

First Corinthians

INTRODUCTION AND LESSON ONE

INTRODUCTION

Emphasis of this series

The Epistles of 1 & 2 Corinthians are long, and they touch on many topics. In both epistles, however, unity is found among the various topics in the overriding theme of "values," or "what really matters." You could even characterize the main concern as "what does it mean to be spiritual?" Paul had to correct the Corinthian Christians' thinking on many points, but primarily because of some immature and unbiblical notions about God and what it means to be a spiritual person.

In this series on 1 Corinthians we will study selected passages rather than attempt an overview of the whole book. With this approach, however, we will discover connections to all the major problems Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians.

Paul's correspondence with the church in Corinth

Paul founded the church in Corinth during his ministry of eighteen months from 50 to 52 A.D. (Acts 18:1-18). In subsequent years, as Paul ministered in Ephesus and other places, he continued to provide guidance to the church in Corinth through his letters and personal emissaries, and through personal visits. In fact Paul wrote them more than the two long epistles we have in the NT. In 1 Cor. 5:9 he refers to an earlier letter (before 1 Cor., probably 55 A.D.), and in 2 Cor. 2:4 and 7:8 he mentions a sorrowful letter which seems not to be 1 Corinthians but another letter (now lost). Altogether, then, he wrote them at least four epistles and was personally present in the city on three distinct occasions (2 Cor. 13:1). This church, vibrant though it was, required a lot of his attention! To understand why, it helps to know something about the city itself.

What kind of place was Corinth?

After destroying an earlier city on the site, the Romans (under Julius Caesar) rebuilt Corinth as a Roman colony. Being a colony meant citizens of Corinth were legally citizens of Rome itself, a distinction and privilege beyond being part of the Empire. By an advantageous location, Corinth was also a prosperous center of trade, which meant many different kinds of people came to live there, including many Jews. In Paul's day the population was probably 500-700 thousand, although the majority would have been slaves.

Corinth "enjoyed" the reputation in the Roman Empire of being morally lax, especially with regard to sex. The expression used in the Empire for "loose living" was "to Corinthianize," or "to live like a Corinthian." A "legitimate" aspect of the sexual life of the city was the temple of Aphrodite, where hundreds of female slaves served as prostitutes in the perverted worship of the goddess of love. Sexual promiscuity was prominent and pervasive in the city's culture and commerce.

Alongside its reputation for sexual excess, Corinth also was regarded in other parts of the Empire as excessively proud of its intellectual life. People in Athens probably led the way in scoffing at this pretentious Corinthian attitude. In Paul's day, however, Corinth was actually more important than Athens because of its wealth.

Issues in the church

The cultural issues in the Corinthian environment were challenges for the new Christians in making personal moral decisions. We will see the impact of this in several ways in the following lessons. For this series, however, we want to see with a more corporate focus—how the church as a body was affected by the clashing values of their city. How *individuals* in the church respond to God *is* how the church responds to God, but individuals learn how to respond to God principally from their corporate involvement with the church in prayer and worship.

Note that Scripture quotations in this series are from either the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) or the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise indicated. Both translations are quite similar to the Revised Standard Version, and are similar to one another in most respects.

LESSON ONE

Who is the greatest?

1 Corinthians 1

1:2 Addressing the Christians in Corinth

Notice how Paul addresses the church as "those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints." The church's calling (individually and corporately) is to be holy in our relationships to God, to one another, and to the world. But the power for holiness (sanctification) is not in us (individually or corporately); it is "in Christ." To be true to our calling (to be saints), we have only one resource: Christ himself.

This has important implications for daily life and its challenges, but also for our worship, as we offer ourselves to God in prayer and praise. Can we offer ourselves as living sacrifices, "holy and acceptable to God" (Rom. 12:1)? Only in Christ, for only there are we sanctified. Our very approach to God in worship depends on Christ—his sacrifice for us and our union with him.

