

MINI BIBLE COLLEGE

I and II Corinthians

Study Booklet #13

Chapter 1
A Brief Survey of
Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians

The first letter Paul wrote to the Corinthians is typical of the pastoral letters Paul wrote to the churches he founded during his ministry as the greatest missionary and church planter ever in the history of the church of Jesus Christ. His letter to the Romans was a theological masterpiece he wrote as a general and comprehensive theological argument to a body of believers he had never met. However, most of his inspired letters were written from a pastoral perspective to churches he knew very well to correct problems or to instruct and encourage believers in their faith. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is typical of those letters written by Paul to churches he knew very well to correct specific problems.

The Corrective Section of the Letter
(Chapters One to Eleven)

Paul founded the church at Corinth during his second missionary journey (Acts 18). For a short period during his three-and-a-half-year stay at Ephesus, Paul was able to visit the Corinthian church a second time. It was during this second visit that some members of the church informed Paul of problems that had crept into

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the church during his absence. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians addressed those problems and showed them how to correct those problems.

Despite their many problems, Paul recognized the Corinthian believers to be "sanctified in Christ Jesus" and "called to be saints (sanctified)." (1:2) From the way Paul addresses this letter, we can learn something about the meaning of the word "sanctified." The literal meaning of this word is, "set apart." Sanctified people are not perfect people but rather people who are set apart to follow Christ. Because the Corinthians were being called to represent Christ on earth, as the one who had led the charter members of this church to faith in Christ, Paul took it upon himself to teach the Corinthians the right way to live.

The first eleven chapters of First Corinthians address the specific problems Paul understood to be festering within the church, inhibiting their spiritual growth and their witness, individually, and as a church in the city of Corinth. By examining the problems Paul addressed in the Corinthian Church, and the solutions he prescribed, we can gain insight into how to address those same problems when they show up in our twenty-first century churches.

The Problems Paul Learned about from Chloe

The problems he learned about from Chloe's house church were; divisions within the church, immorality, and the fact that the Corinthians were suing one another in the civil courts of Corinth.

Paul set an example for those who pastor churches when he told the Corinthian church how he received his information about the problems in their church. In 1:11, we read, "For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by them which are of the house (church) of Chloe, that there are quarrels among you." By naming Chloe's house church — a group of believers who met in Chloe's home on a regular basis — as his source of information, Paul was showing us that he did not permit people to be an anonymous source of information when they wanted to tell him about problems that involved certain people in a local church.

Pastors are often approached by church members who want to tell them about "Mr. or Mrs. So and So," with the condition that the pastor not tell how or from whom he got his information. Paul would not permit that. He was also showing that he was not making empty accusations against certain members of the church but rather writing to reprove them, correct them, and do something constructive to solve the problem. When members of the church are not willing to put their names behind their information, Paul apparently considered that to be gossip - and he would have no part in spreading idle gossip.

The Problem of Divisions in the Church (Chapters One to Four)

The members of the Corinthian church were divided primarily because they were following their favorite pastor and refusing to acknowledge the leadership of the other pastors in the

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church. Paul was the founding pastor and he had overseen this church during its first eighteen months. He was considered one of the greatest minds of his day. This caused many of the Corinthian believers to polarize around him as their true leader, since the Corinthian city represented a heightened intellectual culture. The Corinthian church was like a church in our culture that is located in a city where a famous university is the heart and soul of that city.

Another man named Apollos, an eloquent preacher, was also a pastor in Corinth. His oratory skills were also highly prized by many of the disciples in the First Church of Corinth. The idiom, “To speak as they speak in Corinth,” referred to the inordinate value the Corinthian Greek culture placed upon eloquence.

Those who were less educated in the church, on the other hand, held the uneducated apostle Peter in highest esteem. This impartial favoritism among the believers had led to a polarization around leaders that Paul addressed in the first four chapters of this letter.

The Problem of Immorality in the Church (Chapter Five)

Apparently, a man in the Corinthian church had been living with his father’s wife, and though many in the church knew about it, they had done nothing to correct the man’s immoral actions. Paul confronted the believers about their inaction in chapter 5, clearly instructing them to excommunicate the man from the church. Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians confirms the fact that the believers

followed Paul’s instructions and that Paul instructs the church to receive the man back into their fellowship again (2 Corinthians 2:4-8).

The Problem of Believers Suing Other Believers (Chapter Six)

While disciples of Jesus do have their disputes, Paul sharply rebuked the Corinthians for taking their disputes to court, seeking the wisdom and the judgment of a judge who did not have the Holy Spirit, to resolve their disputes. Paul’s argument was that the Holy Spirit, Who lives within them, could help them resolve their conflicts. Satirically, Paul suggests that the least esteemed member of their church, who has the Holy Spirit, is more qualified to address their disputes than an unspiritual, secular judge. Paul does not mean this literally. He is using sarcasm to make his point. He instructs these believers to suffer loss rather than take a believer to court and mar the witness of Christ in their community.

His inspired instruction has given rise to what is known today as “Canon Law” in the Roman Catholic Church. This instruction has also led many believers to refuse to resolve their disputes in courts of Law, even if they suffer great loss. Believers also apply this chapter by seeking the wise counsel of mature spiritual leaders.

Questions the Corinthians Asked Paul

Questions about Marriage (Chapter Seven)

Paul begins the seventh chapter of this letter, “Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me.” This reveals the second source of the Apostle Paul as he addresses the problems in the Corinthian Church. The first problem in the letter this church sent to Paul raised questions about marriage. This great marriage chapter of the Bible is the answer of Paul to the questions this church asked him about marriage.

Modern translations of the Bible break this chapter into paragraphs. Each paragraph represents the answer of Paul to a question about marriage the church asked him in their letter. By studying his answer you can determine what their question must have been. All the answers of Paul should be considered through the grid of the twenty-sixth verse in which you find these words: “In light of the present distress.” The present distress was persecution. Much of the inspired counsel of Paul in this chapter applies when the church is being persecuted. This is why Paul prescribes that single people should remain single. Once that becomes a given, then it is good for a man to not touch a woman.

In addition to the present distress, Paul affirmed that those who are single are able to more fully devote themselves to the concerns of the Lord, whereas those who are married must take into account the concerns of their spouses. In the closing paragraphs of

this chapter, Paul definitely teaches celibacy. He describes celibacy as a gift.

However, Paul encouraged these believers to be content, whether they were married or single, rather than desire a different situation in life. He also affirmed that marriage is by all means permissible for those who have not been called to a single life.

The Weaker Brother (Chapters Eight to Ten)

Many of the Corinthian believers struggled to know whether it was right or wrong for believers to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols. Paul addressed this issue in chapters 8–10 of this letter. He determined that believers should not eat meat sacrificed to idols if it would cause another believer to stumble. However, he made it clear that the actual act of eating meat sacrificed to idols would not compromise a man’s faith because, after all, “We know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one.” (8:4)

The most dynamic part of Paul’s solution to this problem is when he continues, essentially writing: “But there is not in every man that knowledge. Some, being weak, associate that meat with the abominable immorality associated with idol worship and they cannot eat that meat. The issue is not what is right or wrong in this matter. The issue is, how much do you love that weaker brother? Christ loved him enough to die for him. Do you love him enough to give up a plate of meat?”

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He concludes this section of this letter by sharing three principles that we should apply to the so-called “gray issues” of sanctification. By that I mean – those things that are not clearly spelled out in Scripture that we must do, or must not do as believers who are called to be set apart to Christ. Those three principles are:

1. Do everything to the glory of God.
2. Do what results in the salvation of the lost and the strengthening of the weaker brother.
3. Make sure you are not seeking your own profit.

The Role of Women in the Church (Chapter Eleven)

In 11:1–22, Paul addressed the position women hold in relation to men and God. Besides commanding them to cover their heads when they pray and prophesy, and commanding men to leave their heads uncovered, Paul does assume that the woman prays and prophesies when the church assembles.

This passage is not telling women to wear hats when they come to church. This is related to a cultural custom that women were veiled as they are today in that part of the world. When a believing woman decided that she should no longer wear her veil, Paul writes that she is dishonoring her husband. Another cultural factor that Paul addresses is that in that culture, prostitutes were uncovered and had they had their hair cut short. That is why Paul writes that if it is a shame (in your culture) for a woman to have short hair, her hair should be long. Obviously, this means that if there is no such

cultural application, a devout woman is free to have short hair.

Paul concludes that “The head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.” (I Corinthians 11:3)

Profaning the Lord’s Table (Chapter Eleven)

In 11:23–34, Paul not only reminded the Corinthian believers about the significance of the Lord’s Supper. He emphasized the solemn preparation of the heart that should precede and then impact the approach to the Table of the Lord. Paul wrote that the believer should come to the Table of the Lord, only after he has examined himself and approaches this table in a worthy manner. Because Paul writes that approaching this table unworthily could have serious consequences, many feel they are not worthy of this table. There is no such thing as being worthy of this table. The Table of the Lord speaks of His worthiness. The correct interpretation and application is that Paul is warning the Corinthians not to approach this table “in an unworthy manner”.

The Constructive Section of the Letter (I Corinthians 12-16)

The last four chapters are the constructive section of this corrective letter. These chapters provide Paul’s inspired prescriptions that solve the problems profiled in the corrective section of this letter. Paul begins this section, “Now, concerning spiritual things, I would not have you to be ignorant.” The spiritual

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things he prescribes are: the gifts of the Spirit; the body life of the church; love; the function of the Spirit when the church assembles; applied resurrection, and faithful stewardship.

Chapters 1–11 describe the way Paul’s addresses all the problems in the Corinthian church. Though they were believers and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, they were still choosing to partake of many carnal pleasures and disputes. Paul wrote chapters 12–16 as a general solution to the problems within the church. He began this section by saying, “Now concerning spiritual things, brethren, I do not want you to be ignorant.” (12:1)

In chapters two and three, Paul divided the human family into three classifications: the natural (unspiritual) man, the spiritual man, and the carnal man. The unspiritual (natural) man does not have the Holy Spirit. The spiritual man has received and is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. The carnal man has received the Holy Spirit but chooses to walk in the “flesh,” by which Paul means, “human nature unaided by God.”

From the way Paul organized his letter, we can discern the spiritual identity of the Corinthian believers. Paul addresses them as “sanctified.” He then calls them “carnal.” When you get to chapter twelve, you hear Paul say, “I would not have you to be ignorant.” We must conclude that the Corinthian believers were spiritual people, but their behavior was carnal because they were ignorant spiritual people.

