives, of what love is not, but we dare not think that love means thinking nothing and doing nothing. While love does not rejoice in wrongdoing, it does rejoice in the truth (13:6). God is love, and he is also truth (John 14:6). *Agape* love is never based on lies, and never rejoices in anything false.

Paul’s opening words about love are actually positive: ‘Love suffers long and is kind’ (13:4). Remember, love is the first of the fruits of the Spirit, the Spirit by which we are made alive in Christ. Other fruits include kindness, and longsuffering or patience (Gal 5:22). We all know what it means to be kind or gentle- it is how we want others to treat us! Moreover, God is kind and gentle towards us, not treating us as our sins deserve. One of the chief features of God’s love is longsuffering or patience- literally, ‘slow to anger’ (‘not provoked’ in 13:5). He revealed himself to Moses as longsuffering, and demonstrated this feature of divine love repeatedly throughout the OT (Exod 34:6).

God has demonstrated such love towards me many a time; what about you? The question is, am I or are you demonstrating this feature of love today? Are you patient and slow to anger or are you hot tempered? Are you willing to wait for God to intervene in a situation that tests your patience? Are you sufficiently longsuffering to forgive seventy times seven (Mat 18:22)? Are you sufficiently kind-hearted and loving to repay good for evil (Rom 12:20-21)?

As Paul approaches the end of his listing of the features of love he starts using the word ‘all’ again. He used it in the first part of the chapter, ‘all faith’ and ‘all my goods’, with a sense of hyperbole, but here it is with a sense of the absolute, of ‘all things’ without exception. When it comes to love, to being kind or patient, we like to make exceptions. We say we will forgive some things but not all things. If this is what you say, then read verse 7 carefully- read it every day if necessary!

‘Love bears all things’ (13:7). The literal meaning is ‘put a roof on’. Love stops you from ‘blowing your top’; it puts a lid on your response and enables you to hold your tongue. It enables you to cover or bear the sins of others: ‘Love covers a multitude of sins’ (1Peter 4:8, Prov 10:12). We do not ‘bear all things’ in the sense of ‘grin and bear it’; we bear all things in the more excellent way of love.

‘Love believes all things’ (13:7). Sinners believe lies in preference to the truth. We are all guilty of believing the worst about someone rather than the best about them. Love re-orientates our hearts and our thinking towards finding the good, rather than the bad, in other people. Love enables us to have confidence in someone- maybe they will do a better job than us!

‘Love hopes all things’ (13:7). Hope comes up again in the closing verse of this chapter; it is part of the trinity: faith, hope, and love. People without God are people without hope in this world (Eph 2:12). The love of God in Jesus Christ gives us hope, not only for this world but for the next. Such hope enables us to love one another as Christ loves us. Hope is morally purifying (1John 3:2). We hope the best for others as we pray for them, even those who have wronged us.

‘Loves endures all things’ (13:7). This seems like ‘bears all things’ but is obviously different. To endure means pressing on and not giving up. ‘Though all may leave me, still I will follow’ is the line of a chorus I have heard. In later life Paul said he was, ‘forgetting those things which are behind me and reaching forward to those things which are ahead’ (Phil 3:13). Paul knew that love never fails (13:8). Everything else will fail. This world is passing away and everything in it. All those things you envied and spent so much time and effort accumulating will pass away. They are nothing compared to the glory that awaits those who follow the more excellent way, the way of love.

**The most excellent way** 1Corinthians 13

This chapter of the Bible is widely known for its teaching on love. It is often referred to at weddings, and certainly has a lot to teach us about the love we should show to one another in marriage. In another letter the apostle tells husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church (Eph 5:25). But let us not take this chapter out of its context. It comes between chapters 12 and 14 which are all about spiritual gifts, about misunderstandings and misuse of these gifts in the church at Corinth. Note that chapter 13 actually begins in the closing verse of chapter 12: ‘And yet I will show you a more excellent way’ (12:31).

In the church at Corinth some were puffed-up or arrogant because of knowledge given them by the Spirit of God, and others were puffed-up because they had the gift of speaking in tongues. If we go back to chapter 8 we hear Paul saying, ‘knowledge puffs up but love edifies’ (8:1). Paul heard about lots of puffed-up people, and of divisions in the church at Corinth, but little about love and unity. The Spirit of God gave gifts to members of the church for the building up of the church, not for self-serving purposes.

In this chapter Paul first denounces the use of spiritual gifts without love. By doing so in a poetic way he can use hyperbole and draw dramatic contrasts. He then goes on to describe love in very ‘black and white’ terms. He closes with further dramatic contrasts and metaphors, before concluding with the famous words: ‘And now these three remain: faith, hope and love; but the greatest of these is love’ (13:13 NIV).

**1. Gifts without love**

The apostle fires off a series of ‘if…but have not love’ statements like rounds out of a machine gun as he open this chapter. The ‘ifs’ or ‘thoughs’ target various spiritual gifts and sacrificial works which Christians might hold up as marks of their ministry. These ministries are all valid and important in the life of the church, but the apostle shoots them down one after another if they are not done out of love. Love is not a spiritual gift in the sense that only some have it. Love is best considered a ‘fruit of the Spirit’ rather than a ‘gift of the Spirit’. In fact, it is the first fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22. Other fruits of the Spirit are related to love as it is described here in this chapter.

The word translated ‘love’ in this chapter, and throughout the NT, is the Greek word ‘*agape*’. Greek has four words for love. One is ‘*eros*’, the word the Greeks would use for all our uses of ‘love’ in songs, novels and movies. Another love-word is *‘philos*’ which means ‘brotherly love’. The word ‘*agape*’ was adopted by the apostles to refer to the love of God, and the love of Jesus Christ, the love demonstrated most clearly in the cross (John 3:16, 1John 3:16). It is self-giving, self-sacrificing love, love that focusses on the well-being, not of self but of the other person. The key to *agape* love is in seeing brother and sisters in Christ as God sees them, and indeed, seeing all people as made in the image of God.

Paul ended his lists of spiritual gifts with ‘tongues’, but here he begins with ‘speaking in tongues’ because this was the gift most misunderstood and misused in the church. This was the gift leading to haughtiness and division within the body of Christ. Some think speaking in ‘the tongues of men and of angels’ refers to ecstatic utterances, but as we previously noted, there is no evidence of this. We do not know what the apostle means by ‘tongues …of angels’ but it may simply be hyperbole. Even if this person could speak in the language of angels but had no love it would be nothing but noises. Actually, any language that is not understood is simply noise.

Paul refers to clanging cymbals or gongs, instruments struck by worshippers as they entered pagan temples in Corinth. Paul has already made it clear that no one speaking by the Spirit of God can curse Jesus (12:3). Similarly, no one speaking in a tongue can curse a fellow believer. ‘Speaking in tongues is not a gift outside the control of the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of love’. Love is the fruit of the Spirit. So exercising this ‘spectacular’ gift achieves nothing in the purpose of God if there is no love.

Paul continues in poetic mode to other less spectacular gifts that some exercised with selfish pride rather than in love. The gift of prophecy was related to knowledge of the mysteries of God and his kingdom. Under the old covenant, God spoke to his people through prophets, but with the closing of the New Testament era such prophecy ceased; God’s word is now found exclusively in the Scriptures of the OT and NT.

In the Corinthian church prophets brought a word from God, but if they did this without love for their hearers they conveyed nothing beneficial to the church or its members. Today we have preachers, men whom God chose to convey the words of Scripture to his people, and evangelists who convey this word to the world. A prerequisite for men doing this is love for their hearers. One day I had my bag containing my credit card and passport stolen while boarding a train in Delhi. I was so upset and angry that I started hating every Indian. But the Lord reminded me that he had brought me to this land to share the gospel, and I could not do this if I did not love them. You may have listened to a preacher who showed great knowledge of the Bible, and spoke with eloquence, but if that man displayed disdain rather than love towards you I am sure his words meant nothing to you. Knowing a preacher’s deceitful attack upon my character, I did not hear a word he said!

Faith is the next spiritual gift targeted by the apostle. This is not saving faith but the particular gift of faith as seen in the previous chapter (12:9). It is faith that ‘could move mountains’ (13:2). Jesus could do such a thing of course, and the apostles showed faith in healing people. But here Paul is again using hyperbole. He is saying that even if one had the faith to miraculously move a mountain, but did not have love, then he ‘is nothing’. We recall Pharaoh’s magicians who performed some miracles, and remember that Satan can perform ‘signs and lying wonders’ (2Thess 2:9), but he does not do so in love. Love, not tongues or miracles, is the test of any Christian minister.

From spiritual gifts the apostle moves on to good works (13:3). Some pagans feed the poor because it adds to their tally of good works. Indeed, if good works was the way to heaven they would be head of the queue! But note the word ‘all’- ‘all my possessions’. How does feeding the poor done by Christians differ from that of non-Christians? We should do so in love. Simply throwing scraps to the poor is not demonstrating *agape* love. You may even give all you have to the poor, but if you do so for self-glory and without love for the poor your action means nothing in the eyes of God. ‘When you do your charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what you right hand is doing’, said Jesus (Mat 6:3). This is the way of love, the more excellent way.

Paul goes even further than giving all you possess to the poor; he goes on to speak of giving your ‘body to be burned’ (13:3). Some Christians in the Roman world, as in the British world, were burnt at the stake, although Paul may have been thinking of the three friends of Daniel who ‘yielded their bodies’ to the fire (Dan 3:28). J.B. Lightfoot reckoned Paul’s remark could be explained by the self-immolation of an Indian holy man in Athens when he came to visit Augustus. Surely martyrdom means going straight to heaven? The apostle says that even this ‘supreme sacrifice’ profits me nothing if I do not have love (13:3). How amazing! Sadly, self-sacrifice can be self- seeking. Tragically, a person can commit suicide in order to get attention. There is no self-glory after martyrdom of course, but the apostle is speaking with a degree of hyperbole and even irony to emphasise the importance, and necessity of love*, agape* love, in any Christian ministry.

**2. Love remains**

In the central verses of this chapter the apostle describes love by detailing positive and negative features of love. We will leave these verses now and hopefully come back to them next time. Reading on, Paul continues comparing spiritual gifts to love, noting that while love never fails these gifts will fail (13:8). Prophecies will cease or come to an end, and so will knowledge (13:8). Tongues will be stopped. Love is not only fundamental to ministry involving the use of spiritual gifts but will also remain after spiritual gifts have passed their use-by date. What is that date? We have seen that some gifts were for the age of the apostles but most continue on in the church today. The apostle is thinking of the end of the age and of the return of Jesus Christ. He has this time in mind as he further contrasts ‘now’ and ‘then’.

‘Now we know in part, and prophesy in part’ (13:9). ‘In part’ means the fullness or completion has not yet come. In this present age we minister with limitations; we do not know everything as we would like to. There are things hard to understand even in the writings of the apostles (2Peter 3:16). Most, but not all, Bible scholars will admit to this fact; it seems some in Corinth thought they knew everything. There are many things we will not know until we get to heaven! What Paul says is that tongues and prophecies will cease - they will no longer be needed- but not love. He speaks of when that which is perfect or complete has come, and knowing in part will itself ‘cease’.

The apostle gives two illustrations to help us understand what he is saying. The first is that of a child becoming an adult. While this happens slowly, there comes a time when we suddenly realise that we are no longer a child. I recall the time I left home to come to this city and study, and also the time I became a father. Childish ways were completely put away by that time. Our transition into heaven and into the presence of our risen Lord is likened to the transition from child to adult.

The second illustration is that of a mirror giving a poor reflection (cf. 2Cor 3:18). Mirrors in those days were made of polished metal so the reflection was blurry. Today we have mirrors that give a clear reflection- clearer than we might like! We also have Skype and Zoom with which to see family or friends in far-off places. But such technology can never replace actually meeting someone and shaking hands or giving a kiss. One day we will see our Lord and Saviour face to face (13:12, Col 3:4, 1John 3:2). What a glorious day that will be! Let no one think we have reached that day yet!

Again Paul speaks of our knowing in part (13:12 cf.13:9). God has wonderfully revealed himself in his creation and in his word, but this revelation is only a fraction of what we will know on that day. ‘Then’, or on that day, ‘I will know just as I am known’ (13:12). God’s knowledge of us is perfect. There is nothing about us that God does not know; he knows our every word and our every thought. And you, like many, are concerned about what Google or the Government knows about you! We cannot even comprehend knowing God as he knows us. We cannot comprehend loving him as he loves us. ‘Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us that we should be called the children of God’ (1John 3:1).

The closing words of this chapter are the most well-known of all. The chapter that was introduced as showing us a more excellent way delivers on this promise in the words: ‘Now these three remain: faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love’ (13:13 NIV). The ‘and now’ signals the conclusion of the lesson. Love has been the focus of this chapter, and adding faith and hope forms a trio of the essential characteristics of the Christian life. Faith and hope, and supremely love, must continue in the church today and until the return of Christ. Faith and hope will not be needed then, ‘for we walk by faith not by sight’ (2Cor 5:7), and ‘who still hopes for what he sees’ (Rom 8:24). But love will continue into eternity because God is love (1John 4:8). The Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, always acts in love, and his every relationship is based on love. It was Jesus who said, ‘You shall be perfect just as your Father in heaven is perfect’ (Mat 5:48).