1:4ff. Paul's thanksgiving

Paul is grateful for God's grace, for that is the basis for our salvation (see Eph. 2:8-10). But in this context Paul is primarily thinking of the ongoing gracious activity of God in gifting the Corinthian believers in various ways. It is helpful to point out that the Greek word for "grace" (vs. 4) is *charis*. This is the basis for the expression "spiritual gift" in vs. 7—*charismata*, from which we get the word "charismatic," referring to supernatural empowerment by the Holy Spirit. The same disposition and free action of God on which we depend for salvation (grace/*charis*) is the disposition and action of God on which we depend for supernatural manifestations in the life and ministry of the church. It is all

grace and always grace, not human achievement or talent, which does God's work in us and through us.

It is by God's grace that the Corinthian Christians were so richly inspired in "all speech and all knowledge" (vs. 5) and other spiritual gifts (vs. 7). Paul is sincerely grateful for this, although later he has to address the proper function of these gifts at length. Perhaps Paul mentions these gifts so early, as part of his greeting, precisely because he knows this is a point of pride in the church. He rightly commends them for their zeal for spiritual gifts, but he will give them extensive, corrective guidance later.

1:10ff. Divisions in the church

The first order of business after his greeting is the problem of divisions within the church. In stark contrast to their rich endowment with spiritual gifts is their poverty of loyalty to the same Lord. Not that the Corinthian Christians did not revere Jesus as Lord and Savior; they all did that, certainly. But at the same time they placed too much value on their attachments to their favorite teachers and preachers. The party loyalties detracted from their ultimate loyalty to Christ, as evidenced by their lack of loyalty to one another. As Paul points out by way of a question (vs. 13), Jesus Christ was the only one who had given his life to save them. There can be no real competition for loyalty to him.

1:12 Divided loyalties

The young church in Corinth had been blessed with the ministries of some powerful men of God. The Apostle Paul founded the church (Acts 18:1-11), but later Apollos preached and taught there (1 Cor. 3:5-10). Apollos was known to be a mighty and persuasive speaker (Acts 18:24-28), and some in Corinth preferred his style of ministry over Paul's and made no secret of it (1 Cor. 1:12). Others professed loyalty to Paul, while others claimed "Cephas" (Peter) as their champion. Another group (perhaps claiming to be more spiritual than all the rest) said they belonged to Christ (in distinction from the other groups).

"Has Christ been divided?" (vs. 13) The obvious answer should be "no," although the effect of the divisions among the church would indicate otherwise. The divisions were based on divided loyalties. It is not wrong to have a favorite preacher any more than it is to have a favorite singer, but partisan feelings for human leaders of worship should not detract from the one proper object of worship—God alone. Being willing to hear the Word of God from Paul but not from Apollos is ultimately refusal to let God be God, since (in effect) it says, "Let Paul be God (for me, anyway)." The attitude that "God can speak to me through Paul but not through Apollos" puts a limitation on God. The same could be said of other leaders of worship (choir directors, musicians, etc.). When we put the focus on the human leader rather on God we are in error. (Granted, human leaders can be tempted to get attention for themselves rather than help people give attention to God. We need to be careful about judging the motives of others, however. Our distraction may not be the fault of the leader but rather our own human preference for how things ought to be.)

Paul was not crucified for us and should not be our ultimate allegiance. Even if others value Apollos more than we do, as long as we see ourselves—with Paul, Apollos, and everyone else—as people for whom Christ died, we will see our relationships clearly. We will see our relationship with God in that light; we will see our relationship with human leaders in that light. Paul needed Jesus' death just as much as I did! Not less, not more, but just as much. How can I put Paul (or any other leader, past or present) on a pedestal, when their sins (with mine) helped put Jesus on the cross? As it has been often said, "The ground is level at the foot of the cross."

Likewise the rite of baptism does not identify us so much with the human who administered it as it identifies us with the Savior whose death and resurrection brought us life (vs. 13; see also Rom. 6). Paul is glad (vss. 14-16) that not many in the church could claim Paul baptized them, lest they use that as a point of boasting against fellow believers who had been baptized by someone else.

Paul's questions in verse 13 would seem to be enough to make his point and to shame the Christians in Corinth into more mature behavior. But Paul sees something even more important at stake than just the Corinthians' immaturity. The gospel message itself is being undermined by party strife in the church.