Spiritual Gifts

According to Paul, the spiritual solutions to the problems in their church begin with the function of the Holy Spirit (Chapters 12–16). The Holy Spirit bestows spiritual gifts upon believers. Paul wanted to teach these believers about those gifts so they could be more aware of how the Holy Spirit wanted to function in and among them as a church of the risen, living Christ.

Love

At the conclusion of chapter 12, Paul told them, “ ... earnestly desire the greater gifts. And yet I show you a still more excellent way.” (31) Paul then proceeded to give what has become known as “the love chapter of the Bible.” (1 Corinthians 13) This great chapter focuses fifteen virtues that express the essence of love (4-7). When we understand this cluster of virtues that express the love that is the fruit (proof) of the Holy Spirit living in the believer, then we understand the superiority of love to all the other gifts of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22,23).

Love is “the more excellent way” the Holy Spirit uses to solve the individual and collective problems in the lives of believers. Paul used his description of love to show the Corinthians how they could solve the problems in their church.

To paraphrase and summarize the thesis of this letter of Paul: Paul is teaching that the Holy Spirit does a miraculous work in the believer and the evidence of that miracle is love. The Holy Spirit

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does another miraculous work when He comes upon the believer, or anoints the believer for ministry. The proof or evidence of that miracle is the gifts of the Spirit, which give the believer the capacity for ministry. There is no such thing as the miracle ministry of the Holy Spirit upon believers without the miraculous ministry of the Holy Spirit within believers.

Body Life

In chapter twelve, Paul described the church as a body. In chapter fourteen, Paul describes the order that should prevail among us when the Holy Spirit is working His miracle in us and upon us. This chapter is known as “The Tongues Chapter” because Paul gives very clear instructions regarding the gift of tongues and mentions tongues seventeen times in this chapter. However, the real theme of this chapter is Paul’s answer to this question: “How is it brothers, when you come together?” (I Corinthians 14:26) Paul then answers his own question by telling us how it should be when the body resembles together. More than forty times in this chapter, Paul emphasizes the concept that believers should edify one another when they meet together.

Applied Resurrection (Chapter 15)

Resurrection means “victory over death”. It means more than the physical resurrection of Christ or of the deceased believer. In this great resurrection chapter, Paul teaches that resurrection is also an

ongoing power at work in the daily life of the believer. Additionally, the resurrection of Christ is the basis of our faith, for “if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins” (15:17).

Resurrection is also a vital dimension of the Gospel. In Chapter 2, Paul told these believers, that when he came to Corinth, he determined to know nothing among them but Jesus Christ and Him crucified. He ends this letter the way he began by reminding the Corinthians of the Gospel he preached in Corinth. That Gospel is two facts about Jesus Christ: the death of Jesus Christ and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The first four verses of this Chapter are the clearest statement of the Gospel in the New Testament. Once Paul mentions the Gospel, he writes fifty-four verses about that second fact of the Gospel: the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Applied Stewardship (Chapter 16)

In the last chapter of this letter, Paul addresses the third spiritual thing he wants to share with these Corinthians. Here, he addresses the collection, or, more appropriately, Christian stewardship. Paul was greatly burdened about this particular collection because he was asking Gentile believers in a church he planted to sacrifice and give an offering for Jewish believers in Jerusalem and Judea who were suffering from a great famine and from persecution. What a beautiful miracle it is to know that the former Saul of Tarsus, who persecuted Jewish believers in Judea, is

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now compassionately requesting an offering from Gentiles for the Jewish followers of Christ he once had put in prison or had put to death. This truly exemplifies the universal nature of the body of Christ and the way in which its members can help bring healing to one another by applying the principles of faithful stewardship.

Paul the Pastor

Paul counted the pastoral care of the churches he planted among his sufferings. “Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches.” (2 Corinthians 11: 28) He was willing to risk all that he had for the churches in his care. Paul was willing to suffer and die for their growth in the knowledge and understanding of the mystery of Christ.

As a direct consequence of his labors toward the churches he founded, we have the beautiful jewels of his pastoral letters that now instruct us in the way we should care for our own churches. Because our churches face many of the problems the churches in Paul’s day faced, and because he addressed those problems in his inspired letters like these letters to the Corinthians, we can learn from his inspired letters how we are to care for and respond to those God has placed in our care.

A Close-up of the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians

Chapter 2

Is Christ Divided? (I Corinthians 1-4)

First Corinthians is a corrective letter in which the great founding pastor, Paul, confronted problems in the Corinthian church. The first problem Paul addressed in this letter was the problem of division. The believers were divided over who was the greatest leader in their church. Their evaluation of their leaders was largely based upon who had led them to Christ or who had baptized them. Some were saying, “I am of Paul,” while others were saying “I of Apollos,” “I of Cephas,” or “I of Christ” (1:12). But Paul confronted this problem of division by asking a fundamental question: “Is Christ divided?” (13).

When Paul asked if Christ is divided, he went straight to the core of all the issues surrounding the divisions in the Corinthian church. Fundamentally, because we believe in His resurrection we also believe that Jesus Christ is alive and that He lives in our hearts.

If Christ lives in the hearts of all believers, then they should agree on the fundamental matters concerning Christ and should know that Christ cannot be divided on those matters. How does the Christ Who lives in us feel about race? If Christ lives in us and we live in Christ, how should we feel about race, or any other issue?

If racism, capital punishment, or any other issue is raised among us, because the Christ Who lives in us only feels one way

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about those issues, we know that the problem of our division around those issues is not because Christ feels many ways about those issues. The problem of our division because of those issues lies in us, His followers. The error has to be found in us. Paul was writing to correct the error of division among the Corinthians, making his essential message that they follow Christ and not human leaders. He wrote to those who were polarizing around him and his ministry when he wrote the first four chapters of this letter.

He concludes that section by writing that he planted, Apollos watered, but God made the plant grow. He then declares that he who planted and he who watered are nothing because it was God Who made the plant grow. Therefore, we should not glory in man, but “He who glories, let him glory in the Lord.”

Do Not Exalt Baptism

Paul began his message against division by saying, “Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in enticing words of man’s wisdom, which would rob the cross of Christ of its power.” (1:17) Paul’s statement here makes a priority distinction between the relative importance of baptism and the preaching of the Gospel.

While believers continue to debate how baptism relates to our salvation, Paul’s message teaches that baptism does not save us. If it did, he would have included it in his Gospel message rather than allocating it to something he preferred not to do. He writes that if he

had baptized many of the Corinthian believers, those he baptized may have followed him rather than Christ.

Do Not Exalt Earthly Wisdom

Paul asked, “Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? ... But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong.” (1:20, 27)

The citizens of Corinth were known for their forensic debates, and for their emphasis on philosophy and the intellect. These intellectual and capable men considered themselves to be superior to those who were not eloquent and intellectually gifted.

But Paul brought a different message to Corinth. He taught the Corinthian believers that the wise men of this world are not wise in the sight of God. Instead, God uses those who are considered foolish to shame the wise, so that His glory may be revealed. While this does not mean that it is impossible for intellectuals to know God, or that only foolish men can know Him, it does mean that our boasting should be in God and not ourselves: “By His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, ‘Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.’” (4: 30,31)

Do Not Exalt the Minister

As he continued his message, Paul demonstrated that the Holy Spirit alone is the life-giving agent of spiritual birth: “When I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of (man’s) wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.” (2:1–5)

God uses men to communicate His message of salvation, but He uses the power of the Holy Spirit to ignite change in those who hear the Gospel. Spiritual change does not result from the skills of men but from the power of the Holy Spirit moving within those who hear the Gospel. Since Paul was addressing those Corinthians who were favoring him and his leadership, he was clearly exhorting them not to exalt in his own abilities or giftedness. When Paul wrote these first four chapters of his letter to the Corinthians, he was obviously directing them to exalt in the power of the Holy Spirit that had saved them when they heard Paul preach the Gospel in the city of Corinth.

Exalt the Holy Spirit as Your Teacher

When we read a book, we are learning with our eyes. When we hear a lecture, we are learning with our ears. When we use them

together, we learn even more as we benefit from audio/visual learning. We can also learn through our emotions, and our volition, or our through what Paul calls our hearts. But, Paul taught the Corinthians that they could only learn spiritual knowledge through the Holy Spirit: ““Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love him. For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God.” (2:9–10)

Here, Paul taught that the Spirit of God alone teaches spiritual things to man. Man cannot learn spiritual truth simply through his eye gate, his ear gate or through the gate of his heart. According to Paul, man must learn spiritual truth through the gate of the Holy Spirit.

The spiritual man has received the Spirit of God, and this Spirit gives him the capacity to know and understand the mind of God. Paul used an intriguing illustration to explain this last point: “Who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit Who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God.” (11–12)

The only being that knows what a man is thinking is spirit of that man. In the same way, the only spirit that knows what God is thinking is the Spirit of God. Because we have been given the Spirit

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of God, we are able to know the very thoughts of God.

The unspiritual man, on the other hand, cannot comprehend these spiritual things: “A natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.” (14) A man without the Spirit of God simply cannot understand spiritual things, according to Paul.

Exalt God as Your Leader

In chapter 3, Paul told the Corinthians that they were behaving like unspiritual men. Though he had recognized them as sanctified believers at the beginning of his letter, he also recognized that they were far from where they needed to be, calling them “infants in Christ” and “carnal.” (1, 3) Their division was revealing the fact that they were carnal, or were behaving in an unspiritual manner: “Since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?” (3) The way they were divided around their leaders showed that they were immature spiritually and their attitudes toward their leaders was also immature.

Instead of being divided around the merits of their earthly leaders, they needed to understand the role God plays as the ultimate head of their body: “What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one. I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one

who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth.” (5–7) Again, Paul’s message was that they follow God, not men, and he concluded this section by saying, “So then let no one boast in men.” (21) Do not glory in men and do not be a follower of men. Glory in God and follow Him, for it is He Who has chosen the weak and foolish in this world to confound the wise.

Chapter 3

The Love that Confronts

As Paul was telling the Corinthians not to be divided among themselves about their leaders, he included a teaching about judgment: “It is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord. Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men’s hearts; and then each man’s praise will come to him from God.” (4:3–5)

On Judging a Man's Heart . . .