**Tongues and prophecy** 1Corinthians 14

In the church at Corinth, as in all other churches, every believer had received the Holy Spirit, and at least one gift of the Spirit to be exercised within this church. The exercising of these spiritual gifts in the church at Corinth however, was causing problems. Paul’s focus on *glossolalia* or speaking in tongues here in chapter 14 points to this being the sought-after gift, and the gift causing problems. The spectacular nature of this gift gave it prominence and undue importance, such that ‘tongue speakers’ were disrupting meetings. Paul does not forbid speaking in tongues (14:39), but he makes it clear that this gift is not the most important, that it must be exercised in love, and that it can only edify the church if interpreted.

Concern about the gift of speaking in tongues began in chapter 12: ‘Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren’. This concern continues in this chapter which begins, ‘Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts’ (14:1). You will notice the word ‘gifts’ is not in the original which simply reads ‘spiritual’: Paul Barnett thinks this word refers to specifically to *glossolalia* or tongues, the word used in the second verse. This chapter boils down to a comparison of two gifts, tongues and prophecy.

We will consider the nature of these two gifts, and their importance in the NT church and in the church today. Teaching which demands that all Christians speak in tongues, as found is some churches today, is false teaching. I recall a fellow Christian desperately trying to get this gift, like many others at the time. The apostle clearly states that the gift of prophesying is more important, and the gift to be desired; after being convinced of love, the fruit of the Spirit that is a prerequisite to the exercise of all gifts in the church. Our subheadings will be: edification, intelligible, understanding, and unbelievers and seekers.

**1. Edification**

Edification means to strengthen or build up spiritually. When you believe you became a new creation in Christ Jesus, but this is just the beginning. You will continue to grow up into Christ who is the head (Eph 4:15) as you feed your mind from the word of God, and strengthen your heart through prayer and ministry. The church, the gathering of God’s people, is fundamental to this growth, to this edification. It is in the church that you experience love as God intended.

The gifts of the Spirit are given to each believer for use in the church, not for self-serving purposes or as a matter of pride. Spiritual gifts must be exercised in the context of love, and love mandates considering others more important than yourself (Rom 12:3, 10). The people at Corinth had forgotten about love in their effort to be the most important and influential person in the church. ‘Pursue love’ writes Paul as he returns to the subject of spiritual gifts here in this chapter. Let no one forget the words of chapter 13, conveyed as they are in the power of poetry.

All believers should be eager to know and to use the spiritual gift given them. ‘Earnestly desire the best gifts’ (12:31). We should contribute in the fullest extent to the ministry of our church, and to the building up of everyone in it. At Corinth, and in some churches today, they wanted spectacular gifts like *glossolalia* but Paul gave this a low ranking in his listing of gifts in chapter 12.

Paul ranks prophesying way above tongue speaking (14:1). Why? What is prophesying, and what is tongues anyway? We came across the gift of tongues back in chapter 12 but learn a lot more about it in chapter 14. Even so, we don’t know much about it. Some understand the term ‘*glossolalia*’ to refer to ‘ecstatic utterances’ or ‘heavenly language’, but there is no evidence that it is anything more than another language. Paul refers to ‘so many languages in the world’ (14:10)- most of which I do not know. So if someone speaks a foreign language I will not understand them. They will sound like ‘barbarians’ speaking ‘bar-bar’ language (14:11). However, if someone interprets, or I am given the gift of interpretation, I will understand them.

This was the case on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). The Spirit came upon the apostles and they spoke in tongues (*glossolalia*). They spoke in languages which some foreigner in the crowd could understand. They were not just babbling like drunkards. Years ago we lived upstairs from a Christian who ‘spoke in tongues’. As he stood on his balcony what we heard was babbling; it was unintelligible to us and to him. So who was to know what he was saying? One hoped he was speaking to God and receiving emotional blessing but who was to say ‘for no one understands’ (14:2). In Corinth, pagan priests, by means of drink, drugs, or the devil, would get into a trance and babble unintelligible things. This still happens today- but not in the church I trust!

Prophesy is teaching or preaching in words that can be understood. It is not about telling the future but about telling the word of God for a particular situation today. Such prophecy builds up, encourages, and comforts believers and hence the church (14:3-4). The apostles and their associates were uniquely inspired to reveal the word of God to the church just like the prophets of the old covenant (1Peter 1:21, 2Tim 3:16). The age of prophets and apostles has passed. All that God has chosen to reveal he has revealed, in the OT and in the canon of the NT. These words he has preserved for us and ordained that they be translated into the vernacular. Prophets no longer bring any new revelation. They search the Scriptures to find the word of God for a particular situation.

It is also hard to see a place for *glossolalia* in the church today, although some may be given the ability to speak a language they have not learnt in order to communicate God’s word. Paul spoke in tongues (14:5, 18), as did others in that period; this gave him credibility when speaking against prioritising this gift in the church at Corinth. He insists on the interpretation of tongues a number of times in this chapter (14:5, 13, 26, and 27).

**2. Intelligible**

The argument regarding edification may not be sufficient to convince the puffed-up people at Corinth, so the apostle makes a further point about intelligibility. If Christians are to worship like pagans this does not matter of course. Pagans can go into a trance and make all sorts of noises because their gods are deaf and the only concern is for emotion; knowledge and truth don’t matter. But our God does hear and does understand language. Moreover, he gave us minds to understand truth as revealed to us in the words of the Bible. Tongues may be words but unintelligible words unless interpreted, whereas revelation, knowledge, prophecy and teaching comes in intelligible words (14:6).

The apostle illustrates this point about intelligibility in two ways. Firstly, take a lifeless thing like a flute or harp (Greek is ‘*kithara*’ from which we get ‘guitar’). If you heard me play either you would leave the room bewildered; but if a musician played the proper notes you would listen and enjoy. In this way Paul compares speaking in tongues with prophesying. Secondly, and more seriously, consider a trumpet or bugle rallying troops for battle. Will the soldiers be stirred from their beds by the ‘Last post’ rather than ‘Reveille’? Will the church be stirred into love and ministry by someone speaking in tongues? No. Leaders need to communicate through intelligible words.

Preachers need to remember this as they read the Bible and explain it. Thankfully we have a translation we can understand, but this has not always been the case; and we still need help at times to understand what is written. Someone speaking another language is simply making noises or ‘speaking into the air’ as the apostle says (14:9).

We have already referred to verses 10-11 in asserting that *glossolalia* or tongues were a foreign language. Every language has its meaning and significance but is of no use in conveying knowledge or wisdom to a foreigner who does not speak the language. Inability to communicate in words makes spiritual growth and fellowship very difficult, although the ‘language of love’ does help. Paul urges the Corinthians to be desiring the gift of prophesying rather than speaking in tongues if they really want to see their church grow in the knowledge and love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord (14:12).

**3. Understanding**

In 1986 Boice wrote of a Christianity without content: ‘We see this today, not only in the tongues movement’. ‘We see an emotional, almost contentless Christianity in which experience is everything’. He quotes Francis Schaeffer who wrote, ‘We must stress that the basis for our faith is neither experience nor emotion but the truth as God has given it in verbalized, propositional form in the Scriptures, and which we first of all apprehend with our minds’. John Stott wrote a booklet called, ‘Your mind matters’. Maybe churches have changed in the last thirty years but there is still a focus on personal experience and emotion rather than preaching in many churches.

Paul turns to the matter of praying in public, of praying in a tongue or in the spirit, and praying with understanding (14:15). In my limited experience I found that people often broke into ‘tongues’ when praying; some of course, break into intelligible but meaningless ‘babble’ anyway! Praying with understanding does not mean being less spiritual (14:15). Paul draws the same conclusion about singing. Both prayer and singing are directed towards God, but this does not mean ignoring the people with whom you are worshipping. Our songs must be in intelligible and understandable words, just like our prayer. I was once told to explain the words we were about to sing but this is not necessary if they are intelligible words. Years ago preachers had to make the words of the Bible intelligible at the beginning of their sermon.

Paul refers to, ‘he who occupies the place of the uninformed’ (14:16). He is probably referring to inquirers or seekers, people who are not yet believers. In verse 24 he distinguishes this person from an unbeliever. He writes of this seeker, along with believers, saying ‘Amen’ at the end of a prayer. This word expresses understanding and agreement with the prayer. We should say ‘Amen’ at the end of our prayers, whether individual or corporate. We give thanks and make our requests in understandable words, in the name of our mediator, and conclude with ‘Amen’. In this way everyone is edified (14:17).

Paul concludes his argument for understanding with some strong words, but words of personal reflection. He would rather speak five words with understanding than ten thousand words in a tongue because his aim was to teach others and build up the church (14:19). A church in which someone goes on and on speaking in a tongue is not edifying for those listening- unless someone interprets. It is even less edifying if several members are speaking at the same time! Out of deep concern for this church, Paul writes, ‘Brethren’, be mature, grow up in understanding and do not remain as babes in your knowledge of the faith and in your love for one another. By all means remain as babes when it comes to malice or evil (14:20).

**4. Unbelievers and seekers**

We just referred to these two categories of people who might observe the church at worship. Christian worship was not behind closed doors, and nor should it be today. Sure we make distinctions when it come to the sacraments but our door is open to all. So what happens when an unbeliever enters a meeting in which people are speaking in tongues- assuming he does not understand the language being spoken? Paul begins his answer by quoting from the prophet Isaiah (14:21). When Isaiah spoke the word of God to the people they did not listen, so Isaiah then declared that God would send the Assyrians upon them by way of judgment. Hearing an unknown language would be a sign of divine judgment. Moses spoke of such judgment saying, ‘The Lord will bring another nation against you from afar… a nation whose language you will not understand’ (Deut 28:49). The unbeliever would be confirmed in his unbelief and effectively judged if he heard the Christians babbling in unknown languages: ‘Will they not say that you are out of your mind’ (14:23). Recall Pentecost and those saying the apostles were drunk. Peter quickly explained, in language they could understand, that he was not drunk.

But if the believer or the seeker entered a meeting where they heard people prophesying in intelligible and understandable words, their hearts might be touched and indeed convicted of sin. So when the whole church gathered for worship, as they initially did in the house of Justus, not only are believers edified but seekers and even unbelievers might be touched, exclaiming, ‘Truly God is in this place’, as they fall down and worship the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (14:25).

**Orderly conduct in worship** 1Corinthians 14:26-40

I grew up in a church in which only the minister spoke during the worship service, although someone else led the singing. Yes, it was a church like ours. When I left home I started attending an Anglican church. I found the idea of reading prayers and responsive readings a bit strange. Various members were called to read the Bible, although I don’t recall being asked myself. Sometimes people were asked to pray for things that had been listed.

Then I met my wife. She came from a Brethren Assembly, a church which had no designated minister. At their morning ‘breaking-of-bread’ service various men would stand up to read and share from a passage of the Bible, or lead in a hymn or prayer. I think they based this form of worship on verse 26 of this chapter in 1Corinthians. Such worship is quite edifying, although there is the potential for someone to start dominating the service. The Brethren do have an evangelistic service in the evening which is more like our worship service.

Most churches actually have small group Bible studies in which members are free to participate. The moment you join the church you are assigned to a Bible study group. We have such groups, a weekly prayer meeting and Bible study, as well as Bible classes, but few attend. Just as prayer is essential to the family staying together, so prayer is essential to life of the church.

The church at Corinth was probably like the Brethren assembly except they were preoccupied with the spiritual gifts, especially the gift of speaking in tongues. It seems men, as well as women, were joining in what seems to have been a cacophony of voices in their worship service. No women spoke, and there was no speaking in tongues, in Brethren meetings!

The apostle Paul spends three chapters dealing with the question of spiritual gifts, and with their preoccupation with speaking in tongues in particular. Speaking in tongues was a valid gift of the Spirit at that time but not a gift to be sought after and used in the way it was in the church at Corinth. The gift of prophesying or preaching was far more beneficial for the building up of the church. Besides, all gifts must be exercised with love and humility if they are to be of any benefit.

Having learnt something of what was happening during worship services at Corinth, the apostle concludes with instructions as to how their services should be conducted; ‘Let all things be done decently and in order’ (14:40). Our subheadings will be: participation, place of women, and Paul’s ‘commandments of the Lord’.

**1. Participation**

The church at Corinth actually began in the synagogue. After leaving the synagogue they moved to the house of Gaius Titius Justus for services. The synagogue had a ruler who probably led the services, besides keeping the place in order. We know that Jewish men were asked to read the Bible and speak from the passage read, as Jesus did at Nazareth (Luke 4:17-21). Paul was asked to bring a word of exhortation in the synagogue at Pisidia Antioch (Acts 13:15). It seems psalms were sung in synagogue worship, and there were prayers of course (11:4).

These elements of synagogue services were carried over into worship services in the church. Paul writes of worship at Corinth: ‘Each one of you has a psalm’ (14:26) - the word is ‘psalm’ not ‘hymn’. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul writes of ‘singing [psalms] with grace in your hearts to the Lord’, which was probably in the context of a worship service. The psalms are found in the Bible of course, so they were singing from the word of God. This is the first element of participation in public worship at Corinth.

The second element mentioned is teaching: ‘Each of you… has a teaching’ (14:26). This sounds a lot like what happened in the synagogue: someone read a passage of Scripture and taught from this passage. Since Paul does not mention prophesying in this verse, this teaching may well have been considered prophesying even in these early days of the church- although he goes on to mention ‘a revelation’. We really don’t know exactly what this means but it certainly does not mean telling people where they should live, or where they should work, or who they should or should not marry. Besides, everything must be tested by Scripture.