1:17 Power in the cross

1:17--"For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power" (NRSV).

Christian baptism is not a declaration about the greatness of the person doing the baptizing, nor about the goodness of the person being baptized. Christian baptism is not even a statement about how great the church is, and how smart people are to identify with it. Making a confession of faith or joining the church is not an admission or claim that wisdom resides in the church or that people who know what's good for them will join the church. To put the emphasis on any of these is to miss the main point of the gospel, which is the act of God by which he saves us.

God's act to save us is the cross of Jesus Christ. That alone has the power to save us. If we put the emphasis elsewhere in identifying and describing the church or Christian belief, we miss the power. We cannot actually empty the cross of its power, but *it is empty for us if we are looking elsewhere* for the power to give life or to make life what it needs to be. This point is so important that Paul spends the rest of this chapter developing it.

1:18-31 Salvation by reception of God's act in the cross

1:18--"For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

If salvation is by wisdom, the smart have the advantage. If it is by human power, then the strong have the advantage. But if it is by God's power, then the receptive can be saved. If salvation depends on how smart or strong people are, then we compete with one

another for who is the smartest or the strongest. If salvation depends on God's strength and wisdom (demonstrated in the cross of Jesus), then everyone equally can *receive* (rather than compete).

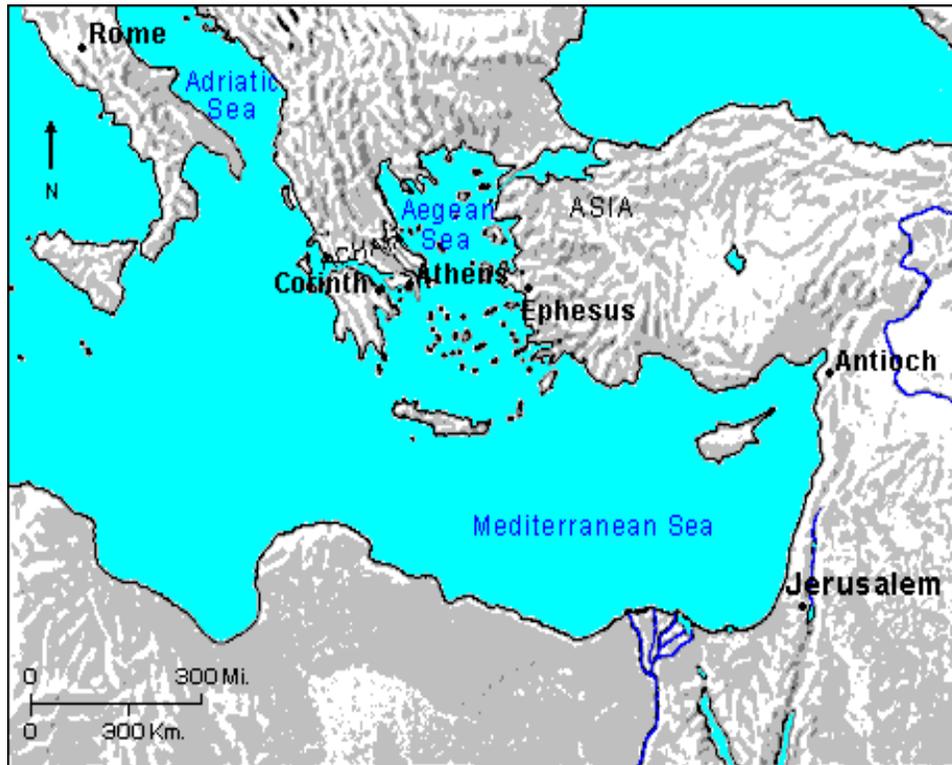
Seeing salvation (or spirituality) as competition denies the message of the cross, which says that salvation is by reception, not competition (i.e., by grace through faith, not by works). Claiming that our Christian group is more deserving of salvation than another Christian group is implicitly a denial of salvation by the cross. Likewise, to imagine that I am personally more worthy of God's attention than a fellow Christian is to deny that I needed the cross, or at least to deny that I needed grace as much as you did!