Many of the Corinthians had been judging Paul favorably, above the other leaders in their church. But Paul told them that their favorable judgment meant little to him because he did not even feel qualified to judge himself, much less accept the judgment others were rendering about him. He felt unable to judge the motives hidden deep within his heart, and he extended this inability to all men. Since a man's heart is often deeper than his own knowledge, Paul taught that we are to leave the judgment of men's hearts to God.

On Judging a Man's Actions . . .

Since we do not know the motives of our own hearts, how could we possibly know the motives in another person's heart? While Paul instructed us not to judge the heart motives of others, that teaching does not mean we should never judge others. It only applies to our judging the motives of another person's heart.

In the very next chapter of this letter (chapter 5), Paul rebuked the same people for not judging someone whom they should have judged - a man who had been living with his father's wife in an immoral relationship. Paul rebukes these Corinthians because they had not judged this man. Paul put it this way: "I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so - called

brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler - not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God judges. Remove the wicked man from among yourselves." (5:9-13)

In this passage, we learn that judgment can apply to both the insiders and outsiders of the church. We are not to judge outsiders or disassociate with them based on their sinful actions. If we were to separate from them completely, we would never be able to share the Gospel with them. Instead, we must leave the judgment of unbelievers to God and continue to share with them the grace Christ offers. Concerning those inside the church, however, who confess that the Holy Spirit lives within them to teach and direct their steps, we must confront them if their actions do not comply with what they say they believe. However, in the case of the immoral man within the church, Paul considered the Corinthian believers to be irresponsible by withholding their judgment of this man.

On Knowing When to Confront . . .

Obviously, the Scripture does not teach that we should never judge another. Many believers like to quote Jesus when we lovingly confront them. They say, "Jesus said, 'judge not.'" Those are the first two words of a statement Jesus made about judging others. Actually, Jesus said much about judging others after He said, "Judge not." Jesus taught that we should never judge the actions of others if

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we have not first judged our own. (Matthew 7:1–5) But beyond that, it is our responsibility as a member of the family of God to confront those who are harming themselves or others within the body of Christ. (Matthew 18:15; Galatians 6:1)

When Paul exhorted the Corinthian believers to confront the man living in sin, he gauged the need for confrontation within a few parameters. First, the man was continuing in the sin. It wasn't a sin he had committed one time and then repented of immediately. Instead, he was continuing to commit the sin and showed no sign of bringing it to an end. Though no sin is above or beyond God's forgiveness, God will not forgive a person who refuses to acknowledge their sin and repent of it. Since this man was showing no sign of repentance or willingness to change, Paul advised that he be excommunicated from the body, which is Paul's second point in the fifth chapter of this letter: A believer who is unwilling to repent of their sin must be removed from the body of believers completely.

On Having the Right Motivation . . .

The motivation for confrontation originates in love. We confront our brothers or sisters who are living in sin because we love them too much to sit idly by and watch them continue to harm their relationship with Christ, themselves, and others. And our objective in confrontation is to see the person restored to the body of Christ, as Matthew 18 and Galatians 6 teach. We restore them in “a spirit of

gentleness” (Galatians 6:1), and God restores them by “leading them in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.” (Psalm 23:3)

Confronting another brother or sister in the Lord because their actions show them to be living in sin is difficult but essential. Our strategy for their restoration to fellowship with the Lord and the body of Christ should be to help them understand how harmful their actions are to their own lives and to their relationship. This is especially true when the sin involves extra-marital affairs.

Sin in the life of a believer also affects their witness to unbelievers and our witness to them as well. Many unbelievers think Christians are hypocrites. If they see a believer living in sin, they will identify that believer as a hypocrite and have one more reason to reject the Gospel and salvation. If they see us associating with that believer and realize we are doing nothing about their sin, they will identify us as hypocrites too. For the spiritual welfare of the brother or sister in our body of Christ and for the witness of every believer in our church, it is essential for us to confront our brothers and sisters in love and humility, placing their restoration to Christ and the body at the front of our intentions in doing so.

Chapter 4
The Marriage Manual
(I Corinthians Seven)

The seventh chapter of First Corinthians has come to be known as the “marriage chapter of the Bible.” It addresses a number of questions the members of the church at Corinth placed before Paul in a letter they wrote him concerning marriage, singleness, divorce, remarriage, and physical relationships within marriage. For many centuries, when church members have approached their pastors with questions about these dimensions of marriage, this chapter has been the pastor’s marriage manual.

The fundamental issue focused in this chapter is, “What is a marriage in the sight of God?” All these questions are addressed in the seventh chapter of 1 Corinthians, where we discover God’s plan for marriage and most of the problem situations that can arise in relation to marriage.

Some would argue that portions of this chapter are not inspired because Paul sometimes spoke from the Lord’s authority and sometimes gave his own opinions on certain matters. For example, Paul affirmed that his teaching was from the Lord when he told them, “But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband” (10). Other times, however, he made it clear that his instructions were not commanded from the Lord but were his own opinions: “But to the rest I say, not

the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her”; “Now concerning virgins I have no command of the Lord, but I give an opinion as one who by the mercy of the Lord is trustworthy”; “But in my opinion she is happier if she remains as she is; and I think that I also have the Spirit of God” (12, 25, 40).

Despite the “human” opinions Paul offered in these verses, we cannot discount his words as uninspired or not from the Lord. Paul was careful in this chapter to build on the teachings of Christ. Where these marriage questions were answered in the teaching of Jesus and the law of God, Paul simply referenced and affirmed what the Lord taught. Where Jesus or the Law was silent, however, he spoke as a man who “by the mercy of the Lord (was) trustworthy.” His last word in this marriage chapter is that he had “the Spirit of God.” (25, 40)

In no way was Paul indicating that his own thoughts in this chapter about marriage were uninspired. In the last words of Paul in this chapter, he affirmed, that what he wrote to the Corinthians about marriage, was inspired by the Spirit of God.

“In View of the Present Distress . . .”

Throughout this chapter, Paul emphasized the counsel that the Corinthians not to marry or to seek a different situation than the one in which they were living when they were called to follow Christ. He instructed them this way because of what he called “the present

distress” (26). The church was living in a time of persecution, and, because of that, Paul thought it best that single people remain single rather than increase the number of concerns facing their daily lives.

Apparently, in their letter to Paul, they asked him if their single children should marry in such difficult times. Paul clearly tells them their virgin daughters and single sons would be wise to remain single. He does not prohibit marriage for these young people, but he definitely encourages them to remain single. For this reason, he began the chapter by telling them, “It is good for a man not to touch a woman.” (1) If these young people had decided to remain single, he wanted them to keep themselves free from temptation.

Though Paul instructed those who were single to remain as they were, he also conceded that choosing to marry was not a sin: “If they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn with passion”; “But if you marry, you have not sinned”; “But if any man thinks that he is acting unbecomingly toward his virgin, if she is past her youth, and if it must be so, let him do what he wishes, he does not sin; let her marry.” (9, 28, 36)

There is some speculation that Paul was previously married, since as a member of the Sanhedrin he would have been expected to take a wife. Furthermore, in a section where he addressed those who are unmarried and widowed, he instructed them to “remain even as (he was)” (8). Most scholars conclude that he was a widower.

“Stop Depriving One Another . . .”

The physical relationship between a husband and wife is purposed for procreation but also for the pleasure of both partners. Paul supported this idea by writing: “The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.” (3–5)

A few verses before this passage, Paul addressed single people by saying, “It is good for a man not to touch a woman” (1), but this does not apply to married couples. According to this passage, sex should be others-centered and intended for their pleasure. The husband should seek to please his wife, and the wife should seek to please her husband, and they should not deprive one another of sexual intimacy.

The parameters for sex within marriage are not about right or wrong, normal or abnormal. The operative word is “mutual.” Whatever a married couple do to give pleasure is not right or wrong. The important thing is that it be mutual. Paul said that the only reason a husband and a wife should forsake their sexual relationship is for them to spend time in fasting and prayer, and that this decision should also be made in mutual agreement.

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This not only shows us the parameters for abstaining from physical intimacy, but also the type of spiritual relationship the husband and wife share. Though they are married and share a physical unity before God, they still have a separate and individual relationship with God. The most intimate relationship in this life is not marriage. It is our relationship with God. People will discuss their marriage relationship more freely than their relationship with God.

This passage also teaches us that the best way to guard against sexual immorality is for both partners to gain satisfaction from the sexual relationship in their marriage. The city of Corinth was steeped in immorality, and Paul desired for married couples to satisfy each other's sexual needs within the home to safeguard against temptation. A strong, mutually gratifying physical relationship is the best defense against the temptations of immorality.

“God Has Called Us to Peace . . .”

Besides singleness and marital relations, this chapter also addresses divorce issues. Obviously, the Corinthians asked Paul in their letter if two believers are permitted to dissolve their marriage by divorce. In verses 10 and 11 Paul answers their question. Put simply, Paul answered their question with one word: his answer was “No!” He referred the Corinthians to the teachings of Christ about the indissolubility of marriage, which Jesus pointed out to the Pharisees, was also supported by the Law (Matthew 19:3-9)

In verses 12–16, however, Paul addressed a question that was not directly answered by Jesus: Is divorce permitted between a believer and an unbeliever? The inspired counsel Paul gave in this instance is very fair: “If any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her. And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away... Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace. For how do you know, Oh wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, Oh husband, whether you will save your wife?” (12–13, 15–16)

Paul told the Corinthians that the believing spouse should stay with the unbelieving spouse and be an example of God's love and grace to them so that they might be saved (see also 1 Peter 3:1–6). If the marriage is to be dissolved, the unbelieving spouse must be the one to make that decision. And if the unbeliever does decide to leave, the believer may let him or her go. When that happens, a brother or a sister is “not under bondage in such cases.” (I Corinthians 7:15)

The Prism of Love

Scholars are not agreed about what exactly Paul meant by “bondage” in verse 15. Some scholars believe it means the believer is free to obtain a divorce but may not remarry if the unbeliever

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leaves the marriage, since Scripture speaks against remarriage if the first spouse is still alive (Romans 7:2–3). Others believe it means they may divorce as well as remarry, since the verse says the spouse is released from bondage and gives no further explanation.

Though scholars disagree on the interpretation of this verse, we must interpret this verse in a Spirit of love. According to Paul, God gave man the Law because He desired man to live well, not because He desired to place man in bondage. “I say this only to help you, not to put a halter around your neck” (I Corinthians 7:35 Jerusalem Bible)

The conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees could be described this way: before Jesus applied the law of God to the lives of people, He passed the Law of God through the prism of the love of God. The Pharisees mercilessly “threw the Book” at people. Therefore, we should pass the teachings of the Law of God through the prism of God’s love before we apply the Law of God to the lives of people.