The other element referred to is speaking in tongues: ‘Each of you has …a tongue …has an interpretation’ (14:26). Not everyone has this gift of course, although maybe everyone at Corinth thought they did. This was the gift causing problems in this church, as we have learnt. I am sure there was also prayer, but here are some elements of a worship service at Corinth. Again Paul reminds them, ‘Let everything be done for edification’ (14:26).

Paul does not recommend the removal of any of these elements of worship, but he does command that everything be done decently and in order (cf. 14:39, 40). The chaotic nature of worship at Corinth was not at all edifying, and was in fact bringing shame upon the name of the Lord. Pride and arrogance were quenching any feeling of love for one another in this church. It was every man and woman for themselves, not unlike in some churches today. Some in the church are not concerned about spiritual things at all; they are set on getting homosexuals in the pulpit, or women in the priesthood.

So what does the apostle command? Firstly, if anyone speaks in a tongue let there be no more than three, let these speak one at a time, and let them make sure they have someone to interpret. Such instructions point to men, and probably women, jumping to their feet to babble in a foreign language without any regard for the person already standing. Maybe half the congregation was on their feet trying to make themselves heard!

It was the same it seems with prophesying. Again Paul limits the number to, at the most, three speaking, and not doing so at the same time. With speaking in tongues he ordered, ‘No interpreter, no speaking in a tongue’ (14:28). Let the person speak to himself and to God somewhere else. With prophesying, the people were to listen and evaluate what was said. They were judge on the basis of Scripture, like the Bereans (14:32, Acts 17:10).

God is a God of order and peace, and so is his Spirit (14:33). And one of the fruits of the Spirit is self-control! ‘While some may have thought their contribution very spiritual, and the exercise of their spiritual gifts appropriate, the disorder was not the Spirit’s work but rather the consequence of the Corinthians lack of spiritual maturity’. It seems there was no one leader of the worship service in Corinth, which is okay when Christians show love and respect towards one another.

**2. Place of women**

‘Let women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak’ (14:34). It is hard to find a more absolute statement in all the Bible, yet most commentators and readers bend over backwards to qualify these words. Some of course, discount them altogether, calling Paul a misogynist, but evangelicals also come up with ways to sidestep this command. Some point to MSS in which verse 34-35 come after verse 40, but these are the late MSS. Some want to distinguish between married and unmarried women but the apostle does not do this here.

There is a legitimate problem that we came across back in chapter 11 where Paul writes, ‘Every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head’ (11:5). Barnett warns us not downgrade this verse but he, like many, downgrades the clear command here in chapter 14. We suggested back there that prayer does not have to be spoken by you. You, the congregation, pray when the minister prays, and you also recite the Lord’s Prayer. Besides, women have opportunity pray and prophesy/teach outside a constituted public meeting of the church, as indicated by Calvin.

At Corinth the problem appears to have been women ‘taking over’ the worship as it were. They were failing the act in submission to their husbands as demanded under the law - the law of marriage established in Genesis 2 (14:34). They were discarding their head covering, a sign of submission (11:34). Here we see them failing to listen to their husbands or to discuss things with them at home (14:35).

It is from verse 35 that many claim Paul was simply stopping women calling out questions to their husbands across the church. Barnett writes, ‘Various women seated together were breaking the silence by calling out questions to the prophet’ who was speaking, and in this way disrupting the meeting and failing to show submission to their husband in public. F.F. Bruce had his doubts, and was not so willing to downgrade this ‘command of the Lord’ given by the apostle (14:37). Note that it is ‘churches’, not just the church in Corinth that Paul is addressing (14:33, 34). Besides, in his letter to Timothy, Paul commands, ‘a woman learn in silence with all submission’ on the basis that ‘Adam was formed first, then Eve’ (1Tim 2:12-15). The apostle Peter also calls for wives to be submissive to their husbands (1Peter 3:1).

All this is too much for many today because they fail to understand marriage, and/or fail to uphold the Bible as the inspired and infallible word of God. There is no command for a wife to be silent at home or in other settings. She has the important role of teaching children, and in study and prayer with her husband or other women. Of course women have gifts just like men but the command of the Lord is for them to be silent in the churches.

**3. Paul writes commandments of the Lord**

The trouble at Corinth was that people in church, particularly those with spectacular gifts, and probably influential women, thought they were writing the rules for public worship. They thought that whatever they said by way of speaking in tongues or prophesying took precedence over the words of the apostle. In the end, Paul asserts his apostolic authority and demands that this church fall into line with the other churches established by the apostles of Jesus Christ.

What he was writing to the Corinthians was ‘the commandments of the Lord’ (14:37). Back in chapter 7 he was careful to distinguish between commands of the Lord and his own advice (7:25). What he writes about the nature and use of spiritual gifts, and the conduct of public worship, is not simply advice but the commands of the Lord. The apostle Peter recognised what Paul wrote as Scripture (2Peter 3:16), and the Corinthians must do the same, and we must do the same today.

Too many in the church today think they know better than the apostles. They place more importance on their own intellect, and on culture, than on the inspired and infallible words of the Bible. They criticise the Roman Catholic Church for elevating church tradition above Scripture, but do much the same thing in elevating the words of modern day philosophers and scientists above those of the Bible. ‘If anyone is ignorant let him be ignorant’ concludes the apostle, defining ignorance as the refusal to accept the commands of Jesus Christ, the Son of God (14:38).

The apostle Paul’s conclusion to this ‘sermon’ that began in chapter 12 with the question about spiritual gifts, is very brief. ‘Therefore, brethren, be eager to prophesy and do not forbid speaking in tongues’ (14:39). The gift of prophesying or preaching is to be preferred to that of speaking in tongues; and there are many other gifts besides these two. The Spirit has given gifts to us all and we should use these gifts for the building up of the church of God. We should be serving the Lord and growing his church. We must be committed to attending public worship regularly, and to worshipping in a fitting and orderly way.

**The gospel you received** 1Corinthians 15:1-11

In his first letter to the church of God at Corinth, the apostle Paul deals with various questions of faith and practice that arose in this largely Gentile church. In fact, most questions were about practice, about sexual immorality, disorder in meetings, and the place of speaking in tongues. But here in this penultimate chapter the question is the resurrection; some were saying there is no resurrection of the dead (15:12). The Greeks laughed at the very idea of bodily resurrection (Acts 17:32), in the same way humanists today laugh at this truth- and no one likes to be laughed at! Besides, their emphasis on spiritual gifts of the spectacular kind drew attention away from a future resurrection. They had the power to speak in tongues and to heal in the here and now. They were ‘bringing heaven to earth’. Who needed the promise of resurrection? What is the place of resurrection in the social gospel or the prosperity gospel today? What place does the resurrection have in your beliefs and your life?

For the apostle Paul, and all the apostles, the resurrection of Christ was an essential element of the gospel. It was this way from the beginning and must ever remain so. Paul came across people saying they were free to believe what they liked, just as we come across such people today. But with words like ‘empty’, ‘vain’ and ‘futile’ (15:2, 14, 17), he told such people the true value of such faith.

Here in the opening verses of this chapter, Paul solemnly announces the possibility of an ‘empty faith’ or of believing in vain. He goes on to reassert the ‘elements of the gospel’ and to give ‘evidence of the resurrection of Jesus’. Our fourth and final point will be Paul’s reference to his own ‘untimely birth’.

**1. Empty faith**

Paul brought the gospel to Corinth on his second missionary journey; he spent more than eighteen months there and saw many believe. He wrote this letter some five years later, but the gospel he preached had not changed. Many things can change in five years. Some want to change jobs, change house, change city, change spouse or change religion every five years or so. They crave something new in the hope of finding happiness. Happiness is found in the truth, not in things new! Some think the gospel of Jesus Christ must change in order to remain relevant in our society, but only a fool wants to change what is already perfect. Only a fool goes looking for salvation outside the gospel because there never has been, and never will be, salvation outside of Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, today and for ever.

The people of Corinth heard Paul preach the gospel and they believed. They believed and were saved as the Spirit of God touched their dead hearts. Salvation occurs when we believe- it has a positional aspect. But it is also ongoing- it has a progressive aspect. Paul writes, ‘in which you stand’ and then, ‘if you hold fast’ (15: 1, 2). He is not saying we can be saved and then lost; if we are truly saved we will continue in the faith and never be lost.

Some at Corinth got caught up in the frenzy of spiritual gifts, thinking they were saved when they were not. Still today there are those who think they are saved because they come from a Christian family, and then there are those who think going to church twice a year or less will suffice in terms of holding fast the word of God. Imagine setting out to swim the English Channel with the idea that a few strokes twice a year will get you to the other side!

‘Unless you have believed in vain’ writes Paul (15:2), reluctantly raising the possibility that some in the church had never truly believed. Paul warned Timothy to watch his doctrine and his life lest he fall away (1Tim 4:3). We have witnessed people profess faith in Christ only to fall away, and, like washed pigs, return to the mud (2Peter 2:22). Failure to attend to the means of grace is always associated with falling away, and often with showing that you ‘believed in vain’.

**2. Elements of the gospel**

Would you like to become a Jew? To do so you would have to learn and obey hundreds of laws; you would have to dress in a certain way and not eat certain foods. It is much the same for a Muslim. If you want to become a Hindu you have to appease hundreds of gods with rituals and offerings. What about becoming a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ? Paul told the Philippian jailer, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved’ (Acts 16:31). That man was about to kill himself. Here the apostle unpacks what we must believe. It is all about Jesus, of course, because there is no salvation outside of Christ. Being a Christian is not about keeping rules and rituals; it about believing in a person called Jesus Christ.

Paul refers to Jesus as Christ or Messiah because this is the title given to him in the OT. What Paul declared to them in person, and now by letter, was not something he dreamt or was told to him by others. He delivered to them of first importance what he received. Received from whom? Some think he is referring to the apostles but he refutes this - at least in the initial stages (Gal 1:12). He says he received it through the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Paul was a scholar of Judaism; he knew the Scriptures. But when the risen Jesus met him on the Damascus road his understanding of these Scriptures was turned on its head, as was his whole life. He suddenly understood how the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms were fulfilled in Jesus. The veil on his heart was lifted (2Cor 3:14). He saw Isaiah 53, Psalms 22 and 16, and other passages in a whole new light. When he writes of the elements of the gospel, as he does here, he explains that it is all according to the Scriptures. A Jewish audience may have known the Scriptures, but a Gentile audience would also be assured that Paul was not sprouting his own philosophy but truth that was written in the holy book of the Jews.

The gospel he declared had just three elements. Firstly, that ‘Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures’ (15:3). The atoning death of Jesus Christ was at the centre of God’s plan of redemption from the very beginning (Gen 3:15); it was according to Scripture. The crucifixion of Jesus Christ is now part of Jewish and Roman history, as well as Christian history. Jesus was crucified by Pontius Pilate at the insistence of the Jewish leaders. Few dare, or care, to refute the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth.

The fact that ‘Christ died for our sins’ is another matter. Many see his death as an act of gross injustice; they see Jesus as a good man, but not necessarily a sinless man. But the gospel truth is that he was sinless, and that he was put to death because of our sin. Christ’s death was a sacrifice making atonement for our sin. The apostle Peter writes, ‘Who himself bore our sins in his own body on the tree’ (1Peter 2:24). For this reason, ‘If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness’ (1John 1:9). If you refuse to confess your sin you have no forgiveness and no salvation. Whatever salvation you think you have is a vain belief.

Secondly, Christ ‘was buried’ (15:4). When a person dies they are buried. To say that Christ was buried seems unnecessary. But to speak of burial is to reinforce the finality of death. We do not put a dead person in a room waiting for them to come back to life! We bury them deep in the earth. In Kenya they make a concrete bunker and close it with a huge concrete slab. With Jesus a huge stone was rolled in front of the tomb. No one was expecting Jesus to come out of the tomb. He was dead and buried. These elements of the gospel remind us of the Apostle’s Creed, where it is stated of Jesus, ‘He was crucified, dead and buried’. Paul’s words no doubt contributed to this early creed of the church.

Thirdly, ‘He rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures’ (15:4). Jesus died and was buried; he did not go into a coma and recover after three days. Yet on the third day, according to Jewish reckoning, the tomb was found to be empty. The Jews made up a story about his body being stolen, but this was never verified. What was verified by many witnesses was the truth that Jesus had been raised from the dead. The Father was pleased to raise his beloved Son from the dead, just as foretold in the Scriptures (Ps 16:10, Isa 53:1-12). It may not be easy to believe in the resurrection of Jesus but it is essential to do so if you want to be saved. Later in this chapter Paul details tragic outcomes of not believing in the resurrection. For now, he details the evidence for the resurrection of Christ.

**3. Evidence for the resurrection of Christ**

In the gospels we find numerous resurrection appearances, some to women and some to men other than the apostles. Paul’s focus is on the apostles; he wrote this letter before the gospels were written. His list includes six appearances in all. Firstly, he was seen by Peter, an incident noted in Luke 24:34, and then by the twelve (15:5). This would have been on the first day of the week. Judas was dead and Thomas was absent but it was the apostles or ‘the twelve’ to whom Jesus appeared.

Paul goes on to tell of an appearance to over five hundred brethren at one time, an incident not recorded in the gospels; some think it was when he appeared in Galilee. I checked my ‘gender neutral’ NIV and sure enough it has ‘brothers and sisters’, with no thought to the fact that Paul makes no mention of any appearances to women. Paul points to a large number of credible witnesses, most of whom were still alive after just twenty five years. He seems to be inviting doubters to go and meet these witnesses for themselves.