Salvation is not by competition among humans to see who can be the best; salvation is by God's gift, given equally to all who will receive it as a gift. The Corinthians, Paul says, should realize this by reflecting on the composition of their own fellowship. "Not many" were what the world would call "wise" (vs. 26). Nor could they claim to be powerful or "noble." The very fact that God had graciously chosen them (of all people!) should show that the kingdom of God is not based on human merit, either of strength or knowledge (vs. 27). Paul says that God's reason for this is "so that no human being might boast in the presence of God" (1:29, ESV).

We are not the source of our salvation (by our spiritual "smarts" or accomplishments); God is our source (1:30). God is the One who gives us life, and who gives us the wisdom and righteousness that we need when he gives us Jesus Christ.

What this means for worship is this: when we worship we praise God; we do not sing our own praises! We do not tell God how blessed he is to have us as his people, but how blessed we are to have him as our God. We do not sing, "how great we are!" but "How Great Thou Art!" As Paul concludes this chapter: "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord" (1:31; see also Jere. 9:23-24; Luke 18:9-14).

Map from WordSearch Bible Study Software.



First Corinthians

LESSON TWO

What makes you so spiritual?

1 Corinthians 2

The kinds of church divisions Paul identified in chapter one arise principally from human pride of a particular sort. There are varieties and degrees of pride—some positive, some not. It is good, for example, to have a certain amount of “family pride.” Being glad to be identified with your family can serve as positive motivation in your behavior. Wouldn't it be good for everyone to feel positive about their family heritage? On the other hand, family pride can be a negative force if it causes us to hold others in contempt or to treat them as less worthy of respect.

You might think Christians would share a positive family pride, since we all have the same Father (see Eph. 4:4-6). Unfortunately we can take such pride in our particular “branch” of the family that we can disrespect others with the same family name (“Christian”). For better and for worse, “denominational pride” is not as strong as it once was. Fewer people care, for instance, whether they are Baptist or Methodist or Assembly of God, although some still feel strongly about these identities. Mostly today people identify with their local church, rather than the denomination.

Spiritual pride can be a negative factor in comparing one denomination with another or in comparing one congregation with another. But probably more than anywhere else we encounter spiritual pride in one Christian being compared with another (it can obviously be a problem in comparing ourselves with non-Christians, too). In the earliest years of the church's existence in Corinth, before there were different denominations to compare with one another, and before there were even separate congregations to compare, Christians were comparing themselves to others in the same church and boasting about their differences.

Their divisions and their boasting, Paul says, prove they are not as spiritual as they think they are (1 Cor. 3:1-4). Making “spiritual” boasts about something so unspiritual shows they do not really understand what it means to be “spiritual.”

2:1-4 Paul's gospel focus

When Paul first brought the gospel to Corinth, he reminds them, he did not put the focus on eloquence of speech. He wasn't trying to convince the Corinthians he was smarter than other teachers, so that they would hang on his every word. No, Paul says, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (2:2, ESV). Paul had no interest in winning regard for himself as particularly powerful, either: “I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling” (vs. 3). Paul wanted them to be impressed and convinced, but not with his person or power. He wanted them to be persuaded only by the “demonstration of the Spirit and of power” (vs. 4). He wanted the end result to be that their “faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (vs. 5). Faith is only as good as that which is being trusted.

In this paragraph Paul does not specify what he means by the “demonstration of the Spirit and of power,” but he has already indicated that God’s power is “the word of the cross” (1:18). The message about the cross of Jesus is God’s power to change our lives, because that is the message about what God has done to save us (see also Rom. 1:16-17). The message of the cross strips us of all wrong pride, because it shows us how desperate we were, how lost and helpless when left to our own resources. The message of the cross strips us of wrongheaded pride, but in its place it gives us genuine hope for full and lasting victory over sin and death.

So Paul’s preaching to the Corinthians had not been about how they could help themselves be better, stronger, wiser, or wealthier. His message had been about the cross of Jesus and the power of God to lift up any soul who clings to the cross. Paul had not focused their attention on some formula such as “ten steps to become a more fulfilled and powerful person.” He had focused their attention on the cross.