For example, we might wonder whether a person who was divorced before they became a believer should be permitted to marry again, since Scripture teaches that a divorced person must not remarry unless their first spouse dies. If we told them such a thing, we would be behaving like the Pharisees, who handled the Law that was intended to express God’s love for the welfare of man and legalistically made the lives of people miserable. The Pharisees did such a thing in relation to the Sabbath by rebuking Jesus for healing a

man on that day instead of remaining inactive, while when Jesus passed the Sabbath law through the prism of God’s love. He then rebuked the Pharisees by saying, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.” (Mark 2:27)

Why, then, did God make the marriage laws? Because God wanted the man and woman He created to enjoy the blessings of marriage, and a family. God also wanted us to have the structure in which marriage and family should function. But we often use those laws of marriage to keep people from lives of fulfillment God intended when He gave us those marriage laws. As Paul said, “The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” (2 Corinthians 3:6)

If you have a version of the New Testament that breaks this chapter down into paragraphs, if you will study each paragraph, you can determine what the question was the Corinthians asked Paul in their letter that he is answering in that particular paragraph. We can assume that the Corinthians asked questions about the divorce and remarriage of two believers; the mixed marriage of a brother or sister who has become a believer but their spouse has not, and they therefore find themselves married to an unbeliever, and whether their unmarried children should marry in uncertain, insecure times of persecution.

The Corinthians apparently asked what new believers should do who have been married many times before they experienced salvation and have multiple ex-spouses from several marriages in their past. We can say that the Corinthians had asked Paul that kind

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of question because of one paragraph in this chapter (17-24). We can summarize Paul's answer: we should not seek to reverse past actions of a new believer, such as telling them to remarry someone they divorced in their youth or to divorce someone who is their second husband. Three times in this paragraph, Paul taught: "only as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk. . . . Each man must remain in that condition in which he was called." (17, 20,24)

Paul uses the word "called," several times in this letter. When he does, he is referring to the salvation experience of the people he is addressing. When a man or a woman experience salvation, they should ask God to bless the marital context in which they find themselves. If they are married to an unbeliever, they should refer to Paul's teachings in 7:12-16; if they are unmarried, they should ask God whether He is calling them to a life of singleness or marriage.

Celibacy: Serving the Lord Without Distraction

Finally, Paul listed the merits of celibacy at the end of this chapter: "One who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and his interests are divided. The woman who is unmarried, and the virgin, is concerned about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit; but one who is married is concerned

about the things of the world, how she may please her husband. This I say for your own benefit; not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is appropriate and to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord." (32-35)

Paul taught that the way to serve the Lord without distraction is to remain unmarried to the point of celibacy. This discussion does not pertain to the "present distress" he discussed in other areas of the chapter but to the undivided attentions of a person's heart to the Lord. In order to secure that devotion, it is better for a person not to marry, though a decision to marry does not make a person inferior to a person who decides not to marry. The virgin who marries will simply have a more difficult time dividing her devotion to both her husband and her Lord. The decision to live a celibate life must be made between an individual and the Lord, as the Lord alone is able to provide the strength needed for a fulfillment found only in Him. Paul describes celibacy as a gift. (7)

"What God Has Joined Together . . ."

The marriage chapter raises some very difficult questions, the most fundamental of which is, "What is a marriage in the sight of God?" Put simply, it is answered by Matthew 19:6: "What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." When two believers are joined together in Holy Matrimony, they commit their lives to one another because they believe God has joined them together. Their conviction that God has joined them together is the basis that

gives their marriage stability, not the piece of paper that says the two of them are legally joined. Given the infinite variables of compatibility and possibilities for marriage partners in this world, the decision to marry should be based on divine guidance.

Chapter 5

Three Principles of Christ-like Living

(Chapters Eight, Nine and Ten)

In the Christian life, a number of issues are judged neither right nor wrong but are often associated with negative feelings, depending on the social implications found within a particular culture. For some cultures, these issues might include the drinking of wine or the wearing of one's hair a certain way. In the Corinthian culture, it was the eating of meat that had been sacrificed to idols. Outside the church, the citizens of Corinth worshiped idols and performed acts and sacrifices on their behalf, including the sacrificing of animals whose meat was later sold at a reduced rate in the markets. Many of the converts to Christianity would have participated in these practices before they came to faith in Christ. After they came to faith, therefore, they struggled to know whether eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols was right or wrong, and

many of them felt it was wrong because of the idol worship associated with it.

Others in the church, usually those who were well educated or had been Christians for a longer period of time, did not see anything wrong with eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols. In their eyes, the idols were nothing more than gold, silver, wood, and stone, and they had no significance in the spiritual realm. This mentality was identified and supported by Paul when he said, "We know that an idol is nothing in the world and that there is no other God but one (8:4). Paul attributed no worth or value to those gold and silver idols and therefore agreed with the more mature believers that eating meat sacrificed to idols was not a negative reflection on one's faith.

"However," Paul said, "not all men have this knowledge." (7) In a sense, Paul was saying that everyone is not as smart as you are. Paul wrote these three chapters to address what a person in the church who has the knowledge of the worthlessness of idols should do when he encounters a brother who does not have that knowledge. Paul shifted the issue from the actual eating of meat sacrificed to idols to the relationships between brothers and sisters in Christ and how those who are stronger ought to regard those who are weaker in the faith. In response to the objection that they should have the liberty to eat anything the Holy Spirit gave them the liberty to eat, Paul said to the stronger believers, "Take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak..."

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Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble.” (9, 13)

Paul knew that this solution would give cause for concern among the “stronger” believers. He was a champion of spiritual liberty, and he hated any form of legalism. He did not like to see people change his teachings into a guidebook of dos and don’ts for the Christian life. He knew that many of the stronger believers were going to take his solution as some form of legalism. They would respond to his solution by saying, “Why should my spiritual liberty be limited by my brother’s weakness?” Paul wrote these three chapters to teach the Corinthians (and you and me), why it is important for us as believers to consider the needs of our weaker brothers and sisters as we decide what we have the liberty to do about what we might call the “gray issues” of Christ-like living.

Three Principles of Christ-like Liberty Summarized

We find Paul’s teachings in this section summed up by his final words: “Whether, then you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many, so that they may be saved” (10:31–33). From these verses, we glean three principles. First, we learn that our priority concern must be the glory of God. Second, we learn that our actions should be based on what results in the salvation of others. And third, we learn that the profit of others is

more important than our own profit. The issue is not what is right or wrong, or our right to do, or not to do something. The issue is what glorifies God, what leads to the salvation of others, and what profits others. When you reflect on these three principles, you realize they express a concept Paul will spell out for us later in this letter this way: L-O-V-E – God’s Agape love.

The world does not support such a mentality. The values of the cultures of this world are expressed in this familiar statement of values clarification: “The first law of civilization is self-preservation.” The people of this world base their actions on whether something will have a positive or negative effect on them. They ask, “What will I *get* out of this?” But the philosophy of Christ, taught here by Paul, is about giving - giving to God, that He might gain glory, and giving to others that they might be saved and edified.

Our salvation made us the bond slaves of Christ. We are no longer free to do as we would choose. We are compelled to act, as Christ would have us act, out of concern for the salvation and edification of others to the glory of God.

Applying the Three Principles of Christ-like Living

In chapter 9, Paul demonstrated how he applied these three principles in his own life. To begin with, he defended his liberty: “Am I not free? Do we not have a right to eat and drink? Do we not have a right to take along a believing wife, even as the rest of the apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? ... If we sowed

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spiritual things in you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? If others share the right over you, do we not more?" (1, 4–5, 11–12). Here, Paul demonstrated his right to eat and drink, to take a wife for himself and to gain material goods from the services he rendered to others in ministry.

All Things to All Men

As an apostle under the law of liberty, Paul was free to act in any way that would not directly contradict the teachings of Christ, but he chose not to do so. Instead, he told the Corinthians, "Nevertheless, we did not use this right, but we endure all things so that we will cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ.... I have used none of these things" (12, 15). Though he was at liberty to act on his own behalf, he chose not to do so for fear that it would hinder the Gospel he came to preach. In this way, he unselfishly placed God's glory and man's salvation above his own desires.

The high point of Paul's message is contained in the following paragraph: "For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without laws, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak;

I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some. I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it. (19–23)

Though Paul was free from men, meaning he was born free and was not a slave to anyone, he made a deliberate choice to become a slave to all men for the sake of the gospel. He determined to serve them in any way he could so as to gain the opportunity to present the Gospel of salvation to them. If a man was a Jew, Paul would accommodate his actions to make the Gospel clear and appealing to a Jew. If a man was not educated, Paul would speak to him in such a way that the Gospel was made clear to him.

Although there were limits beyond which he would not go, if a man were lawless, he would do everything he could to make the Gospel clear and attractive to a lawless man. Though Paul would not compromise what he believed if others rejected it, he was willing to use his liberty in Christ to make the Gospel understandable to all men in all their different walks of life.

Paul made liberty in Christ one of his foremost concerns and repelled all forms of legalism, but he was also highly concerned about the weaker brother and the unity of the body of Christ. Consistent with that concern, he chose to abstain from practices that might cause a weaker brother to stumble.

By application, though we are free in Christ to do many things, we are responsible for the way our actions impact others, especially those who are members of our own spiritual body.

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Therefore, if we practice something that does not violate God's holiness or our relationship with Christ, but causes another brother or sister to stumble, we should not practice it in their presence. The principle Paul is teaching is not applied by our sending the weaker brother or sister away, or by telling them to look the other way. The application of this principle is found in our concern for and our love of our brothers and sisters in Christ and the unity of the body.

Understanding the Role of Women in the Church

In the eleventh chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul addressed the role of women and the Table of the Lord. He instructed women to have their heads covered and to wear their hair long. Paul wrote: "If a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her" (15). In the Corinthian culture, women with short or shaved hair were known as prostitutes and women of questionable character. To set the Christian women apart, therefore, Paul instructed them to cover their heads and wear their hair long.

This was a teaching based on culture, but its principle of being set apart from the culture still applies. If the culture in which we live identifies certain types of people with certain types of dress or hairstyles, we should avoid dressing ourselves or styling our hair in those ways. We should give no cause for concern among the brethren for our appearance, and we should give no reason for outsiders to identify Christ-like women with prostitutes. If the culture does not associate short hair with prostitution, then it goes

without saying that there is nothing wrong with Christ-like women wearing their hair short.