Then there was an appearance to James, and again to all the apostles; the latter was probably at the ascension (Acts 1). The ‘James’ Paul mentions is most probably James the brother of Jesus, and leader of the Jerusalem church after Peter left. This ‘James’ was an unbeliever during the years of Jesus’ ministry; seeing the risen Jesus during the forty days before his ascension may have led to his conversion.

Finally, Paul refers to his own ‘sighting’ of the risen Jesus; this was after his ascension into heaven. It happened on the road to Damascus. He saw the risen Jesus and heard him speak (Acts 9). This profound experience changed Paul’s life. Saul the persecutor became Paul the preacher of the gospel.

**4. Untimely birth**

Christ’s appearance to Paul was outside the time of his other resurrection appearances. Paul was immensely and eternally grateful that Christ chose to appear to him and change him so dramatically. His early life of following the law in order to be saved was shown to be futile (Phil 3:7). He was a devout Jew and top scholar, but after meeting the risen Jesus he became a humble Christian.

Paul became an apostle on the basis of this revelation of Jesus Christ, but regretted his violent persecution of Christians, and the fact that he had not been a disciple of Jesus like the other apostles: ‘I am not worthy to be called an apostle’ (15:9). But by the grace of God he made the most of the remainder of his life. He worked harder than all the rest, not because he himself was stronger but because of the abundance of grace given to him (15:10).

‘One Lord, one faith, one baptism’ (Eph 4:5). There is only one gospel, the gospel declared by the apostles back in the first century. If you want to be saved you must believe that Jesus died for your sins, that he was buried, and that he rose again on the third day- nothing more and nothing less!

**If Christ is not risen** 1Corinthians 15:12-19

As soon as the disciples confessed Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, Jesus started telling them that he must go to Jerusalem and be killed and be raised the third day (Mat 16:21, 17:23, 20:19). Not that they understood what he was saying at the time, but this is exactly what happened to Jesus. The disciples were told, and they witnessed the words of Jesus come true. Believing in the physical resurrection was not easy, which is why Jesus prepared them. Even when they saw the risen Jesus some, like Thomas, were not ready to believe. But Jesus graciously appeared to Thomas and to all the apostles, as well as many others. It was necessary for them to believe that he is risen from the dead.

As the apostles preached the resurrection of Jesus- which they did whenever they preached the gospel- they were met by Jews telling them that his body has been stolen, and by Greeks mocking the very idea of bodily resurrection. Preaching the cross and that Jesus had died for our sins was not such a problem. Everyone knew that Jesus had been crucified, and if some wanted to believe his death was atonement for their sins then so be it. But the apostles continued preaching the resurrection of Jesus. Why? Because without the resurrection there is no gospel. Believing in a dead man is ultimately futile no matter who he might have been. Gamaliel referred the Jewish leaders to a man called Theudas who drew many followers but when he was killed they scattered and it came to nothing (Acts 5:36).

When God, with great power, raised Jesus from the dead he was vindicating all that Jesus had done. Jesus was obedient unto death, therefore God highly exalted him (Phil 2:8-9); he did not leave his body to rot in the grave- the psalmist said as much in Psalm 16:10. It was a supernatural meeting with the risen Jesus that impacted Paul to the core of his being, changing him from a persecutor of Christians to a preacher of the gospel (15:8).

The apostles not only preached the resurrection of Jesus but the bodily resurrection of all believers (15:22, Rom 8:23). Because Christ is risen, we who believe will also be raised from the dead at the last day, or be suddenly changed if we are still alive (1Thess 4:16). This is the promise of the gospel. This is the great hope of the believer. But in Greek philosophy, as with scientific philosophy today, the idea of bodily resurrection is laughable (Acts 17:32). People go on about dead loved-ones being angels or stars or even being reincarnated in some form but laugh at the idea of them coming out of their graves. It would be interesting to conduct a survey about belief in bodily resurrection. It might be surprising to see the result of such a survey among church members. It was certainly a truth under challenge in the church of God at Corinth.

Some at Corinth were saying that there is no resurrection of the dead (15:12). Most likely, Greek philosophy was influencing Christian thinking, just as scientific opinion, as distinct from scientific fact, influences Christians today. The Greeks believed in the immortality of the soul but not the body. It has been suggested that the focus on spiritual gifts of the spectacular kind was leading to a ‘here and now Christianity’, a Christianity with little or no focus on the future. Did they think the future had already come? At Ephesus, Hymenaeus and Philetus were saying the resurrection is already past (2Tim 2:17-18). There is of course, what we call a spiritual resurrection when dead hearts hear the gospel and come to life. But in the same context, Jesus speaks of a future physical resurrection when those who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out (John 5:25, 29).

To say that there is no resurrection of the dead is to question the resurrection of Jesus and the gospel itself. Through logical argument Paul shows that such belief, or lack of belief, makes his preaching and the preaching of all the apostles empty and in fact makes them liars. He then points out that it also makes their faith futile. Later in the chapter he refers to those who get baptized for the dead, and to the dangerous life he lives for the gospel, something quite foolish if there is no hope of the resurrection.

**1. Empty gospel**

Jesus Christ was fully human as well as divine. He died as a man and was buried like any man. But God raised him from the dead after three days. If God raised Jesus then he can, and will, raise every follower of Christ. This is the completion of salvation- mortality must put on immortality (15:54). Only then will death, which came because of sin, be defeated. So Paul argues that if there is no resurrection of the dead then Christ is not risen. People may have been reciting words like the Apostle’s Creed but they were not being honest about Christ being raised from the dead if they did not believe in the resurrection of the dead for all followers of Christ.

And it was not only a matter of honesty. Failure to acknowledge that Jesus Christ rose from the dead, that Christ is alive and not dead today, undermines the whole gospel. As Paul says, ‘our preaching is empty’ (15:14). It means he and the other apostles have no gospel to preach. And if the gospel they preach is empty or vain or worthless then their faith must similarly be empty, vain and worthless. They have in fact believed a huge lie, just as the Jewish leaders maintained.

**2. Preaching lies**

The failure of some Corinthians to believe in the resurrection of the dead impacted Paul personally. The logical outcome was that Christ is not risen, the central message of the gospel Paul preached. Indirectly they were saying Paul and the apostles were false witnesses of God and men preaching lies. Paul was not greatly concerned about men calling him a liar but being called a false witness of God was deeply disturbing. He received the gospel by revelation of Jesus Christ. He preached in the power of the Holy Spirit. It was God’s judgment not man’s that he feared if he was preaching anything false. The greatest concern, and indeed fear, of any preacher should be the concern to preach the truth as declared in God’s word. Woe to him who deliberately twists the word of God in order to preach the doctrines of men.

**3. Faith is futile**

After reiterating the fact that, ‘if the dead do not rise then Christ is not risen’ (15:13, 16), Paul draws further conclusions with regard to faith and life. If Christ is not risen your faith is futile and you are still in your sins (15:17). Futile or worthless faith is like that of idol worshippers. An idol is nothing, and the cross of Christ is nothing if Christ is not risen. Images depicting Christ still on the cross are among such worthless idols- and we see lots of such images in our city.

Some people worship their ancestors but dead ancestors cannot help the living or give any hope of eternal life. A dead Christ is unable to justify believers. It was on the cross that Jesus bore the penalty of our sins but we only have assurance of this because God raised him from the dead. In the resurrection God accepted the atoning sacrifice of his Son for our sins. So if Christ is not risen you are still in your sins. ‘Christ was delivered up because of trespasses and raised for our justification’ (Rom 4:25 ESV). The cross and the resurrection cannot be separated. Moreover, the resurrection of the dead in general cannot be separated from the resurrection of Christ. Christ has ‘become the firstfruits’ of those who have died, as the apostle goes on to say (15:20).

Paul goes on to speak of believers who have already died, or in typical NT language, those who have ‘fallen asleep in Christ’. What is your hope for fellow believers whom you have buried? Muslim men, especially martyrs, are told they will go to a house of harlots. I do not know what women are promised! A Hindu expects to be reincarnated in another form of life, often an animal. The humanist expects nothing- just annihilation. Tragically, this is the expectation of some Christians. If we deny the resurrection of Jesus we cannot expect the bodily resurrection of loved ones, or ourselves. This is the other side of Paul’s logic. He speaks of Christ being ‘the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep’ (15:20).

The word ‘perished’ means much the same as ‘annihilation’ (15:18). It means to ‘cease to exist’. If you don’t believe in the resurrection of the body you are saying that death is the end of your existence. Yet even pagans believe in some form of life after death, as just pointed out. It seems the more educated men become the more hopeless their life becomes. The apostle Paul however, assures us of a glorious existence when Christ returns and we come out of our graves. Jesus himself spoke of going to prepare a place for us and coming again that we might be with him (John 14:23).

Let us not be influenced by worldly philosophies, as the people at Corinth were. Peter spoke against the same cynicism from scoffers saying, ‘Where is the promise of His coming’ (2Peter 3:4). Scoffers abound today, just as people without God and without hope abound. Do not listen to such people. Do not let them take away the hope you have of a brother or sister in Christ being raised from the dead. They will not be raised with the same body, as Paul explains later in this chapter, but they will be the same person. Eternal life means just that; it includes quality of life in this world but it is not limited to this present life.

**4. Conclusion**

Some preachers go to great lengths to explain this aspect of eternal life, namely that it is a quality of life. They do not like being criticised for promising ‘pie in the sky after you die’. What did Jesus have to say about eternal life? He prayed, ‘This is eternal life that they may know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you sent’ (John 17:3). We can and do know Jesus now- if he is alive that is- but then, after our resurrection, we will know him more completely (1John 3:2). This is our hope and with this hope we purify ourselves. Like a bride going to her husband, we want to be fit for our husband in heaven.

Following Christ’s example and seeking to imitate him in this life is all pointless if there is no resurrection. Living to please God and help our fellow man is short sighted, and ultimately pointless, if our only hope in Christ is today and in this present world. How can I say that? So many Christians are focussed on doing good, on helping the poor and needy. In fact, many call themselves Christians because of their good works; they pay no regard to the resurrection and eternal life. Such people are to be regarded with great pity writes Paul. Of the lost and misdirected people they are the most lost.

Christians living this pitiable life can be found in humanitarian aid organisations. They go about helping people but being careful not to upset them by mentioning the name of Jesus. The cross and resurrection of Jesus is not important in their work of helping the poor. Moreover, some gospel preaching is totally focused on what Christ can do for you today. There is no mention of suffering and no mention of bodily resurrection.

As believers in Christ, we are a new creation in Christ Jesus in the here and now. We must start living a different life, and that life will be one of loving and caring for the poor. But we will do everything because of the love of Christ; and Christ’s love and his promise is that he will be with us always. Christ is risen and he is Lord. He is our hope and our salvation. Our hope in Christ extends beyond this present world. Without such hope our present life is without meaning. We will not endure suffering; we will fall at the first hurdle.

**But Christ is risen** 1Corinthians 15:20-28

What do you know about Hinduism? It is the majority religion in the most populous nation on earth. Hindus worship lots of idols because Hinduism has many gods- indeed hundreds of gods. You can choose whatever god you like. Some Hindus are happy to take Jesus as a god. But the Jesus of the Bible will not be worshipped as one god among many. Hindus have no definitive holy book.

The Christian religion, on the other hand, has one God and one holy book, the Bible. True Christians are not free to believe what they like and worship how they like. There are essential doctrines that followers of Christ must hold; belief in the resurrection is one such doctrine. We must believe that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he rose again on the third day (15:3, 4). Christ is risen as the firstborn from the dead (Col 1:18). All who believe in Christ will be raised from the dead.

In the church at Corinth some were saying that there is no resurrection of the dead (15:12). Was it okay for some to believe in the resurrection and some not? Could they not agree to disagree and be tolerant to each one’s personal belief? Was not unity more important that doctrinal correctness? Not according to the apostle Paul. ‘If Christ is not risen your faith is futile; you are still in your sins’ he declared (15:17). If Christ is not risen you cannot be ‘in Christ’ and are not a true Christian. You only become a Christian when you believe that Christ died for your sins and rose again on the third day. You are not a Christian because you believe there is a God, or by default because you do not follow any other religion.

In countering this destructive philosophy entering the church at Corinth, Paul goes on to assert unequivocally, ‘But now Christ is risen from the dead’ (15:20). The ‘now’ is more logical than temporal. From the very beginning this is what Paul and the other apostles preached. It is a central truth of the gospel, and a most glorious truth. The resurrection of Christ is essential to our future resurrection, and to the future reign of Christ. This world is ruled by death, but this was not always the case. Death came because of sin. Christ has come to deal with the cause of death, and hence conquer death itself.

‘Christ’s resurrection is the firstfruits’. This is Paul’s, and hence our, first point. Our second point is, ‘Christ as the second Adam’ and our third point, ‘Christ must reign’.

**1. Christ the firstfruits**

In the rural society of ancient Israel harvest time was very special; it was a time of thanksgiving. The first portion of the harvest was brought to the house of the Lord by way of thanksgiving, and in the expectation of an abundant harvest to follow. Paul is using this feature of the Mosaic Law as a picture of the resurrection of Christ being followed by the resurrection of all believers who had fallen asleep or died. His resurrection is the first; all who belong to him will similarly be raised from the dead.