2:6-8 Two kinds of wisdom

Although Paul contrasts his message of the cross with the wisdom of the world, he admits that there is nevertheless wisdom in his message. You can see that some of Paul's references to "wisdom" are positive (1:24, 30; 2:6), while others are negative (1:19-20, 22). Sometimes even within one verse we find the word "wisdom" used with both senses (1:21). Obviously there is *God's wisdom* (true wisdom), and there is *human wisdom* (what passes for wisdom among humans). They are not the same, and humans are not truly wise unless we yield to God's wisdom.

The desire to be *autonomously* wise (wise for ourselves, not needing God) got us into trouble in the beginning (Gen. 3:6). The Bible warns us repeatedly against wanting to be self-sufficiently wise, and we are told that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 9:10), which means we cannot be wise without proper respect for God. Proper respect for God must include acknowledgement that he is the only Source for our very lives, as well as the only reliable Source for the wisdom we need.

One way to think of the contrast between the two kinds of "wisdom" referred to by Paul is to think in terms of orientation or outlook. Living by worldly wisdom involves orientation to humans (ourselves or others) as the source(s) for life and the things to make life "good." Godly wisdom means looking to God as the Source of life, and as the One who finally decides whether our lives have been good. Depending on which wisdom we live by, we direct our orientation, our openness, and our obedience to one or the other—the human agenda of autonomy (independence from God) or the divine agenda (God's kingdom).

The wisdom of God is so different from the world’s wisdom that it appears to be foolishness to many; it is power so different from the world’s that it appears to be weakness (1:22-25). The wisdom of God is the power and wisdom of the cross.

This wisdom of the cross is God's wisdom, so eternal and transcendent that "the rulers of this age" cannot understand it. The rulers (i.e., the powers) of this age have shown that they did not understand God's wisdom, for they opposed it when they "crucified the Lord of glory" (vss. 6-8). They can oppose it, and they have done so, but they cannot defeat it. That is demonstrated by the fact that "the Lord of glory," whom they crucified, has been raised from the dead. The cross, where the rulers of this age appeared to win, was actually where they were defeated (see also Col. 2:14-15). Acting in what they thought was their own best interest, the rulers of this age collaborated in their own destruction.

In contrast, this wisdom of the cross is understood by the truly "mature" or "perfect" Christian (2:6). That the Corinthians have not fully understood this wisdom is evidence of their own immaturity (3:1). Paul wants us to see this: the triumph of God's wisdom over "the rulers of this age" shows it is foolish to boast about worldly wisdom or earthly power, since these "are doomed to pass away" (vs. 6). In contrast, we are invited to invest our boasting in God's wisdom, "which God decreed before the ages for our glory." God's wisdom is older and will take us infinitely further than the best wisdom or power the world can offer!

This older and more powerful wisdom of God, the wisdom of the cross, is so far beyond the greatest wisdom and powers of this age that humans cannot even discover it. Our inability to discover it does not mean, however, that we have to remain ignorant of it. What we cannot *discover*, through human ingenuity, we can *receive* through God's gift of his Spirit.

2:9-16 Spiritual wisdom for spiritual persons

What we could not figure out for ourselves God has revealed through his Spirit. Even our best, most creative imagination could not have guessed "what God has prepared for those who love him" (vs. 9). There is a way to know what God has prepared for us (at least enough to keep us going), but it is not through relying solely on our observations and imaginations (vs. 9). We have to rely on God's Spirit, by relying on the Words by which God's Spirit has revealed his plan and his wisdom (vs. 10).

None but God's own Spirit could know the things of God. Thus, knowledge of God's thoughts must always be treated as a gift, as God's grace. Our knowledge of God's will and ways is not our achievement, even when we have worked hard at studying the Bible, for the Bible could never have been written except as a gracious gift of God. The fact that we have Scripture available to us is a gift, as is the availability of competent and faithful teachers. Even more basic, however, is the necessity for God personally to be present in our lives, helping us to understand. If we have multiple translations, or even read the Bible in the original languages, and have the best of teachers available—all of these things are not enough to give us true understanding of God's wisdom if we lack the Holy Spirit in our own lives.