As I observed in my survey of this letter, the teaching of Paul that a woman should be covered when she prays or prophesies, does not mean that women should wear hats to church. This was related to the custom, which is still practiced in Middle Eastern cultures, that women should be veiled in public. This important teaching of Paul shows, that even though we are taught in the letter of Paul to the Romans, that we should not be conformed to this world (Romans 12:2), we are not to be totally insensitive to the cultures in which we live. When female missionaries live in Middle Eastern cultures today, they are trained to not be insensitive to some of these very same factors in that culture.

The fact that Paul assumes that women do pray and prophesy when the church assembles, argues that the role of a woman in church services includes women preaching and praying. An in depth study of the role of women in the church can lead us to this conclusion: a woman can do anything in the church as long as what she does is under the authority of the elders of that church. Based on that same in depth study, everybody in the church is under the authority of the elders, and the elders are under the authority of the risen, living Christ, and the Word of God.

A Manner Worthy of the Table of the Lord

When Paul gave his inspired corrections for the abuses of the

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Corinthians when they met at the Table of the Lord, he instructed the Corinthian believers to care for one another and to care for their hearts before they met at that table. He had heard they were partaking in the sacrament unworthily on two counts: they were not thinking of their brothers and sisters in Christ and they were not taking the communion elements in a worthy manner: “In your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk” (21).

It was a practice in the first generation of the church to share what they called a “love feast”, before they celebrated communion. From what Paul writes here, it seems that they did not place the food they brought on a common table. Apparently, each one brought what they were going to eat. Some were wealthy and brought much food, while some were poor (perhaps, even slaves), and were not able to bring any food at all. Those with plenty were eating in front of those who had nothing. One believer was eating sumptuous food before believers who were hungry and had nothing to eat. Some believe Paul throws a “wet blanket” on church dinners when he asks the question: “What! do you not have houses to eat and drink in?” (22)

They were taking the communion elements without concern for their fellow believers. We also see that some of the brothers were approaching the Lord’s Supper to satisfy their appetite for wine. They were actually using the wine to make themselves drunk. We are shocked to read of these abuses because we compare our church culture to the church culture of “The First Church of Corinth.” We

must remember that these were the very first members of the very first church in the morally decadent city of Corinth. Those of us biological and spiritual parents realize that babies make messes. Paul labels these Corinthians as babies (I Corinthians 3:1).

These abuses were understandably abhorrent to Paul. The essence of the meaning of the Lord’s Table is to remember Christ’s death and resurrection and what those two Gospel facts should mean to the believers who meet Christ and one another at that table. Paul rebuked the Corinthian church by writing: “Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup” (27–28).

In some translations, this passage warns the Corinthians not to approach the Table of the Lord unworthily. This is an unfortunate translation because it makes believers feel that they must be worthy of the Lord’s Table. When they have committed sins, they deliberately absent themselves from this table at the very time when they need this table most. The correct translations interpret Paul correctly. He was instructing the Corinthians (and you and me), that we are to approach this table in a worthy manner. This table speaks of our unworthiness and of His worthiness has our suffering and risen Savior.

In a word, Paul was telling them to make the Lord’s Supper a time of reflection in their hearts before the Lord, not a time to gorge

themselves with their own gourmet food, while their hungry fellow believers watch, and then get drunk on the wine of the Lord's Table.

Paul shows that it was also a time for them to find communion with each other, when he tells them: "When you come together to eat, wait for one another." (33) The unity of believers is also an important dimension of communion. Waiting for tardy believers so that all the body can take communion together is a symbol of our unity before the living Christ, Who's death and resurrection we are celebrating and applying, individually and collectively.

How do you approach the Table of the Lord? Do you take time to examine yourself *before* eating the bread and drinking the wine that represent His broken body and shed blood on your behalf? Do you recognize the importance of the body and blood of Christ when you the vertical and horizontal fellowship with Christ and your spiritual community?

Meditate on this solemn passage and then make your time at the Table of the Lord a holy and sacred experience, individually and corporately applying the essence of the meaning of the Lord's Table, in reverence and remembrance of His sacrifice, and of His resurrection.

The Constructive Section of the Letter

Chapter 6

The Function of the Holy Spirit

Paul began the constructive section of his first letter to the Corinthians by declaring: "Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be ignorant." (12:1) The Corinthian believers were sanctified and spiritual people. They were set apart to following Christ. But they were also carnal people. They were sanctified and called to be saints, but their lives were not bearing witness to Christ because they were ignorant saints. The burden of the greatest teacher in the first generation of the church after Pentecost was: "I would not have you to be ignorant."

On an earthly level, the Corinthian believers were intelligent people. They highly esteemed knowledge, and many of them probably had much secular knowledge. As believers, they also had knowledge of God and of the Holy Spirit. But they were ignorant about the function of the Holy Spirit. Paul earnestly desired to dispel their ignorance in the second section of his letter. He began by teaching this church of ignorant saints by teaching them about the way the Holy Spirit wants to function in a church.

Wrong positions on the Holy Spirit

The Corinthian church was what we would call today, "A charismatic church." Since Paul is beginning a section of his letter in

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which he will have a lot to say about the Holy Spirit, he begins by stating several ways people are wrong in their understanding of the role and function of the Holy Spirit. He tells them that it is wrong to be ignorant about the function of the Holy Spirit. He will tell them it is wrong to idolize certain manifestations of the Holy Spirit and it is wrong to try to initiate certain functions of the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit Gives Gifts

Paul began by teaching that the Holy Spirit gives the believers spiritual gifts: Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit... For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills. (4, 8–11)

When the Holy Spirit establishes His presence in believers, He brings with Him different gifts. He establishes diverse gifts in different believers so that they can use them in unique ministries. Though these gifts are incredibly diverse, and they equip a variety of believers to have a diverse variety of ministries, they are given to believers by the one, Holy Spirit. These gifts of the Holy Spirit reach in and they reach out for the risen Christ. Gifted believers minister to

the other believers in their church. When that happens, the whole church is edified or perfected for the work of the ministry, which in addition to reaching in and blessing the believers, reaches out in obedience to the Great Commission.

Spiritual Gifts Demonstrate Diversity

In this chapter, we learn two opposite but complementary principles. First, we learn about the diversity of gifted believers because they have different clusters of spiritual gifts. If two of us are exactly alike, one of us is unnecessary. All the gifted saints in a local church are necessary. All the members are not gifted with the same gift — some are teachers, others are prophets, still others are discerning; some have administrative gifts and some have the gifts of healing.

A Spirit-filled church will have in its body a wide range of people who are blessed with different spiritual gifts, which are under the control of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not a liquid. The Holy Spirit is a Person. We either have the Person of the Holy Spirit or we do not have the Holy Spirit. The concept of being filled with the Spirit, literally means, to be controlled by the Holy Spirit.”

Spiritual Gifts Function Like a Body

Second, we learn about the oneness, or unity of the saints in a local church. This means that all the members are united in one Person, and that Person is Christ. This also means, that though they

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are different people with different gifts, they function for one common purpose. How can these two opposite principles function in one group of people? Paul brings these two opposite and contradictory principles together with his inspired revelation that the church functions like a human body:

“For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is (the risen, living) Christ.” (12) Our bodies are composed of hands, feet, ears, lungs, and other parts — different parts — but each part functions in a beautiful coordination with the rest of the body. The parts perform their individual functions while still acting on behalf of the whole body. So it is in the body of Christ, where each member has a different gift but is united with the rest of the body through Christ, Who is our Head (Colossians 1:18).

Spiritual Gifts Defy Uniformity

Unfortunately, not all churches appreciate the diversity of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. They prefer that all their members display the same gifts, whether it is the gift of healing or prophecy or tongues or any other gift. Their emphasis is that some gifts and manifestations of the Holy Spirit are superior to others and that all their members must be in possession of these credential gifts or manifestations of the Spirit. In my opinion, that is not what Paul teaches in these constructive chapters of his letter.

Paul wrote: “There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit.” (4) Paul taught that these kinds of church bodies cannot function properly, using the illustration of the physical body again to demonstrate his point: “If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ... The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you.’” (17, 21a) That is not unity. That is uniformity. Uniformity is not the way the Apostle Paul tells us the church is designed by Christ to function.

The Church Has a Function

This chapter illustrates the essence and function of the church. We learn that the church is held together through unity, as demonstrated through Paul’s teaching that we are a body controlled by one Head, Who is Christ. We also learn that the members of the church possess diversity through the different gifts bestowed upon them by the Holy Spirit. We are to live in unity without sacrificing our diversity. He does not mean theological or doctrinal diversity. Paul teaches that there is a sense in which we are to celebrate the diversity of the various members of our local church without injuring the supernatural unity of our church.

The church also functions with plurality, which means that the Holy Spirit uses all the members of a church to accomplish the work of Christ and proclaim the Word of Christ to this world. His work is not to be accomplished through the hands of one or two

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clergyman, but by all the members through the use of their spiritual gifts.

The members within the church also demonstrate empathy for one another, as Paul said: “If one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it” (26). And, finally, the members of the body of Christ function with equality. Though our gifts are different, they and the believers through whom they are exercised, are of equal value in the sight of God. For these reasons, the great leader of the New Testament Church, James, labeled the problem of social profiling as a sin (James 2:9). Though some gifted believers and their gift/ministry patterns are less prominent, they are equally valued by the Christ of the church. God composed the body this way “so that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.” (25)

The Gifts Are for Edification

First Corinthians 14 demonstrates what happens when a church elevates one gift above another, specifically the gift of tongues. Within the Corinthian church, those who spoke in tongues considered themselves superior to those who did not speak in tongues. They elevated tongues as the credential of Christian experience, rather than the role it truly serves as one of many spiritual gifts the Holy Spirit can bestow on a believer. A fair question regarding this gift or manifestation of the Holy Spirit is this

question: is speaking in tongues the Christian experience, or is it the experience of some Christians?

Three Problems of Gifted Churches

When the gifts of the Spirit are functioning within a church, they create problems. Many pastors would rather have the problems that come with these gifts than to have a perfect order without the spiritual life these gifts bring to a church. (A corpse has perfect order, but it is dead.) These problems begin with the problem of discrimination. Those who possess what they believe to be a superior ability or gift cluster, discriminate against those who do not possess their gift and ministry pattern. This discrimination leads to a depreciation on the part of those who do not have that particular spiritual gift/ministry pattern. Since believers tend to be insecure spiritually, those depreciated members will begin to doubt their spiritual worth. These under appreciated members will often leave the church and the third problem, which is division within the church, will surface.