This is the great hope we have as believers. Our hope in Christ goes beyond this present life, so we are not people to be pitied. This truth is not wishful thinking. It is not an irrational or ignorant belief. It is based on the resurrection of Christ that was witnessed by hundreds of people. Writing to the Thessalonians, Paul says, ‘I do not want you to ignorant brethren concerning those who have fallen asleep’. He tells them the same truth as he tells the Corinthians, namely that Jesus died and rose again, ‘even so God will bring with him those who sleep in Jesus’ (1Thess 4:13). When Jesus comes again from heaven, the dead will be raised and gathered up to meet their Lord and Saviour - our Lord and Saviour- and will remain with him for ever in their new incorruptible and immortal heavenly bodies.

**2. Christ the second Adam**

I once heard a preacher say that he was still putting together the pieces of the puzzle that is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Being an elderly man, I quietly thought he has better get it together soon! The apostle Paul puts all the pieces together here in this chapter, and in the verse before us. He goes back to Adam, he speaks of Christ as the second Adam and of Christ coming again. What is missing in this historical survey, this survey of redemptive history? Nothing!

Adam is well-known as the first man God created. Adam inherited no sin but he had the ability to sin or disobey God. God gave him just one command, telling him not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because, ‘the day you eat of it you will surely die’ (Gen 2:17). God was not joking. ‘How could God judge so harshly’ you might say. Well, you can ask God yourself, but the fact of history is that God meant what he said because Adam died and you also will die. Paul refers to death as the last enemy to be destroyed (15:26). Only ignorant people think of death as a friend.

Death came into this world by one man, a man called Adam (Rom 5:12). It came into the world because Adam sinned. But God sent another Man, a man he raised from the dead because he was obedient unto death. The resurrection of this Man, his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, brings life to all who believe in him. ‘For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all will be made alive’ (15:22). The federal or representative concept is there with Adam and with Christ, the difference being that we are all of the flesh of Adam or we all carry Adam’s DNA, but to be in Christ requires faith and spiritual rebirth. This new birth is by the grace and power of God, as Paul makes clear in Romans 5. Please do not think that this verse in any way hints at universalism.

As Neil Armstrong stepped onto the moon he famously said, ‘One small step of man, one giant leap for mankind’. That ‘giant leap for mankind’ is nothing compared to the steps taken by Adam and by Jesus Christ. Adam stepped into sin and brought death to every human being. Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Son of Man, stepped out of the grave three days after being crucified, dead and buried. In doing so he conquered death and brought life to all who believe in him. Human history and the history of the world was for ever changed by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Both heaven and earth were impacted by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It was Satan, the fallen angel and adversary of God, who tempted Eve in the Garden of Eden. But his success would be short-lived. As God promised, the seed of the woman would bruise the head of the serpent (Gen 3:15). Satan was defeated by the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. As Jesus went to the cross, knowing that God would raise him after three days, he said, ‘I have overcome the world’ (John 16:33). Satan tempted the incarnate Son of God but, unlike Eve and Adam, he did not succumb. Satan cannot touch the risen Jesus, nor can he touch those who belong to Jesus. Satan is still active but is ‘on a leash’ as we say, ready to be cast into the lake of fire when Jesus returns in judgment (Rev 20:10).

We are jumping ahead so let us return to follow Paul’s argument, which is most logical. ‘But each one in his own order’ he writes (15:23). ‘Christ the firstfruits’ rose on the third day after being crucified. Christ is risen and will remain so for eternity. The next life-changing event in history for the believer is the second coming of Christ, the *Parousia* (15:23). This is so because all who are Christ’s, whether in the grave or still alive, will be raised in new bodies (15:42). Paul does not at this time refer to the resurrection of unbelievers but Jesus does in John 5:28-29. In reading ‘then comes the end’ in verse 24 the fate of unbelievers is understood.

At Christ’s second coming all the dead will be raised to face the ‘great white throne judgment’ (Rev 20:11). Only those whose names are in the Book of Life, or believers, will escape this judgment. Already the rulers of this world, they and their spiritual master, have been judged (Rev 20:10). The powers and rulers of the darkness of this age already know they are defeated, but they continue to deceive men and women in their earthly kingdoms. When Christ comes he will put an end, a complete end, to all authority and rule and power in this world. The kingdoms of this world will disappear. Politics, wars, terrorism and corruption will all disappear. ‘Heaven and earth will pass away’ said Jesus (Mat 24:35).

**3. Christ must reign**

The victory already belongs to Christ through his resurrection, but at his coming it will be fully realised or consummated. Christ will reign supreme. All his enemies will be put under his feet, a promise made way back in the Psalms - Psalm 8 and Psalm 110. There is no indication of time in the words of the apostle; nothing to indicate a reign of one thousand years! As indicated, the victory is already won. Christ already reigns from heaven. There will be no great battle, just Christ coming and claiming what is his, all because of the cross and the resurrection. His enemies will be crushed under his feet (15:25, Ps 110:1).

Paul writes of Jesus then delivering the kingdom to God the Father (15:24). Jesus never acted alone; he always acted in accordance with his Father’s will. His will and his Father’s will are in fact, the same. God the Son was sent to inaugurate the kingdom of God (Mat 4:17). In this kingdom are all God’s elect, all who Christ has delivered from sin and death, and from the power of Satan, by his own death and resurrection. This kingdom is not seen today but it will be on the day that Christ comes again. It will be the only kingdom that remains. Christ will acknowledge his Father’s sovereignty in all things by handing this kingdom over to him, while not diminishing his own role as king of this kingdom, the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God is one of no more death, no more sorrow, no more crying or pain (Rev 21:4). ‘The last enemy to be destroyed is death’ (15:26). Death has plagued mankind since the Fall. When Christ comes, and all are raised from their graves, there will be no more death. In the kingdom that Christ hands over to his Father there will be no more sin or evil. The rulers, the powers and the authorities referred to in verse 24 will all be ended. Christ will no longer have to defend his children or mediate for them. When we who believe are raised at the last day we will sin no more. We will not need a mediator. We will be raised to sit with Christ himself in heavenly glory.

Paul quotes words from Psalm 8 that refer to the Lord making man ruler of his creation. He gave man, as in Adam, dominion over all the works of his hands; he put all things under his feet (Ps 8:6). This dominion was corrupted by sin. It was Jesus who restored this God-ordained rule of man. In fact, the rule of Jesus extends to all that is created, both visible and invisible (Col 1:16). All things are now under his authority, as he told his disciples when sending them into the world (Mat 28:18).

There is only one exception to Christ’s rule and that is God the Father who sent Jesus into this world and established him as King of kings and Lord of lords. Paul goes on to say that when the Son hands the kingdom over to the Father he will be subject to the Father, ‘that God may be all in all’ (15:28). He is not speaking about the essential nature of the Trinity or undermining the truth that God the Son is equal with God the Father. He is speaking about Christ’s work being accomplished. The subordination is one of function not essence. Calvin says, ‘all things will be brought back to God, as their alone beginning and end, that they may be closely bound to him’.

In speaking of the Day of the Lord, the prophet Zechariah said, ‘And the Lord shall be king over all the earth- in that day it shall be -the Lord is one and his name is one’ (Zech 14:9). ‘For from him and through him and to him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen’ (Rom 11:36).

**Practices based on belief that the dead are raised** 1Corinthians 15:29-34

The apostle Paul began this second last chapter of his letter to the Corinthians reminding them of the gospel that he and the other apostles preached. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a fundamental truth of this gospel. He lists many appearances of the risen Jesus. But some in the church at Corinth were saying there is no resurrection of the dead. This not only brought into question the resurrection of Jesus, but also the promised resurrection of the dead in Christ when Christ comes again. Because Christ is risen, believers live in the hope of being raised to be with Christ for ever. Paul concluded, ‘If Christ is not risen your faith is futile’ and, ‘If only for this life we have hope in Christ we are to be pitied more than all men’ (15:17,19).

Paul went on to declare that Christ is risen, and is the victorious King of the only kingdom that will remain in the end, the kingdom of God. In the verses we come to today he adds a couple more reasons that support his argument that the dead will be raised. They are more practical than theological. Our theology, or the things we believe, affect how we live, of course. Paul has already spoken about hope (15:19). Now he comes to the nitty-gritty of this hope. He speaks of putting his life on the line for the sake of the gospel, a foolish thing to do if death is the end. But first he refers to the practice of being baptized for the dead. He concludes with some strong words about being ignorant and easily deceived.

**1. They baptize for the dead- why?**

This one verse, verse 29, has led to intensive research into baptism for the dead in the early church, research that has come up empty handed. There is nothing else in the NT documents referring to vicarious baptism. Other documents from the period of the early church are similarly silent apart from a couple of references to this practice, presumably among heretical groups. This verse is still used by heretics today. The sect called the ‘Latter Day Saints’ that belongs to the Mormons, supports the practice of vicarious baptism within their church.

All that we know about this practice of being baptized for the dead is what is written in this verse. What we do note is that the apostle Paul in no way endorses the practice. Although he does not condemn the practice he distances himself by writing ‘they’, not ‘you’ or ‘we’- as he does in the next verse (15:29,30). He refers to this practice only because it illustrates his point that the dead will be raised. Being baptized for the dead is a futile ritual if the dead are not raised.

Those saying that there is no resurrection of the dead may have been among those being baptized for the dead; such was the level of ignorance within this church (15:34). Some churches today display similar ignorance when it comes to knowing the Bible. The practice of praying for the dead is equally one of ignorance regarding the teaching of the Bible. Your eternal destiny cannot be changed after you die. This life is the only time you have in which to decide where you spend eternity.

**2. We face dangers- why?**

While Paul distances himself from those who practice vicarious baptism, he stands tall among those who daily suffer for their faith in Jesus Christ, in his death and resurrection. ‘Why do we stand in danger every hour’ he asks (15:30). Although completely forgiven by the Lord, Paul never forgot how he persecuted the church of God. He felt so indebted to the Lord for saving him that he ‘laboured more abundantly’ than the other apostles.

In preaching the gospel, Paul was opposed by Jews as well as Gentiles. In his second letter to the Corinthians he lists some of the dangers he faced: five times being scourged by the Jews, three times beaten with rods, and once stoned and left for dead (2Cor 11:23f). Paul travelled to many places, bringing the gospel to those who had not heard it. In doing so he was attacked by robbers, he was shipwrecked, and was often without food, water, or a roof over his head.

Paul faced suffering willingly because of the hope of the resurrection. Why would anyone deliberately choose a life of suffering if death was the end of all existence? Some people practice self-deprivation because it ‘cleanses their soul’ but no one steps into the jaws of death if they have no hope beyond death, unless they are severely depressed. Paul was continually stepping into the jaws of death, as it were. He went up to Jerusalem at the end of his third missionary journey knowing that he may be killed by the Jews. Why? Would he have gone up if his hope in Christ was only for this life?

Here in this letter Paul refers to fighting with beasts at Ephesus, asking why he would do this if the dead do not rise (15:32). It is unlikely that Paul as a Roman citizen was actually sent into an arena of ravenous lions. He is probably speaking figuratively of the opposition and threats he was receiving from men at Ephesus. The Jews were relentless in their efforts to get rid of Paul. The Gentiles were also ready to attack him if his preaching affected their business, politics or religion (Acts 16:16f, 19:23f).

These attacks did not stop Paul from preaching the gospel but spurred him on even more. Why? Because he was mentally unstable and wanted to die? Certainly not. It was because he knew the gospel had to be preached if men and women were to be saved from sin and death. He believed and he preached justification by grace alone through faith alone, and he preached the resurrection of the dead. He preached that if Christ is risen then we who believe in him will also rise from the dead to be with him in glory.

Paul quotes from the prophet Isaiah, ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!’ (Isa 22:13) to describe the philosophy adopted by people who believe death is the end, or death means annihilation. The people Isaiah spoke to ignored God’s call for them to weep and mourn because of the disaster that lay ahead. Instead they chose to satisfy the lusts of the flesh to the full. They took a very short-sighted view with regard to life. Our life in this world is very short in view of eternity, but without a view of eternity it is all that we have; so let us make the most of it by having parties and orgies, by eating and drinking till we are sick, and by getting hold of whatever new thing this world has to offer. Living this way is perfectly logical if we have no hope beyond the grave- just look around at society today! What is illogical is living in this way when we believe that after death comes the resurrection and the judgment.

Paul goes on to quote from a Greek poet called Menander. Paul was an educated man; he knew the Bible and he knew other literature. At Athens he quoted a Cretan poet. Here he quotes from Menander’s work ‘*Thais*’, saying, ‘Evil company corrupts good habits’ (15:33). He could have quoted from the wisdom books of the Bible; for example, Proverbs 13:20: ‘He who walks with wise men will be wise but the companion of fools will be destroyed’. Psalm 1 also teaches us not to walk in the counsel of the wicked, stand in the path of sinners, or sit in the seat of mockers. It becomes apparent that this is what was happening in the church at Corinth.

Back in chapter 6 Paul told the Corinthians not to be deceived, saying that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God (6:9). Some had led grossly immoral lives before being converted. Tragically, some were returning to their old ways. Why? Because of false teaching. Satan was using false teaching to undermine the gospel, just as he does today. It is important to ‘watch your life and doctrine closely’, as Paul urged young Timothy (1Tim 4:16). Some people at Corinth we watching neither. Are you watching your life and doctrine? Or do you think you know better than the preacher? Examine what is preached by all means, but do so in the light of God’s word, not your own beliefs. And remember this little saying referred to by Paul: ‘Evil company corrupts good habits’.