To illustrate the necessity of God's Spirit being present to enable our understanding of God's ways, Paul compares it to the knowledge available to the human spirit. Who really knows what is inside a person except "the spirit of that person"? (vs. 11) You can't really

be sure "what's going on" inside someone else unless they "open up" to you. We may guess what someone is thinking or feeling, but especially if that person is trying to conceal his or her thoughts and motives, we cannot know for sure. If that is true for knowing what is on the heart of another human being, how much more should we see the necessity of letting God give his Spirit to us, so "that we might understand the things freely given us by God" (vs. 12, ESV). Truly to grasp God's gifts, we must receive his presence.

Verse 13 indicates that the same Spirit who reveals the things of God (vs. 10) enables Paul and the other writers of Scripture to put those things into words so that others can receive the message. The writers of Holy Scripture needed more than the words of "human wisdom" to talk accurately and adequately about the wisdom of God; they needed words "taught by the Spirit" (vs. 13).

It is one thing, for example, for Isaiah to see a vision of God in the temple (Isa. 6); it is another thing for Isaiah to use the right words to tell us what God says. Technically speaking, Isaiah received a *revelation* in the temple; when he wrote about it, he needed the *inspiration* of the Spirit to guide his words. Taking this one step further, we need the Spirit's *illumination* when we read the inspired record of revelation.

When Paul refers here in 1 Cor. 2 to "spiritual" persons, he means those who are illuminated by the Holy Spirit in their understanding of spiritual things. He contrasts these "spiritual" persons with "natural" persons, i.e., people who do not have or do not heed the Spirit of God (vss. 14-15). This passage can sound very mysterious and mystical, but Paul is essentially identifying two different perspectives, based on the two kinds of wisdom discussed above.

In 1 Cor. 2:14-15, Paul says the "natural person" (or "the man without the Spirit," NIV) does not receive or accept the things of God, because they are discerned "spiritually." On the other hand, the "spiritual person" examines, judges, or discerns "all things." Are these two separate kinds of people? If so, we might ask why some believers seem not to understand "all things"? On the other hand, it seems Paul is not talking about two kinds of people but rather *two perspectives*, two different ways of looking at things. In that case, we can understand why our knowledge (even for the most mature believers) is still partial. Until we are more spiritual in our outlook, our knowledge will remain, to some extent, "natural" rather than "spiritual."

Reading on into 1 Cor. 3, we note Paul's complaint that he was not able to speak to the Corinthians as "spiritual" people because of their immaturity and unspiritual ("fleshly") attitudes. He does not accuse them of being devoid of the Spirit of God; in fact, he has already affirmed their zeal for manifestations of the Spirit (1:7; see also 12:13 and Rom. 8:9, where Paul affirms that all Christians have God's Spirit). Their problem is not in lacking the Spirit but in acting and thinking in ways inconsistent with the Spirit. They were not totally "unspiritual," for then they would not be believers. But neither were they as "spiritual" as they thought, for their immaturity and party divisions betrayed their natural/unspiritual ways of looking at things. A person can be indwelt by God's Spirit

and still rely on human resources (out of ignorance, arrogance, fear, or some other human trait).

To be a spiritual person depends on the presence and work of the Spirit, which is God's gift to every believer (Rom. 8:9). But being spiritual also depends on a person's commitment to obey God and to please him rather than oneself. The *presence* of the Holy Spirit is a matter of "either/or": either the Spirit is present or he is not; either one is a Christian or one is not. The work of the Spirit and *our responsiveness* to him, however, can be a matter of "more-or-less": the Spirit's freedom in us and our obedience are mutually related; his expression in my life is to some extent contingent on my obedience, which may be partial.

Thus the distinction between the "natural person" and the "spiritual person" is not an absolute distinction in our present experience. Those who have the Spirit of God still have to be instructed and exhorted to spiritual attitudes and behavior; those with the Spirit do not automatically act in accord with the Spirit and may need to be rebuked for unspiritual behavior. Otherwise, Paul did not need to write 1 Corinthians!