Eventually, this division can grow to the point that the members will break from one another and form different groups that give them the affirmation they seek. There are two thousand shades and grades of the Protestant version of the body of Christ. If your body were divided into two thousand parts, could your body function well? These three problems of discrimination, depreciation and

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division have destroyed or seriously handicapped the body of Christ all over this world.

To keep the problem from escalating to this level, Paul confronted the Corinthians. He told those who were elevating the gift of tongues above all others that this gift was not a superior or a credential gift. Of all the gifts listed in chapter 12, the gift of tongues should be the last gift to use as a credential gift, because all the gifts of the Spirit are given to edify the other members of the church. The gift of tongues is a gift that, when used without an interpreter, does nothing to edify the body of Christ: “One who speaks in a tongue edifies himself; but one who prophesies edifies the church.” (4)

Paul contrasted the gift of tongues with the gift of prophecy to show that those who were elevating the gift of tongues did not truly understand their gift. They did not understand that spiritual gifts should be used to edify the body of believers. They were most likely proud of the “special prayer language” they shared with the Holy Spirit, which other members of the church did not enjoy. Though that language is pure and is given by the Holy Spirit, it should ultimately be used to edify the body of Christ through the use of another member of the church who has the gift of interpretation (I Corinthians 14:27,28).

Paul exhorted the Corinthians to use their diverse gifts for the benefit of the entire body: “What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done

for edification.” (26) In other words, our spiritual gifts are to be used for the edification of the body of Christ. They are given to promote our unity and to strengthen our diverse gifts and ministries.

By Application

What is your spiritual gift/ministry pattern? Have you discovered how the Holy Spirit has endowed, equipped, and encouraged you to use the gifts He has given you? How might you better serve the body of Christ with your giftedness? Whether your gifts are to teach, to discern, to give wisdom, to evangelize, to administrate, gifts of helps, gifts of mercy, gifts of healing, or any of the other gifts Paul described, the Holy Spirit has prepared you with the abilities you need to glorify God and edify His church. Study the listings in the Scriptures of more than twenty spiritual gifts and prayerfully consider that spiritual gifts inventory until the Holy Spirit and the other members of your church help you to discover your spiritual gifts. According to Paul, there is no such thing as an ungifted member of the body of Christ. Begin to use your gifts today, and watch the Lord multiply your efforts for His glory.

Chapter 7

What Is Love?

(Chapter Thirteen)

Paul addressed many problems in his first letter to the Corinthians and offered specific solutions to each of those problems. But he offered one solution that can be applied to every spiritual problem the Corinthians faced and every spiritual problem we may ever face in our own churches. That solution is love.

The greatest thing in the world

This great love chapter actually begins with the last verse of chapter 12: “But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And yet I show you a still more excellent way” (12:31). In chapter 12, Paul was discussing the function of the Holy Spirit, which is to bestow spiritual gifts on believers. In chapter 13, Paul showed that love is the greatest thing in the world: “If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.” (13:1–3)

Paul begins his great love chapter by comparing the value of love to that which was highly valued by the Corinthians. Since they

valued human eloquence and they considered the gift of speaking in tongues to be a credential gift, he states that if I speak in the tongues of men (human eloquence) and angels (speaking in tongues), and do not have love, I am only a lot of noise.

These intellectual Greeks valued learning and knowledge so Paul states that love is more important than knowing everything. As his charismatic church, the Corinthians valued prophecy and understanding the mysterious. Paul therefore declares that if I have the gift of prophecy and understand all the mysteries in the world and do not have love, I am nothing.

He also states that if I give all my money to feed the poor and give my body to be burned as a martyr and do not have love my charity and my martyrdom accomplish nothing. At the beginning of this letter, Paul acknowledged that these Corinthian believers were extremely gifted. (1:7) According to Paul, nothing we are, nothing we have in the way of giftedness, and nothing we do can replace the importance of love in our lives because love is the greatest thing in the world. Paul obviously agreed with the Apostle John that God is love. That is why love is the greatest thing in the world and that is why nothing I am, nothing I have, and nothing I do can ever replace the importance of love in my life.

There are several Greek words for love. The word Paul uses here is the word “agape”. Other Greek words express philanthropy or sexual love. This word is the word that is used to describe the way

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God loves us and the way we can love others when our love is what Paul described as the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22,23).

We cannot define this quality of love, but we can describe how this quality of love behaves. In verses four through seven, the concept of love is passed through the prism of Paul's Holy-Spirit inspired mind, and it comes out on the other side of that prism as a cluster of fifteen virtues: "Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love is Indestructible

According to this cluster of virtues, there are many observations we can make about agape love. The first one is that love is indestructible. It is patient and bears all things; it endures all things and outlasts everything. This love is tough. When we love someone with agape love, we can tell them that nothing they ever say or do will make us stop loving them, because we are loving them with the agape love of God, and God's love is tough. After all, this is the way God loves us. While we were living our sinful lifestyles, God showed us His love by sending His Son to die for us (see Romans 5:8). When we love people with the same kind of

indestructible love with which God loves us, we will love them with a tough love that is indestructible.

Unconditional Love

Love is also unconditional. It does not love someone based on what they do or do not do. This love is not based on performance. Human love is often the very opposite. We place conditional expectations on people to behave a certain way and give them our love only so long as they behave accordingly. That is the way most parents love their children and the way most husbands and wives love each other. But a person who is loved this way feels insecure. They never know if their performance will be acceptable. They worry that they will not meet our conditions and live up to our expectations. Even when they do, they cannot guarantee that they can continue to deliver that performance.

But agape love is not that way. It is unconditional. When we love unconditionally, we do not keep a record of wrongs done against us to prove that a person is no longer worthy of our love. When we love unconditionally, our love never fails and people never have to worry about whether or not we still love them. And, again, that is the way God loves us. Though we continue to fall short of His holiness, He separates our sins "as far as the east is from the west" (Psalm 103:12), never failing to forgive us and to forget our trespasses. His love for us is not based on what we do or how we perform, and that is the way we should love others.

Inspirational Love

Love is also inspirational. It believes all things and hopes all things, just as Christ loved the apostles. When Jesus met Peter, He called him Cephas, which means, “rock” (John 1:42). Though Peter’s life was characterized by instability, Jesus called him a rock for three years, and three years later said to him, “You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. (Matthew 16:18,19)

Try that love strategy on your children. Children usually live up to what we call them. If we call our children a failure, they will probably live up to our expectations. But, if we love our children with “agape” love, which believes in them and hopes for them, we will see our children reach and exceed our belief and our hopes for their full potential. While we are loving our children with this positive affirmation that believes in them and hopes for them, in this process our belief and hope becomes theirs. They come to believe in their potential and have an optimistic hope with which to face their future. That is what I mean when I say that agape love is inspirational.

Love Never Fails

After describing what love looks like, Paul returned to the subject of spiritual gifts. He showed that the spiritual gifts will never replace love because love will outlast everything: “If there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will

cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away.” (8b–10)

When Jesus Christ returns, we will no longer need prophecies. When we see Him face-to-face and know Him as He is, we will no longer need our limited human knowledge. All the gifts of the Spirit will someday pass away, but three qualities will last forever: “But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love.” (13)

Hope is the conviction God places in our hearts that there is something good in this life and we are going to find it. We also have the expectation that something good exists beyond this world. Hebrews 11 also describes this hope and links it to faith: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (1) This means that hope is a foundation of conviction God gives us that should lead us to faith. Faith builds on the foundation of hope and transitions hope into faith. Faith leads us to God. The faith chapter also tells us that we cannot come to God without faith, but with faith we can come to God (11:6).

The point Paul is making in the last verse of his love chapter is that hope brings us to faith, and faith brings us to God, but when we encounter agape love we have not found something that brings us to something that brings us to God. When we intersect agape love we are in the presence of God because, God is love. This quality of love is the essence of God. Paul therefore named love as the greatest

of the three lasting qualities in life and told us that the pursuit of agape love should be the magnificent obsession of our lives.

Chapter 8
The Resurrection of All Believers
(I Corinthians 15)

Chapter 15 is the resurrection chapter of the Bible. Resurrection is one of the spiritual things Paul presents to the Corinthians as part of his general solution to the many problems in their church. The Greek philosophers doubted most forms of supernatural phenomena. Although these Corinthian Greeks were believers, their cultural heritage continues to impact their thinking and their intellectual baggage caused them to doubt the supernatural, especially the resurrection of Christ and of the resurrection of deceased believers. If these Corinthians had not doubted and questioned resurrection, we would not have the masterpiece of Paul on the resurrection of Christ and of deceased believers, which is the Fifteenth Chapter of First Corinthians.

Paul reminded them that the resurrection of Jesus Christ was a vital part of the Gospel he preached and that they had believed: “Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the Gospel I preached to you, which you believed and on which you have taken your stand. By this

Gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.” (1- 4)

This was the Gospel that saved them and was the foundation of their entire belief system. Once the Apostle Paul mentions the resurrection of Christ as half of his Gospel message, he writes 54 verses on the subject of what we might call, “Applied Resurrection.” Paul declares that the resurrection of Christ could also be proved through the testimony of a host of witnesses: “He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time ... then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also.” (5–8)

The Corinthians struggled not only to believe in Christ’s resurrection, but also in the resurrection of all deceased believers when Jesus Christ returns. (Paul had obviously taught the Corinthians about the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.) Paul linked the resurrection of the believer to the resurrection of Christ, calling Christ’s resurrection the “first fruits” of those who will be raised (20). If we are not going to be resurrected, then Christ was not raised either and our faith has been made void (13–14). When Christ died on the cross, He bore the weight of our sins on Himself. But when He rose from the dead, He demonstrated His victory over death.

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Because of this, His resurrection is a necessary part of our faith. The resurrection of our own bodies is the application of the resurrection of Jesus Christ to our own death and resurrection.