**3. Some lack knowledge**

Why do we come to church? To worship the Lord? I hope this is the case! But you also come to learn about the Lord. We do not want to be people who worship in ignorance- we may end worshipping graven images, or believing we are saved by the ritual of baptism! We come to learn what the Lord requires of us. We should examine our hearts and lives in the light of God’s word, and go away determined to walk closer to the Lord. Let us not be going away to walk with the wicked.

‘Awake to righteousness, and do not sin’ urges Paul (15:34). ‘What is sin?’ some ask; others do not want to know about sin at all. But since you ask, then listen to what the Bible answers. Adam sinned by disobeying God’s command. Sin is breaking God’s commands. In the words of the Shorter Catechism Q14, ‘Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the Law of God’. ‘But I do not know God’s law’ you might say. This is no excuse, of course. Try telling the policeman who pulls you over that you did not know it was 40kph zone! You must find out what God requires; all you have to do is read your Bible. The trouble with many today is they are careless in this regard. They go to YouTube and listen to any Tom, Dick or Harry, and come up with a mish-mash of what they think the Bible says. Read the Bible for yourself. There are millions of illiterate people in the world, and missionaries are teaching them to read so that they can read the Bible. If you have been taught to read then read your Bible. Is your Bible worn from regular use?

Some at Corinth did not have ‘the knowledge of God’ (15:34). They were in the church- Paul was writing to the church- but they had little knowledge of God. What knowledge they had was probably what they were taught in Sunday School- if you will forgive the anachronism! Knowledge brought from their heathen past, or gathered from heathen friends on Facebook, may have been mixed with this Sunday School knowledge. We know that some came up with the idea of being baptized for the dead. At the time of the Reformation, the church had departed from the Bible in many ways. Luther, Calvin, and others worked hard to ensure that the people in the church had a true knowledge of God, and of what God required by way of life and worship. They worked to make the Bible available in the language of the people.

‘I speak this to your shame’ concludes Paul (15:34). Corinth was a prosperous, cosmopolitan city. These were not uneducated people. But to their shame, their knowledge was in worldly matters rather than things pertaining to the kingdom of God. Some had become so ignorant that they were denying the resurrection of the dead- possibly while being baptized for the dead at the same time!

The gospel Paul preached is thoroughly logical, despite what mockers say. Sure it is supernatural, but that is not illogical. Holding opposing views is illogical. Believing one thing and doing another is illogical- and hypocritical. May the Lord help us to grow in our knowledge of him, and be ‘awake to righteousness’.

**With what body do they come?** 1Corinthians 15:35-50

Some time ago I got news that the wife of a good friend had died in hospital. The man telling me this news spoke of being to three funerals in the past fortnight. We cannot escape the presence of death, no matter how hard we try. Death is always reminding us of the frailty of this body in which we live, and of the brevity of human life- my life and yours included. None of us will escape death. Ever since death entered the world, man has been looking for a way to avoid it. A couple of years ago we were hearing of advances in medicine that promised a greatly extended life span, but today we are battling to control a deadly coronavirus pandemic. Most religions have something to say about death but nothing to give us any hope.

Our only hope comes from the Son of God who came into this world to deal with death. He came to conquer sin and death. Jesus shared in our flesh and blood (Heb 2:14). He died and was buried like any other person, but on the third day he was raised from the dead, unlike any other person in history. The resurrection of Jesus is at the heart of the gospel that we preach, and that you believe. In raising Jesus from the dead, God tells us, firstly, that he accepted his sacrifice for sin- good news for you who believe- and secondly, that you also will be raised from the dead. Jesus is the resurrection and the life (John 11:25).

The resurrection of Jesus was bodily resurrection; the grave is empty and hundreds of people saw him alive in a body that they recognized, yet was different. Some do not believe Jesus is risen; this means they are still in their sin, and whatever faith they speak of it is futile. Their ‘Christianity’ gives them no hope beyond this world. Paul insists however, that Christ is risen and that because he is risen we who believe in him will also be raised from the dead. Jesus is the firstborn from the dead. Some might believe that Jesus is risen from the dead but do not believe in the general resurrection of the dead. Again, Paul says this is illogical. If God raised Christ from the dead he can, and will, raise us also.

Some people want to tell us that this is all ‘spiritual’- meaning it is all in the mind- because physical resurrection does not fit with Greek philosophy or the philosophy of science. They do not like to label us who believe in the resurrection as ignorant but try to convince us that it is all spiritual because bodily resurrection simply does not happen! People are free to believe what they like of course, but a Christian who does not believe in bodily resurrection can have no hope beyond the grave- and indeed no confidence that their sins are forgiven.

The apostle Paul was confronted by two questions as he preached this sermon about the resurrection of the dead: ‘How are the dead raised up?’ and, ‘With what body do they come?’ (15:35). You may be asking the same questions, or be hearing the same questions about the resurrection today. Paul does not really answer the first question because he has already explained how God raised Jesus from the dead. If you believe God raised Jesus, why do you ask how the dead are raised up?

The question of the resurrection body is interesting, and reaffirms the truth of bodily resurrection. It is foolish to think that the body which goes in to the grave is the same body that comes out of the grave. It is the same person but in a different body, a body fit for heaven not earth. Paul uses an agricultural analogy, telling how we sow seeds that are dead but see them come to life. He uses a second picture from the natural world to show how the animals have very different bodies. Thirdly, he contrasts earthly bodies with heavenly bodies, as in the sun, moon and stars, pointing to the glory of each. His fourth and final point is not an analogy but a theological reality: he contrasts Adam with Christ, the man from heaven.

**1. Agricultural analogy**

Almost everybody knows that when you plant a wheat seed the seed does not start multiplying with new seeds appearing on the surface. The seed gives rise to a wheat plant; in the process called germination the seed dies and disintegrates. I say ‘almost everybody’ because some people think you have to a buy a wheat plant from the nursery if you want to grow wheat.

This analogy teaches us two lessons: firstly, the seed must be put into the ground and die, and secondly, the plant that emerges bears no likeness to the seed that was planted. You might plant a seed having no idea what it will become. A tomato seed looks nothing like a tomato fruit- thankfully they put a picture on the packet these days. My father used to keep all his own seeds so we learnt to tell the difference between watermelon, rockmelon and cucumber seeds, although the latter two are very similar. He would plant the seed and up came a plant that grew and grew, and produced watermelons if it was a watermelon seed.

‘God gives it a body as he pleases, and to each seed its own body’ (15:38). In the seed that is planted is the essence of something new and vastly different. In terms of the resurrection, the body in which you now exist will die and be buried; what God raises from the dead at the resurrection will be a completely transformed body. You will be the same person but you will have a new body. The earthly tent that you currently live in will be discarded, and God will clothe you with a heavenly body (2Cor 5:2). We are not talking about reincarnation in the form or body of an animal. We are talking about a body that God sees as fit for heaven. In the resurrection, the body sown in corruption or decay ‘is raised in incorruption’ (15:42).

**2. Animal world**

Paul again points us to the natural world, not to a wheat seed dying and giving rise to a wheat plant, but to all the different forms of animal life. Paul was not an evolutionist but he did notice the diversity of animal life, not to mention birds and fish (15:39). God made all these creatures during the six days of creation, giving them different bodies, bodies appropriate to their life and habitat. He made man in his own image to rule over the creation, but he did not make him with wings- flesh that flies belongs to the birds. If in this present world there are many ‘kinds of flesh’, why should we think it unusual that there is a body fit for heaven, as well as a body fit for this earth? God is able to transform our bodies as he pleases. He ‘will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to his glorious body’ (Phil 3:31).

**3. Another world**

Looking beyond this natural world, Paul points to the heavens, to celestial or heavenly bodies (15:40). We use the word ‘heaven’ in two senses: that which is not of the earth but is celestial, and as the place where God dwells. The dwelling place of God is often described in celestial terms. So Paul contrasts heavenly bodies with earthly bodies here in these verses. The heavenly bodies include the sun, the moon and the stars. These heavenly bodies again, are very different to each other in appearance - or in this case ‘glory’ (15:40, 41).

Speaking of glory brings the apostle back to his subject, namely the resurrection of the dead. ‘So also is the resurrection of the dead’ (15:42). What is the resurrection body like? Well, it is different. There are different kinds of flesh. And what is sown is not the same as what later emerges from the ground, in terms of a wheat plant, or in terms of our bodily resurrection. What is sown in corruption is open to decay, but what is raised is incorruptible or imperishable (15: 42). The resurrected body is not open to decay like the natural or earthly body from which it comes.

The resurrected body displays the power of the resurrection, and the glory befitting a heavenly body, a body that in many ways conforms to the glories of our risen Lord and Saviour (Phil 3:21). ‘The resurrection body of Christ shows us something of what life will be like for believers in that new world which their resurrection will usher in’. Paul was not a man who took glory in his earthly body; he could not be accused of narcissism. Rather, he was a man who wanted to know Christ and ‘the power of his resurrection’ (Phil 3:10). He was consumed with thinking about the resurrection; he had of course, been granted a vision of the risen Jesus.

**4. Adam and Christ**

‘There is a natural body and there is a spiritual body’ (15:44). The apostle continues answering the question about the resurrection body. Not for a moment does he countenance the idea of disembodied spirits floating around in eternity. Jesus was raised from the dead in a transformed body, in a spiritual body. Those who belong to Christ will similarly be raised in a spiritual body. The disciples at first thought they were seeing a ghost or a phantom (Luke 24:37), but Jesus quickly assured them it was him and that although his body was different it was just as real as the body he had before his resurrection. His resurrected, spiritual body was ready for life of a different order, life in heaven.

Paul takes us back to the very nature of man as he was created by God. God formed Adam out of the dust of the ground and breathed into him the breath of life (Gen 2:7). We all inherit this natural body, this body that returns to the dust, but we also inherit a soul that does not die. We have life from God. Paul contrasted Adam and Christ back in verse 22 saying that Adam sinned, bringing death to the body he inhabited- it became a body of death. The second Man, who came from heaven, also inhabited a human body but one that would not see decay.

‘The last Adam became a life-giving spirit’ (15:45). So we see those made from the dust returning to the dust- this is the natural man. But this is not the end because after the natural comes the spiritual (15:46). What is sown a natural body is, in Christ, raised a spiritual body. Note again that it is a spiritual body not just a spirit, a disembodied spirit. It is a spiritual body because it is a heavenly body.

Paul thinks logically and sees resurrection as the logical outcome of our salvation. God raised Jesus from the dead so he will similarly raise those who die in Christ, or die as believers. Paul even likens baptism to being buried with Christ and being raised with him: ‘For if we have been united together in the likeness of his death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of his resurrection’ (Rom 6:5). ‘We shall also bear the image of the heavenly man’ is what he writes here in 1Corinthians 15:49. It is a bit like putting on new clothes, or changing tents (2Cor 5:4). When writing of our citizenship in heaven in Philippians 3, Paul says that Jesus will come from heaven and transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to his glorious body.

Paul concludes, saying that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God (15:50). Our present body is not evil, though it is weak, and not as glorious as it might be. It is what God has given us for life in this world. But this world is not all that there is. Jesus came from heaven and spoke of returning to heaven to prepare a place for us. He came to establish the kingdom of God as the only kingdom that will remain for ever. Life is this kingdom will be a continuation of our existence as individual persons - we are not absorbed into a great nothingness, nor are we annihilated. Our soul does not die but our body does. But then we will be raised with a new body, a transformed body fit for heaven. Jesus assured the Sadducees that there would be a resurrection, although there would be no marriage in heaven. We will be ‘like angels in heaven’ he said (Mat 22:30).

**Jesus wins victory over death** 1Corinthians 15:50-58

‘Death is part of life’ we say; ‘Death comes to all’; ‘There is no escaping death’. We live in the shadow of death. Death seems to rule in this world - except for the fact that Jesus rose from the dead. The Bible speaks of a new heaven and new earth where ‘there shall be no more death’ (Rev 21:4). And here in our reading today the apostle Paul writes of the defeat of death: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory’ (15:54).

Surely this is good news for a world fighting death on so many fronts- disease and sickness, disasters like fire and floods, war and murder, poverty and famine, to name a few. For all man’s valiant efforts against these forces, the victory remains with death. Is it any wonder that the apostle rejoices as he proclaims the defeat of death? The gospel of Jesus Christ shouts to any who will listen: ‘Death is defeated’; ‘There is no more death’. Do you hear this gospel? Do you believe it?

We come to the closing verses of this lengthy chapter that began by reassuring us of the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, before assuring us that all the dead will rise at the last day. As believers, we live with the hope of the resurrection, the sure and certain hope of being raised in the likeness of Christ, and being with him in heaven for ever. As human beings, we consist of a body and a soul. We find it hard to imagine ourselves being without this body in which we are living, but as Paul clearly states, ‘flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God’ (15:50).

Paul spent some time explaining different kinds of flesh, and how seeds die and give rise to a very different body. He explained that our natural body comes from Adam, but this gives way to a spiritual body: ‘We shall also bear the image of the heavenly man’ (15:49). Hence the conclusion that, ‘the perishable does not inherit the imperishable’ (15:50 NIV).

‘I tell you a mystery’ writes the apostle as he brings to us revelation given him by the Lord (15:51). In a parallel passage in 1Thessalonians Paul says he speaks ‘by the word of the Lord’ (1Thess 4:15). What is this mystery? It is about the instantaneous change that will occur when Jesus returns, about being clothed with immortality. Paul hails this event at the end of time as victory over death through Jesus Christ our Lord. This truth, like all Biblical truth, is not just for academics but for practical living; it affects the way we live and serve the Lord today.