The distinction between the natural and the spiritual in 1 Cor. 2 is not so much a distinction between two kinds of people living in this world as it is a distinction between two kinds of perspectives. These two perspectives—the natural and the spiritual—are totally different in themselves, but they may be imperfectly held, inconsistently used, and even mixed in the same person. One area of a person's understanding may be informed by the Spirit, even while he or she resists or lacks the Spirit's perspective in another area. You may be relying on God in one aspect of life, and trusting only yourself in another. Whenever (and to whatever extent) we rely on our own judgement rather than God's Word, we act as "natural" persons (i.e., as though we did not need God's Spirit). Whenever we let God's Word be our standard and God's Spirit be our strength, we act as "spiritual" persons (as though we were created and redeemed for life only in fellowship with God—which we are!).

Another way to approach this whole issue is to ask: *What* does the spiritual man understand that the natural man does not? From the near context in 1 Cor. 2 we find the answer is "the things of God." When we look more carefully at the context of the opening chapters of the epistle, we see that the heart of "the things of God" is "Christ crucified"—God's power, wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption (1 Cor. 1:18, 23-24, 30; 2:1-2). Through their petty divisions and competitiveness within the church, the Corinthians have demonstrated their failure to understand the centrality and adequacy of "Christ crucified," thus prompting Paul's emphasis and rebuke. Their distraction from "Christ crucified" for the sake of superficial matters and "fleshly" competition among themselves shows that they are not as spiritual as they believe they are (1 Cor. 3; cf. Paul's own focus in Phil. 3:10-11).

What the spiritual man knows which the natural man cannot know is this: "Christ crucified" (and the implications of Christ crucified). The natural man cannot embrace this message because it means death to the natural man, death to that perspective which

imagines self-sufficiency and practices self-centrality. For a person to embrace the message of the cross is to die to self and die to sin, to die to life as the "natural man." As Paul emphatically teaches elsewhere, Christ's death is my death, too (Gal. 2:20; 2 Cor. 5:14-17; Rom. 6:3; see also Lk. 9:23). The gospel is not simply about Christ's death; it is about my death with him—death to sin and self in order to live for God; death to the natural man in order to live as a spiritual man. For the natural man to embrace this message means death; for the spiritual man it means life, fellowship with God in the Spirit. To move from "natural" to "spiritual," then, means to embrace the cross of Christ as my own and to live no longer for myself or my purposes but for him "who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20).

Becoming a spiritual person does require a decision and a continuing commitment, but it is not the decision to start receiving secret messages from God. Rather it is the decision to believe and embrace what God has already said and to apply that to oneself. The spiritual man or woman may hear other words from God, as Paul discusses in 1 Cor. 12 and 14, but if one does not hear the word of the cross as God's word about himself or herself, that person is not a spiritual person. Indeed, being spiritual is not so much an *ability* to hear God speak as it is a *willingness* to hear what God has already said in the cross of Christ. Willingness to hear that word will produce an appropriate willingness to hear anything else that God might say—through the rest of scriptural teaching, through another Christian, or through a manifestation of the Spirit's gifts to the church. Knowing how to listen to God in these and other ways is important and part of what every Christian needs to learn; but more necessary than techniques for listening is the will to listen.

God can impart knowledge to us supernaturally (as through words of knowledge and prophecy, 1 Cor. 12, 14). But the context most conducive to valid instances of these manifestations is a fundamental commitment of the will. The necessary commitment is gauged more by responsiveness to what God has already said than by one's claims to be waiting to hear God's voice. In practical terms, this means we approach God in praise or prayer with openness and obedience to what he has already said (in Scripture). We also want to be open to what he might want to speak to us individually or corporately through the Spirit right now. Failure to hear a "fresh word" from God doesn't mean worship hasn't happened. Refusal to hear an "ancient word" from God means worship has been avoided.