The Corinthians wondered, “If we are going to be raised from the dead, then how is it going to happen and what will our bodies look like?” The intellectual premise of the intellectual Corinthians was that they did not believe in the resurrection of believers because they did not understand how it could happen. To address that mindset, Paul compared the resurrection of the dead to the planting of a seed: “That which you sow does not come to life unless it dies; and that which you sow, you do not sow the body which is to be, but a bare grain, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body just as He wished, and to each of the seeds a body of its own.” (36–38)

A seed in the ground becomes a beautiful flower, like an Easter Lilly, even though we do not understand how that happens. And the seed planted does not look like the flower that sprouts out of the ground. Just as God changes that seed into a plant, He will change our corruptible bodies into incorruptible bodies at the time of the resurrection: “It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body” (42–44).

God gives us an earthly body to live in this world and God must give us a heavenly body to live in heaven. Our corruptible flesh

and blood cannot enter the kingdom of heaven, so God must change our earthly bodies to equip us to live in the eternal, spiritual realm. This is what He will accomplish through our resurrection. Those who are still living at the time of Christ’s return must also experience this metamorphosis, and they will: “in the twinkling of an eye.” (52) The Greek words here are, “In an atomo”. As Paul spells out this change, he teaches that two problems must be resolved to prepare us for heaven. Our corruptible part (our body) must be made incorruptible and our mortal part must be made immortal. When those two miracles have been accomplished, we will be ready for heaven. The word, “Resurrection” literally means, “victory over death.” The resurrection of the deceased believers will resolve these two problems and will be the believer’s victory over death. That is why Paul concludes his resurrection masterpiece by declaring the death and resurrection of the believer to be a great victory! (54-57)

Paul applied his teaching on the resurrection to the believers by telling them to “be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.” (58) All the authors of Scripture tell us about the Second Coming of Jesus Christ because that event is the blessed hope of the church and the only hope of this world.

Make the observation that the prophets and apostles always tell why they are telling us about the Second Coming and all the related events that surround that blessed hope, like our resurrection. In the last verse of this resurrection chapter, Paul applies the Gospel

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of resurrection to motivate believers to do the work of the Lord. It is as if he is telling us that we are on the winning team and the quality of our eternity will be determined by the degree to which we were part of the victory.

Faithful Stewardship: (I Corinthians Sixteen)

Many believers feel let down when Paul lifts them to the heavenly Gospel realities of resurrection in chapter fifteen, only to say, “Now, concerning the collection.” We need to understand some things about this collection and we need to appreciate why Paul placed the issue of this collection where he did in this pastoral letter.

Paul finished his first letter to the Corinthians by asking them to contribute to a collection for the suffering Jewish believers in Jerusalem, who were suffering from a terrible famine and from severe persecution. He placed the subject of faithful stewardship in the constructive portion of his letter because stewardship is one of the “spiritual things” he told us about in the first verses of chapter twelve, when he began the constructive section of this letter. He also placed this subject where he did because faithful stewardship is one of the spiritual disciplines that determines the spiritual health and vitality of a believer.

This is also a beautiful insight into the reality that the Apostle Paul was one of those new creations he tells us about in his writings (II Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15). The grace of God, changing lives, is what the Gospel of Christ is all about. Paul was once the one

who was striking terror into the hearts of believers in Jerusalem and Judea (Acts 8:3; 9:1, 13,14). Now he is taking up a collection from Gentile believers he has led to Christ to help the suffering Jewish believers he once arrested, put in prison and put to death.

The Second Letter of Paul to the Corinthians

Chapter 9

The Credentials of a Minister

(II Corinthians 1-6)

Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians from Ephesus, and he sent it to them by the hand of Titus. Titus brought the letter to the Corinthians and stayed with them while he explained and defended the letter’s contents to those who were involved in the problems addressed in the letter. Meanwhile, Paul was forced to end his three-and-a-half-year stay in Ephesus because a riot broke out in response to his ministry in that city (Acts 19). Paul moved on to Troas and then to Philippi, where he waited for Titus to return with news from Corinth about how the Corinthians had responded to his first letter to them.

Much of the news was good. The Corinthians had treated Titus with love and cordiality, and all that Paul exhorted them to do in the first letter had been obeyed. But some of the news was not

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good. Some people in the church had begun to attack Paul's apostleship, others criticized his speaking abilities, and still others thought he was a bit out of his mind, or "beside himself." (2 Corinthians 5:13) Furthermore, many of them were offended that he hadn't come to visit them himself. But these critics never refuted any of the points Paul made in his letter because Paul's logic was irrefutable. Instead, they attacked Paul himself. And when Paul heard these things, he wrote this second letter.

The first six chapters of 2 Corinthians define the credentials of a minister, since that was the main issue those who attacked Paul held against him. They thought him unworthy of the role of apostle and therefore unqualified to correct them. Paul wrote this letter to defend his apostleship and role as a minister of the Gospel. We can therefore bring together important principles about the credentials of a minister from his words.

Those who are called into the pastoral ministry today are considered ministers of the Gospel. However, when Paul uses the word, "minister" he is not referring to a clergyman, but to the ministry to which every authentic disciple of Jesus is called.

The fourth chapter of Paul's letter to the Ephesians teaches that those who are called as evangelists, pastors, and teachers are given these gifts "for the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry." (12) (When believers were sanctified, or set apart to following Christ, Paul called them saints.) In other words, a pastor/teacher's job description is to equip what we call "the laymen"

to do "the work of the ministry." The work of the ministry is not only committed to a few professionals, like a pastoral staff, but to all the members of a local church. There is a sense in which all the members of a church are to be the ministers of their church.

The Training of the Minister

Paul describes how God trains us to be His ministers. One way He does this is through teaching us how to comfort others who are suffering. He does this by allowing us to suffer first: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." (1:3-4)

When we suffer, we are driven to God and we discover that He, Himself, can be the comfort we need in our times of suffering. By gaining comfort from the true Comforter, we are then equipped to comfort others in their suffering. Through our suffering, and our discovery, we become qualified ministers of comfort, credible witnesses to the comfort we found when we were suffering. An evangelist is one beggar telling another beggar where the bread is. A minister of comfort, as Paul defines is, one hurting heart telling another hurting heart where the Comfort is.

Once Paul described this qualification of a minister God can use, he defended the credibility of his ministry by telling the Corinthians about his sufferings in Lystra, where he had been

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brutally stoned and may have been dead:

“We do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our own affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead; who delivered us from so great a peril of death, and will deliver us, He on whom we have set our hope. And He will yet deliver us.” (8–10)

In a subtle way, Paul was verifying his authenticity as a minister of the faith. He opened his letter with a discussion of how suffering turns us to God and makes us qualified ministers of comfort, and then he showed how he was qualified to be a minister in that way. In Lystra, God permitted Paul to suffer beyond the point of endurance — to a point where he despaired even of life — so that he would learn to trust in God and not in himself. Once he learned not to trust in himself, he learned that only God can raise the dead, and that only God was able to deliver him from what must have been an awesome experience. Some believe Paul is telling us that he experienced death and resurrection when he was stoned in Lystra. Others believe he is using figurative language in these verses.

The Task of the Minister

What is the task of a minister? Paul answered that question: “Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in

every place. For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life.” (2:14–16)

According to Paul, as ministers of the Gospel we are like flowers, exuding a sweet fragrance of Christ wherever we go. This fragrance either draws others to salvation and eternal life or it turns them away and toward death. If they reject our fragrance, they also reject Christ, and their path leads toward death. But if they are attracted to Christ through the fragrance of Christ that we are, they find the salvation of Christ and eternal life.

The weight of such a responsibility prompted Paul to ask, “Who is sufficient for these things?” (16) We are not sufficient to be the difference between eternal life and eternal death for the people who intersect our lives, but God is: “Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God.” (3:5) It is through the Holy Spirit that lives are changed. We are merely vehicles through which God shares His fragrance; the fragrance flows from the Christ Who has changed and is changing our lives.

What Motivates the Motivator? (Chapter 5:13-6:1,2)

When Paul defended himself against the charge that he was out of his mind, or “beside himself,” he taught another task of the minister. In the Greek language, the accusation translates that Paul

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was “eccentric.” They were charging that Paul was operating from a different center than their own. Because these critical Corinthians were self-centered, Paul agreed with them that he was guilty as charged. He did operate from a center that was different from theirs. Christ was the Center around which the life of the Apostle Paul revolved. That is what he meant when he wrote: “If we are beside ourselves (eccentric), it is for God.” (13)

Paul’s defense for his “eccentricity” was that the love of Christ and the calling of his ministry were at the center of his life: “The love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf... We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: be reconciled to God.” (14–15, 20a)

The Three Absolutes of Paul

Paul based his actions on three absolutes: that Christ died for all, that all are lost, and that all must hear the Gospel message. With Christ and these three absolutes at the center of his motivation, he lived like a man who clearly was eccentric (18).

Levels of Relationship

In this passage, in addition to a window into the heart motivation of the Apostle Paul, we have a profile of three levels of

spiritual maturity. These levels describe our relationship to Christ in three ways: *by Christ*, *in Christ* and *for Christ*. *By Christ* represents everything we have in the way of salvation and spiritual blessings by Christ. *In Christ* represents our union in Him, as the source of everything we need to follow Him. These two words also represent our absolute surrender to all that is on His heart, like all those who are lost and must hear the Gospel of salvation. *For Christ* represents our motivation for living our lives by Christ and in Christ.

Chapter 10

The Transparency of a Minister

Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians is all about the ministry God wants every believer to experience. Paul told the Ephesians that we were “created in Christ Jesus for good works,” and that God determined before we came to salvation that we would walk in those good works (Ephesians 2:10). We were saved by grace, but we were created to do good works. In other words, God has a ministry for us and that ministry is one of the reasons He brought us to Himself and salvation. Though these works do not save us, they are the purpose, in this life span, of our salvation.

We have already learned from this study that all believers are ministers of the Gospel, created by God for good works, and that the

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purpose of our ministry is to reconcile all people to God. But in order to bring people to God, our lives must be characterized with an honest transparency. It must be clear to all that everything that is good in our life is because of the Christ Who has saved us and lives in us.

How Do We View Our Lives?

A minister's transparency begins with the way he views his own life. He regards himself as a mere vessel to be used by God: "We have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves... always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body." (4:7, 10)

We are little clay pots, but we carry about in these earthen vessels the priceless treasure of Jesus Christ. Our transparency makes that Treasure known to others. Even the cracks in our earthen vessels are part of our transparency because our Treasure is like a Light that shines out through these cracks, or the obvious evidences of our flawed humanity.