**1. Instantaneous change- the dead will rise and we will be changed**

Judging from what the apostle writes here, and in Thessalonians, there seems to have been a question about those who are still alive when the Lord returns and the dead start coming out of their graves. In fact, they will not ‘start’ coming out of their graves because it will be instantaneous. ‘In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye’ (15:52). ‘Moment’ in the Greek is *‘atomos’*, meaning something that is so small as to be indivisible- in this case, time. We might say, ‘in the blink of an eye’ or, ‘in a split second’.

What Paul says will happen instantaneously is the change that will take place in our bodies when Jesus comes again- specifically to those still alive at this time: ‘we shall not all sleep’. As usual in the NT, the word ‘sleep’ is used of death here in verse 51. Use of the pronoun ‘we’ does not mean Paul thinks he will still be alive at this time. He, like all in the early church, believed Jesus would return soon. We should be living with the same expectation! We may be alive when Jesus returns because he may come at any time. Imagine that- you might actually avoid death if you are alive when Jesus returns. Not that it will make any difference in the end because those who have died will also be raised to life.

Jesus himself spoke of coming on the clouds of heaven and about sending his angels with a great sound of a trumpet (Mat 24:31). Paul writes of ‘the last trumpet’ (15:52) or ‘the trumpet of God’ (1Thess 4:16) as calling the dead out of their graves, and those still alive being changed at the same time. We might liken it to the bugle calling soldiers from their bunks in the morning. The trumpet call will be heard even by the dead! It will be heard throughout creation. It will be the last sound in this present heavens and earth. Just as every eye will see Jesus when he comes (Rev 1:7), so every ear will hear the blast of the last trumpet, the dead included.

**2. Immortal and incorruptible**

‘Heaven is a wonderful place, filled with glory and grace; I want to see my Saviour’s face because heaven is a wonderful place’; so go the words of a chorus the children sing. Heaven is a place of ‘no more death or sorrow or pain’; so go the words of Scripture. Heaven or the kingdom of God (15:50) is a place of no more growing old, no more perishing or decay. We will be like angels (Mat 22:30). We cannot enter heaven in our present body of flesh and blood. We must be changed. We will still be the same person but will be given a new body, a body that is not flesh and blood, a body that does not grow old, and a body that is immortal. ‘This mortal must put on immortality’ (15:53).

In another letter Paul writes of putting off this earthly tent and of being further clothed (2Cor 5:1-4). We are reminded of the small detail at the end of the parable of the wedding feast where the king comes in and sees a man not wearing a wedding garment (Mat 22). When questioned, he had nothing to say and was thrown out, out into hell. The new dress, if you like, the new body we must have in heaven is given by the Lord. ‘We will be changed’ (15:51, 52) is passive; Paul is referring to believers of course. ‘This corruptible must put on incorruption’ (15:53) is still passive but it indicates the absolute necessity of a completely transformed body for ongoing eternal life in heaven.

**3. Victory over death through Jesus Christ**

The apostle starts rejoicing as he comes to the close of this chapter. He has explained the glory of Christ’s resurrection and how those who believe in him will be raised from the dead with new heavenly or spiritual bodies. He has revealed a mystery, which is that those who are alive when Christ comes will be changed. What a great day this will be! The prophets spoke about the Day of the Lord. Jesus spoke about his return on the clouds of heaven. A sense of joy and rejoicing comes over Paul as he meditates upon the glories of heaven, of being ‘always with the Lord’ (1Thess 4:17), of a body being transformed into the likeness of Jesus’ glorious body (Phil 3:21). The words of the chorus, ‘I want to see my Saviour’s face’ are quite appropriate, are they not?

The cross was prophesied, and the resurrection was prophesied. With his own eyes Paul saw these prophecies fulfilled. The end of death was also prophesied. Isaiah wrote, ‘He [the Lord] will swallow up death forever’ (Isa 25:8). The apostle had not yet seen this fulfilled, but he knew it would be soon. After writing so much and so clearly about the resurrection, about the transformation of our earthly bodies, and about putting on immortality, he rejoices in the victory that will be revealed at ‘the last trumpet’. The victory has already been won at the cross and the resurrection of Jesus. Let us be in no doubt that Jesus is coming again, and that when he does we as believers will be raised in new bodies fit for life in the presence of the our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Paul also refers to words written by the prophet Hosea, words declaring God’s power and intent to ‘redeem them from death’ and break the power of Sheol or the grave. The Greek translation of the OT, the LXX, has Hosea saying, ‘the sting of death’. Paul picks up on this, saying, ‘the sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law’ (15:56). He reminds us that death is linked to sin, that death entered the world because of sin (Rom 5:12). If Adam and Eve had not sinned there would be no death! But they did sin, and so we live with death- well, we did until the death and resurrection of Jesus. At the cross Jesus dealt with sin- our sin. He forgives our sin. By the blood of Jesus Christ we are justified before God; God remembers our sin no more. Jesus took the penalty for our sin and imputes his own righteousness, which means we will not die (John 11:26).

Have you ever been stung by a bee? The bee inserts its sting and in goes the poison. Paul likens sin to that poison. It is sin that brings death. And what is sin? ‘Sin is any want of conformity unto or transgression of the law of God’ (Shorter Catechism Q14). Sin is defined by the law. It is the law that reveals sin. So Paul reminds the Corinthians, maybe with the Jews in mind, that the law does not bring life but the law condemns (Rom 7:10, 11). Through sin and its partnership with the law we have received the sting of death. From the day we are born we start dying- and there is nothing we can do to help ourselves, and nothing any other human being can do to save us, except the Son of Man and Son of God.

Paul rejoices with the cry, ‘But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ’ (15:57). In Romans he similarly cries out, ‘I thank God- through Jesus Christ our Lord’ after realizing that he was a wretched man in need of deliverance from ‘this body of death’ (Rom 7:24, 25). The apostle John also speaks of the victory we have in Jesus Christ. Through faith, through believing that Jesus is the Son of God, we have victory, victory over the world, the flesh, and the devil (1John 5:4, 5). Jesus himself said, ‘I have overcome the world’ (John 16:33).

Do you celebrate the victory of Jesus Christ over the world and over death like these apostles? This is what we celebrate when we come together as the people of God. Those who celebrate their team winning the football do not do so sitting alone at home- they do so with their mates. Yet Christians say they can celebrate the victory of Christ sitting alone at home. They do not need to come to church they tell you! Let us who are worshipping today remember we are celebrating the greatest victory in all history, the victory of our Lord Jesus Christ over death, a victory in which we who believe in Jesus share.

The apostle concludes this great chapter with a brief word of exhortation. How does a follower of Christ celebrate his victory over death? Yes, we come together to thank and praise our Saviour. But if we love people as Jesus loves them we want them also to be rejoicing with us, be they family, friends or neighbours. For their own sakes we want them to be saved from death, and for the Lord’s sake we want everyone to be praising his holy name.

‘Therefore my beloved brethren’ writes Paul. Brothers and sisters in Christ, ‘Be steadfast and immovable’. We must stand firm in the faith the Lord has given to us. ‘Stand against the wiles of the devil… and having done all, stand’ (Eph 6:11, 13). ‘Though all may leave me still I will follow’ are the words of another children’s chorus. We should all be making this promise every day.

‘Always giving yourself fully to the work of the Lord’ (15:58). What is the work of the Lord? It is to believe, it is to worship, and it is to witness. There is a saying that the devil finds things for idle hands to do. If you are busy in worship and witness you will not have idle hands. Hands busy with futile worldly endeavours are hands already claimed by the devil!

Worship and witness are never futile. ‘Your labour in the Lord is never in vain’ (15:58). How can Paul say this? Because of what he has just declared about the victory we have in Jesus Christ. We are already victorious. Our work in the Lord is for his glory, not ours. We look for his blessing and his voice saying, ‘Well done good and faithful servant… enter into the joy of your Lord’ (Mat 25:23).

**A visit to collect the collection** 1Corinthians 16:1-11

The final chapter of Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth continues dealing with questions or concerns raised in a report from this church. They raised concerns about relationships between men and women; Corinthian society was given to sexual immorality. They had a concern about food offered to idols, again from living in a pagan society. In the increasingly secular and heathen society in which we live are we not facing similar concerns?

The Corinthian church had concerns about spiritual gifts, about their use or abuse, about selfish and unruly behaviour that was dividing rather than uniting the church. They also has concerns about the ‘collection for the saints’ in Jerusalem, the subject of our sermon today (16:1). Their final concern was about Apollos (16:12).The apostle deals with these concerns very briefly compared to the other concerns, but the collection was important to him. It became the subject of two chapters in his second letter. In this closing chapter of his first letter, Paul informs the Corinthians of his intention to send Timothy from his base in Ephesus to Corinth.

**1. Collection**

What was this collection all about? Fourteen years after his conversion, Paul went from Antioch to Jerusalem with Titus and Barnabas. They took with them a gift for the church in Jerusalem. When a prophet spoke of a great famine coming upon the Roman world, the disciples decided to send famine relief to the brethren in Judea (Acts 11:27-30). If this was around AD46 it was during the reign of Claudius when there was a severe famine. Why the effects of this famine were more severe in the Judean church than other churches is not certain but it is known that Christians in Jerusalem were persecuted, so maybe lost their jobs. The Jews in Jerusalem received a temple tax from the Jewish diaspora but the Christians were denied this. Paul did not want the Christians in Judea to suffer hunger when other ‘Gentile’ churches could help.

Paul had previously gone up to Jerusalem with Barnabas and met leaders of the church there. They supported his calling to minister to the Gentiles and also asked that he remember the poor, the very thing Paul was eager to do (Gal 2:10). So it appears that when Paul began his mission to the Gentiles he encouraged each believer to set apart from their income something for the poor back in Jerusalem: ‘I gave orders to the churches of Galatia’ (16:1). He also writes of the churches in Macedonia freely giving to this collection (2Cor 8:1f). He must have spoken to the church in Corinth about this collection also because they were asking him about it. In fact, it seems he sent Titus to Corinth for the purpose of organising this collection before writing this letter (2Cor 8:6).

With all the infighting and division within this church they may have forgotten about this collection, although some remembered because they were asking Paul about it. Judging by Paul’s concern for propriety with regard to this collection, it may have been that some, the incestuous man in particular, were accusing Paul of taking this money for himself. This would be strange when he refused to take any stipend for his ministry but logic is never a strong point among those who oppose the truth.

Despite personal opposition, Paul did not abandon the work of the Lord in Corinth; nor did he abandon the collection for the brethren in Judea. The collection was an important part of his ministry. Why was this? For a start, he wanted to help brothers and sisters in the church no matter where they were (Gal 6:10) and he had agreed to do so when in Jerusalem. It was also about a visible evidence of love in the hearts of believers. He did not see much love for one another in the church at Corinth; ‘love is kind’ and looks out for the needs of others. In his second letter, Paul urges them to be generous and cheerful givers because the Lord loves a cheerful giver and his is able to make all grace abound to such a person (2Cor 9:7-8). When the poor receives the gift they give thanks to God, so God is gloried.

Paul was also mindful of the spiritual blessings that had come to the Gentile churches from the church in Jerusalem, so it was appropriate to return material things to this church (Rom 15:27). Jerusalem was like the mother church. He was also aware of the pressure the Jews were putting upon believers in the church at Jerusalem. He did not want a Jew-Gentile divide within the local church or in the broader church. This collection would help unite the church. When Paul was arrested by the Jews in Jerusalem he was able to say, ‘Now after many years I came to bring alms and offerings to my nation’ (Acts 24:17).

The collection would come from the churches, which meant individuals in the church each putting aside what they could each week. Support for the ministry and for mission did not come from some vast reservoir of funds; it came from individual Christians. If individuals did not give there would be no collection. They were not compelled to give; this was not a tithe. They were urged to give as the Lord had prospered them (16:2). It was a test of the sincerity of their love for the Lord and one another (2Cor 8:8).

Paul knew, as we know, that setting aside a sum each week is the most effective way of giving. He specifies the first day of the week as the best time for this because from this and other references we understand that the church met on this day, later called the Lord’s Day (Rev 1:10). Many think Paul is saying to put this money aside in their homes but this is not clear. It would make more sense for this money to be set aside by the church because when Paul came he did not want any collection to be made (16:2). He wanted the collection to ready to be taken to Jerusalem.

Conveying the collection to Jerusalem was an important and responsible task. A precious gift from Antioch was taken up by Paul and Barnabas and given to the elders of the church in Jerusalem. Paul was ready to go up again with this collection but was not sure that he would do so at this stage. By the time he wrote Romans in AD57, Paul had decided to go himself (Rom 15:25f). He would not go alone of course, even though he was an honest man. He knew about accountability and the need to be above suspicion in such matters (2Cor 8:20, 21). He said that when he came the church could select two men to whom he would give letters of approval (16:3). The other churches would send men with their collections. We read of these men accompanying Paul when he eventually made it to Corinth in AD57, men from Berea, Thessalonica, and Derbe (Acts 20:4, 2Cor 9:4).

I have personally witnessed the gifts of Christians being sent by a ‘humanitarian agency’ going to a corrupt nominal Christian. The media recently revealed ‘Christian money’ finding its way into the hands of a terrorist organisation and being used to purchase weapons. The relief money collected for the church in Judea would be personally delivered by the apostle or by authorised men, who would see it got to the people for whom it was collected. He wanted those who gave to be sure their gift was used for the purpose of helping the poor.

**2. Coming soon**

The apostle Paul was writing this letter from Ephesus some five years after he first visited Corinth. He wrote in the context of a deteriorating moral and spiritual situation in this church. Things would deteriorate even further, and he would not get back to Corinth for another twelve months or so for the visit regarding the collection that he spoke of in this letter- he did make a short ‘painful’ visit shortly after sending this letter and the visit of Timothy (2Cor 2:1). His original plan was to visit them on the way to Macedonia and again on his way back from there (16:7, 2Cor 1:15, 16). This was, ‘if the Lord permits’.

Paul liked to inform churches of his plan to visit but sometimes the Lord had other plans for him (cf. Acts 16:6). We must learn from Paul, and from James, who warns us against making plans without acknowledging the will of God. The current pandemic has made us more aware of the will of God in making any travel plans: ‘If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that’ (James 4:15).

As Paul writes this letter he plans to visit Corinth by way of Macedonia, giving the reason that he might spend more time with them and even spend the winter with them. Travel by sea during winter was risky. Paul got criticised for changing his plans, but he had good reasons, and as it turned out it was for the best (2Cor 1:15f). So as Paul wrote this letter his plan was visit the churches in Macedonia, places like Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea, on his way down to Corinth, spend the winter with them and have them send him on his way ‘wherever I go’, presumably to Jerusalem (16:6). His plan was to do this soon, but as it turned out it would not be for another year.

Paul was a missionary whose mission was to preach the gospel where it has not been heard (Rom 15:20). His was not a settled ministry but he was concerned that the church was established before he left, and he kept in touch with them also. Maybe this church would have been better established if he had appointed elders and or deacons, as he did at Philippi, but every place is different (Phil 1:2, Acts 14:23, 20:17). It seems that he wanted Stephanas to act in such a role but does not call him an elder or deacon (16:15, 16).

Paul was writing this letter from Ephesus where a ‘great and effective door had opened to him’, although he did face many opponents (16:8, 9). Paul visited Ephesus at the end of his second missionary journey but could not stay. He returned on his third missionary journey and stayed two years. He saw a wonderful response to the gospel as he reasoned with the people daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9). His plan was to stay until Pentecost, a feast of the Jews fifty days after Passover; he does not say that he is going to Jerusalem for this feast. As we know from Acts 19, a silversmith started a riot in the city and Paul had to leave Ephesus in a hurry- shortly after writing this letter it seems (Acts 20:1).

**3. Timothy**

Timothy was from Lystra in south Galatia. He was a young believer whom Paul took under his wing as he continued on his missionary journey. He came to Corinth with Silas sometime after Paul first arrived there (Acts 18:5). We are not told that he left with Paul but he was with him in Ephesus. Paul in fact, sent Timothy back to Corinth when he heard of the troubles there (4:17). Timothy was closer to Paul than anyone. He was like a son, someone Paul could trust to do what he himself would do. Besides, Timothy was low key, unlike Apollos and Cephas/Peter, brothers in Christ whose visits to Corinth seem to have made things worse- not that they were behind the problems!

Timothy was young and rather timid. Would he be able to handle the self-appointed leaders that has established themselves in this church, men and women from the upper classes who had turned against Paul? The ‘if Timothy comes’ probably means ‘when Timothy comes’ (16:10 cf. 4:17). Paul express some anxiety about the reception Timothy will receive. He would come with Paul’s authority but that authority was being challenged. He tells them to do nothing to make Timothy fear, and further, ‘let no one despise him’ (16:11). Paul was anxiously waiting for Timothy’s safe and peaceful return as he wrote this letter.

We know from this letter itself the things Timothy would have to deal with in Corinth: there was a man, a member of the church, living in incest and no one was doing anything about it. Was he a rich and influential man? Other members were visiting brothels and pagan temples exercising their ‘liberty in the gospel’, as they said. Worship services were chaotic with ‘super-spiritual’ members exercising their gifts without love. The poor were being left to starve! How would Timothy survive? This was Paul’s concern.

Did Timothy survive? Judging by Paul’s own unplanned and ‘painful visit’ shortly after this, we assume Timothy’s visit was exactly as Paul feared. The apostle’s relationship with this church was tested in the extreme but he remained faithful to the Lord, and faithful to these backsliding believers, knowing that as he had just written, ‘Your labour in the Lord is not in vain’ (15:58 NIV). Moreover, as he writes in his next letter, Satan stands ready to take advantage of us, but we are not ignorant of his devices (2Cor 2:11).

**Apollos, Stephanas, and a final word** 1Corinthians 16:12-24

Paul continues addressing concerns raised by the church in Corinth even as he draws this letter to a close. Calling this a ‘letter’ is somewhat of an understatement as we come to the thirteenth page, as it is in my Bible; it is the same length as his letter to the Romans. I doubt that Paul wrote this in one sitting! Actually, as with his other letters, he used an amanuensis; only for his final greeting does he take the pen himself (16:21).

In this closing chapter we come to know about Paul’s travel plans, and about other people engaged in the ministry. We learn a lot from this letter even if we do not know these details, but knowing them gives us more insight into his thinking and the difficulties he faced, as well as the joys he experienced. The more we know of Paul the more we learn from him, just as with other people, and especially with the Lord Jesus himself. Are you, day by day, learning more about Jesus? We will never know all there is to know about the man who is the Son of God, but the more we do know of his love, the more we will show his love to others, and the more those around us will be blessed. The apostle Paul knew Christ’s love and demonstrated Christ’s love, which is why he could say, ‘Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ’ (11:1).

The various people mentioned in this closing chapter include Timothy, Apollos, Stephanas and his friends, as well as Aquila and Priscilla. We looked at Timothy previously. Regarding Apollos, the church must have asked about him because Paul writes, ‘Now concerning our brother Apollos’ (16:12). He goes on to commend Stephanas and his household, and closes by urging them to love the Lord and do everything in love.

**1. Apollos**

Apollos was a converted Jew from Alexandria. We do not know the details of his conversion but we do know that Priscilla and Aquila filled him in on some details of the gospel after hearing him preach in the synagogue at Ephesus (Acts 18:24-26). They and others wrote him a letter of commendation when he went to minister in Corinth -this was after Paul left. Apollos was an accomplished speaker, so was well received in Corinth; ‘He vigourously refuted the Jews publicly’ (Acts 18:28). People compared him to Paul and some preferred him to Paul (1:12, 3:4).

There is no indication that Paul met Apollos until they were both ministering in Ephesus. Apollos was not a man Paul sent places because he was not a member of his ministry team; but he was a fellow minister of the word. Paul knew Apollos was popular in Corinth but never criticised Apollos in any way. All he said was, ‘I planted, Apollos watered, and God gave the increase’ (3:6). Apollos was not an apostle, and was not the ‘father’ of this church, but he was a gifted speaker, unlike Paul.

The Corinthians asked about Apollos in their letter, and Paul writes that he strongly urged him to go to Corinth with the brethren- presumably Stephanas and friends (16:12). This would not have been wise given what Paul had learnt about the current condition of this church but he did not discourage Apollos from going. He may have been thankful that Apollos decided not to go, but gives no indication of this. It was probably a matter of leaving things in the Lord’s hands. Are you able to leave things in the hands of the Lord even when you could intervene- and probably make matters worse?

As it turned out, Apollos was quite unwilling to go at this time. He may have been praying about this matter and seen that it was not the will of the Lord. It is not easy to turn down an invitation from people who love your preaching, but decisions like this should not be made on the basis of popularity or an easy life. If ministers or missionaries only went places where they would be popular, and where life would be easy, the church would not grow as the Lord intends.

**2. Stephanas**

Stephanas was one of the first converts in Corinth (16:15). Paul was not one for keeping a tally of baptisms but he did recall baptizing Stephanas and his household, as well as the synagogue ruler Crispus, and Gaius, the man who gave his house as a meeting place (1:15, 16). Stephanas must have been well-off, coming from a ‘household’ and being able to travel as he did. He probably brought the letter to Paul expressing the many concerns of this church. He would also have given Paul a firsthand verbal report of the church. Paul was about to send him back, probably bearing the letter he was writing in answer to their concerns.

In these few verses we learn that Stephanas was a faithful believer, a man devoted or committed to ‘serving the saints’ (16:15). Paul speaks of his ‘household’, so he probably had parents and/or a wife and children who were all active in serving the Lord. It is easy to get the impression that everyone in this church was selfish and self- serving, but here is a family that remained true to the gospel preached by the apostle. No wonder Paul was ‘refreshed in spirit’ when they came (16:18). Being a long-serving and faithful member of this church, Paul urges the members of the church to submit to Stephanas and to others like him (16:16). As mentioned previously, it is as if he is appointing him as a deacon or elder.

Stephanas came with two men, one called Fortunatus and the other Achaicus. These are Latin names, the first meaning ‘lucky’ and the second ‘from Achaia’. They were probably freed slaves. But ‘in the Lord’ they were of equal status. Even if they were still slaves they would be ‘one in Christ’. From what we read about this church, there was too much worldly thinking, too much division between rich and poor. Stephanas was not one of the puffed-up people in this church!

After all the bad news Paul had heard, news about a man committing incest and about other ‘puffed-up’ people, it was a joy for him to meet with Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus and fellowship with them. It may only have been for a few weeks but it was a blessed time for the apostle, and no doubt for these brothers also. Paul would send them back with this letter in which he tells the church to acknowledge such men and submit to them in the Lord.

**3. Love**

The apostle began his final word of exhortation saying, ‘Watch, stand fast in the faith’ and, ‘do everything in love’ (16:13, 14). He then digressed to speak about Stephanas. He comes back to this exhortation, but not before sending greetings from two people who were known to the Corinthians, Aquila and Priscilla. This couple were in Corinth when Paul first arrived there, and they welcomed him into their home. They were Jewish refugees from Rome, already believers it seems. They moved across to Ephesus at the same time as Paul and stayed on to meet Apollos when he came to Ephesus (Acts 18:26). Now Paul is back in Ephesus and they are still there, leading a house-church in their home (16:19). All the brethren in Ephesus conveyed their greetings to the sister church in Corinth.

Paul urges the Corinthians to, ‘Greet one another with a holy kiss’ (16:20). This would have been men to men, as was the custom. From what we know of this church however, there would have been little by way of greeting one another with a holy kiss. It is not easy to kiss or shake hands with someone you despise, or someone who despises you - ‘despise’ is Paul’s word (16:11).

‘Watch, stand fast in the faith’ (16:13). Jesus urged his disciples to, ‘Watch and pray, lest you fall into temptation. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak’ (Mat 26:41). Paul could say the same thing to this church, which thought they were ‘in the spirit’ but were in fact, being ruled by the flesh. The very heart of the gospel was under attack in Corinth so they needed to stand firm in the faith- ‘and having done everything to stand’ because it was a satanic attack (Eph 6:13, 2Cor 2:11, 11:14). Paul urges them to be brave and strong, not in their own strength but in the strength of the Lord (16:13, Ps 118:8, 146:3).

Above all, do everything in love (16:14). In his own handwritten words, Paul urges love (16:22). In fact, he says that ‘if anyone does not love the Lord Jesus Christ, let them be accursed’ (Greek *‘anathema*’ meaning ‘set aside’). God loved us, and gave his only begotten and beloved Son as a propitiation for our sin (Rom 3:25). This is what you must believe if you want to be a true Christian. If you do not believe in God’s love, you will not love him and you will be a liar to call yourself a Christian- and God hates liars! Remember, Paul is writing to the church, and I am speaking to the church. He is telling men and women who may be members of the church but who do not love the Lord that they are under God’s curse. We must solemnly ask ourselves, ‘Do I love the Lord?’ And then we must also ask, ‘Does the Lord know I love him?’ and then also ask, ‘Do others know that I love the Lord?’

The Lord knows your love when he sees you reading his word, and sees you on your knees in prayer. He knows your love when he hears you singing his praises and worshipping him in the assembly of the saints. And the Lord knows your love for him when he sees you loving one another. ‘Let everything be done in love’ writes the apostle. He wrote a whole chapter about love because this church was not giving love the priority it must have in the church. ‘Faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love’ (13:13). Everything, absolutely everything, must be done in love!

The apostle wrote this letter in love: ‘My love be with you all in Christ Jesus’ (16:24). How could he say this when these people were opposing him and giving him so much grief and sorrow. Surely he was justified in cutting them off and starting again? No. Paul knew the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ (16:23). In earlier days Paul, or Saul as he was then called, was more than a rebel; he was a persecutor of Christians. But Christ confronted him and changed his heart. He knew the abundant grace of Christ. In this grace he loved the rebels at Corinth. He graciously answered their concerns. Yes, he was firm with them at times, but sometimes grace must be firm. Paul exercised his apostolic authority only when necessary (e.g. 14:37).

We conclude, as Paul concludes, with the word ‘*Maran atha*’, an Aramaic word meaning, ‘O Lord, come’ (16:22). This word must have come from the church back in Judea. ‘It must have expressed a sentiment that this church regarded as supremely important’. That church was severely persecuted by the Pharisees and by King Herod. James was murdered, Peter escaped prison, and the other apostles had to flee the city. Years later Paul would be attacked by a mob of Jews. Persecuted churches do not forget the promise of the Lord’s return. It is prosperous churches like that in Corinth, and like many churches today, that fail to say, ‘*Maranatha*, O Lord Come’!

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