In order to accomplish this task, the Lord permits pressure to come against our clay pots. These pressures are the trials we endure for the sake of the Gospel. Paul often referred to his own trials in this letter in order to demonstrate how they were part of his training as a minister of the Gospel. Christ reveals Himself in our trials because His power enables us to endure them: "We are afflicted in

every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed." (4:8–9) When trials come upon us and we are able to withstand them, others will wonder what enables us to endure the trials. We can then share with them the priceless Treasure of Christ.

A Seminary of Suffering

Paul wrote that we prove ourselves to be ministers of God through our trials: "in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses, in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults (angry mobs), in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger" (6:4–5).

I call those adversities, "the storms". In order to reveal Himself, God permits His ministers to get caught in storms. He permits and even sometimes directs these pressures to come upon them.

He has a specific way that He desires His ministers to respond to this storm: "in purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness" (6). But how do we do that? Through the spiritual resources He provides for us: "in the Holy Spirit, in genuine love, in the Word of truth, in the power of God; by the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left" (6–7). Through these pressures and our Spirit-empowered response to them, we show Christ to the world as his authentic ministers.

In chapter five, Paul gave us a window into his motivations. In chapter eleven, he gives us an autobiographical window into his

own personal seminary of suffering: “In far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. (11:23b–27) Through these trials, and his response to them, Paul was able to prove himself a minister of the Gospel.

How do others know you are a minister of God? People desire to see how life in Christ is different than life without Him. Do they see the Treasure Who lives in your clay pot? The ministry of the Gospel is not about what Paul called, “dishonest manipulation of the Word of God.” (4:2) The authentic ministry is about the transparent witness of our lives - that we suffer for the cause of Christ but are able to withstand those sufferings through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. The life of the minister is to be the evidence of the Christ to those who are looking for the Savior.

Chapter 11

The Transcendence of a Minister

A Damascus Road Experience

It is impossible to understand the life of the Apostle Paul apart from the word, “experience.” Paul had a number of extraordinary experiences during his time on earth. Before his conversion to Christianity, he persecuted the church with a fearless zeal. With “tunnel vision” – obsessively focused on one thing only, as Saul of Tarsus, he committed himself to the destruction of the first generation of the church of Jesus Christ. But then he had an experience with Christ on the road to Damascus, where Christ spoke directly to him and blinded his eyes with a great flash of light (Acts 9). His Damascus Road experience changed the life of Saul of Tarsus forever!

An Arabian Desert Experience

Before Paul began his public ministry, he went to the desert of Arabia, and there he had another experience. In Arabia, he learned all he needed for ministry, choosing not to consult with men like the apostles, but only with the risen Christ, Himself (Galatians 1,2). Scholars are not agreed about how long Paul says he was with the risen Christ in the desert. Some say three years and others believe it could have been much longer. The apostles had three years with Jesus as their Teacher, and Paul claims he also had his years

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with Jesus teaching him in the desert wilderness of Arabia. This Arabian Desert experience prepared him to write half the New Testament and spread the Gospel to the entire world of his day.

A Heavenly Experience

Paul recorded a third experience in 2 Corinthians 12, where he tells us he was caught up to the third heaven. He did not give many details about his experience there, only saying that he heard “inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak.” (4) Paul shared this heavenly experience with the Corinthians to demonstrate his credentials as a minister of the Gospel. This experience convinced Paul that it is possible to live in the heavenly dimension while we are still living on earth. The minister living and moving and having his being in the heavenly dimension of life is what I mean by “the transcendence of the minister.”

A Heavenly Perspective

Paul’s experience in the third heaven left a permanent mark on his life. From then on, it was as though he always had one foot in heaven and one foot on earth. He spoke frequently of his desire to depart from earth to be with Christ, counting his life on earth as less valuable than the glory of being with Christ in heaven (Philippians 1:21–24).

This experience impacted the view of life he shared with others. When he wrote to the Ephesians, it is obvious that he wanted

them to keep heaven at the forefront of their minds, writing: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ” (Ephesians 1:3). He essentially wrote to the Corinthians that if in this life only we have hope in Christ, we should be pitied more than all men (I Corinthians 15:19).

A Humble Perspective

In the twelfth chapter of this letter, Paul gives us another autobiographical window into his life. He tells the Corinthians that he was given “a thorn in my flesh” which was “a messenger from Satan to hurt and bother me, and prick my pride.” (7) Scholars are not agreed about precisely what this thorn was. We know that he wrote to the Galatians that his eyes were so hideous to behold that the sight of his eyes nauseated them and that they would have given their eyes to Paul if they could have (Galatians 4:15).

In his Corinthian letters he speaks of chronic fatigue. He tells them that they considered his bodily presence to be weak and he reminds them that he was with them in great weakness (II Corinthians 10:10; I Corinthians 2:3). Since he wrote half the New Testament, planted churches all over the world of his day, and had many extraordinary experiences with the risen Christ, he tells us that God thought he might be proud. According to Paul, God permitted his “thorn in the flesh” to keep him humble.

Has God given you a thorn in the flesh? Do you face

limitations that make you think God cannot use you? Let the experience of Paul encourage you. God likes to use our weakness as a showcase in which He can exhibit His strength. He likes to use our disability as a showcase in which he exhibits His ability. God likes to demonstrate His adequacy in the showcase of our inadequacy. God will use your limitations to show you and others that it is not a matter of who or what we are, but a matter of Who and what He is. Serving God is not a matter of what we can do but of what He can do. Thank Him for being strong though you are weak. And allow Him to manifest that power in your life, as you have never experienced it before.

Chapter 12

The Grace of Giving

There is one more teaching of Paul in this second letter to the Corinthians we must focus as we conclude our survey of this profound letter. Before Paul was converted to Christianity, he was a zealous Pharisee who was dedicated to the preservation of the orthodox Jewish faith. Since he rejected Christ and saw the followers of Christ as a threat to the Jewish faith, he fiercely persecuted all the Jews who were disciples of Jesus Christ. After his conversion to Christ, his memories of the many believers like

Stephen he put in prison and to death must have caused him much guilt. These same Jewish disciples of Jesus in Jerusalem and Judea were suffering from persecution and a great famine. As we learned from the last chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul was filled with compassion for these Jewish believers and was collecting a love offering from his Gentile churches for them. The fact that this former prosecutor of Jews who followed Jesus Christ is now compassionately taking up an offering to help relieve their suffering is a witness to the miracle of the grace of God changing lives.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians about this love offering in 2 Corinthians 8–9, asking them to contribute to the offering out of the overflow of their hearts for their persecuted brethren. He shared with them about the giving practices of the Philippians, in whose city he was staying at the time he wrote this letter, because they were excellent examples of generosity and faithful stewardship. Paul’s missionary journeys were supported by the believers in Philippi, who were mature enough in their faith for Paul to know they were giving with the right motives and understanding of what faithful stewardship is all about. The Philippians had also given money to support the suffering saints in Jerusalem, which Paul recorded in this letter to the Corinthians:

“Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. For I testify that

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according to their ability, and beyond their ability, they gave of their own accord, begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, and this, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God. So we urged Titus that as he had previously made a beginning, so he would also complete in you this gracious work as well.

“Just as you abound in everything, in faith and utterance and knowledge and in all earnestness and in the love we inspired in you, see that you abound in this gracious work also.” (8:1–7)

Paul is holding up the stewardship of the Philippians as a model for the Corinthians. The Philippians were Paul’s favorite church and the Corinthian church was his most difficult church. As Paul profiles the faithful stewardship of the Philippians for the Corinthians, he gives us a masterpiece on the subject of faithful stewardship. Here is a brief summary of the stewardship patterns of the Philippian Church, which Paul made an inspired model for faithful stewardship when he made them part of his inspired second letter to the Corinthians.

The Quality of Faithful Stewardship

Paul said the Philippians “first gave themselves to the Lord and then to us by the will of God.” (5) Paul would not accept offerings from anyone unless they met this prerequisite. They needed to give themselves to God before they gave any part of

themselves to men. The Philippians had given themselves to Paul only after God had confirmed that it was in keeping with His will that they do so.

Furthermore, the Philippians gave out of their own volition, pleading for the privilege of partnership in this ministry to these suffering Jewish disciples of Jesus. This is another important aspect to the quality of our giving. Paul would never coerce or manipulate people to participate in this offering because he wanted them to give of their own accord. As he writes in the next chapter: “Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” (9:7)

The Ability Involved in Faithful Stewardship

Paul said the Philippians gave generously, “according to their ability, and *beyond their ability*.” (8:3) We know that they were not wealthy because Paul also said that they were in “deep poverty.” (2) When someone gives generously, we often assume that they are wealthy. It seems that it would be easier for a wealthy person to give out of their abundance. But this was not the case with the Philippians. They were giving in a time of extreme poverty and severe trial — and they were giving beyond their ability to give.

How is it possible for a believer to give beyond their ability to give? By allowing the grace of God to add to their gift. When we decide how much we know we can give to the work of the Lord but then ask God to add His grace to that gift, we are able to watch God

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work through our faith. By His grace, He can multiply what we offer Him in faith.

The Philippians, in their poverty, offered their small gift to God and watched it grow as God's grace turned it into a gift that was beyond their own ability to give. This is what Paul meant when he said, "We wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given to the churches of Macedonia." (1) Here, the Greek word for grace is "charis", or "charisma", which means the power and blessings of God upon a person's life. It is the grace of God that makes it possible for us to give beyond our human abilities. This is what is meant by the grace of giving.

The Equality of Faithful Stewardship

When Paul invited the Corinthians to share in his love offering for the suffering believers in Jerusalem and Judea, he wrote: "This is not for the ease of others and for your affliction, but by way of equality — at this present time your abundance being a supply for their need, so that their abundance also may become a supply for your need, that there may be equality; as it is written, 'He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little had no lack.'" (8:13–15)

Giving should be relative to what a believer has, not what a believer does not have. God can make use of a gift in direct proportion to the sacrifice that was made to give it. When we give what we have in faith, even if it is difficult and we do not have much

to give, God can multiply it in mysterious ways so that it is worth just as much as the large gift a rich man gives that involves very little sacrifice. The fruit of the gift is not dependent upon the amount given but on the sacrifice and faith it took to give it.

This was the point made by Jesus when He said that the poor widow who gave a very small gift actually gave more than those who were able to give generously because she gave that upon which her sustenance depended. (Luke 21:1-4)

What about you? Do you recognize that all you have belongs to God and that He asks you to be a good steward of it? Are you giving cheerfully to the work of God? Are you giving sacrificially? Be faithful with what you have and God will use it to bless the kingdom of God — that is His promise.