Paul's final words in this chapter provide a useful conclusion to this discussion of what it means to be spiritual: "But we have the mind of Christ" (vs. 16). Obviously the apostle does not mean we know everything the glorified Christ knows (cf. 1 Cor. 13:9). What Paul means is that we think like Christ thinks; our attitude is like his. If not, we are out of step, but he is our resource for getting back into harmony with the will of God, or growing in our obedience. Because we have received the Spirit from God, we can learn to say along with Jesus—the most truly spiritual man ever—the prayer that will make us more spiritual: "Father, thy will be done." (Cf. the Lord's Prayer and Matt. 26:39.)

First Corinthians

LESSON THREE

From immaturity to true spirituality 1 Corinthians 3, 4 (and 6)

Paul began his letter to the church in Corinth with words of appreciation and encouragement (1:4-9). Very quickly, however, he moved to address the issue of divisions within the church (1:10ff.), and he spent much of the first four chapters focused on this problem. Later he will deal with other problems in the church, including toleration of immorality (ch. 5), lawsuits between church members (ch. 6), abuses of the Lord's Table (ch. 11), and misuse of spiritual gifts (chs. 12, 14). Each of these would be sufficiently serious to warrant a letter from Paul, but he starts with the problem of divisions within the church. He starts here because the pride which produced the divisions was really the root of the other problems as well.

As discussed in the previous lesson, the Corinthians' misplaced pride depended in large part on a misunderstanding of what it means to be spiritual. Paul sought to correct their understanding by defining true wisdom in reference to the cross of Jesus (1:18—2:16). He is still dealing with this topic in ch. 3, where he flatly tells them that they are not as mature as they think they are.

3:1-4 Immaturity of the would-be “spiritual”

Paul does not say that he chose not to address them as “spiritual”; he says he “could not.” Just as you wouldn't try to feed a two-month old child a piece of steak, so he could not treat them as mature when it was so evident they were not. Probably the Corinthians were somewhat insulted by this comment, but it was important for them to be corrected, even though it hurt their pride.

Their basic problem is that they are looking in the wrong direction. They are not behaving as “spiritual” people (although they have the capacity, since they have received the Spirit); they are behaving as “carnal” people (KJV). Their perspective is “of the flesh,” evaluating and comparing according to merely human ways of measuring worth. Some like Paul's style better; others prefer Apollos. There's nothing wrong as such with *identifying what* you like; the problem comes with *identifying with what you like*: “I belong to Paul” (NRSV), or “I follow Apollos” (ESV, vs. 4). When you link your own identity with one teacher/preacher, you exclude others (and those who are identified with those leaders). This is also a potential problem with different styles of worship.

If I am to be truly mature in Christ, I can still have my tastes for certain styles of worship (liturgical or informal, traditional or contemporary, etc.), but I cannot insist that my group's preferences define what it means to belong to Jesus. If I have difficulty worshipping in a particular style, I may just have to admit it and perhaps learn to live with it. What I cannot do (if I want to be mature) is deny that those who prefer another style are really worshipping. I can't say, for example, that true worship must be informal (or

formal). I can't say that true worship must use traditional hymns (or contemporary music).

There will always be different preferences based on one's culture and personal tastes. To elevate a particular *style* of worship to be the *standard* for everyone is to allow style to rule over substance. The most important issue is not *how* the worship is being done but *who* is being worshiped. [Paul will address certain matters of *how* later, in chs. 10-14. I don't mean to imply that style is totally insignificant, merely that it cannot be made all-important.]

3:5-9 What is Paul anyway?

Although we should honor spiritual leaders who have blessed our lives, we cannot identify with them more than we identify with Jesus, or even as much. If I identify with John Wesley, for example, so much that I can't have Christian fellowship with Baptists or Presbyterians, then I have put God's servant on too high a pedestal. All who belong to Jesus belong to him equally. All who belong to Jesus belong to all others who belong to Jesus. I cannot build a church from which other true Christians can be (rightly) excluded.

So, if you belong to Jesus and I belong to Jesus, we belong to one another. John Wesley belongs to the Baptists as much as he does to the Methodists, because we all belong to Jesus! We are not competing with one another; we are joined to one another. Later, Paul summarizes the point against boasting of our human heroes: "So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God" (1 Cor. 3:21-23, NRSV).

Paul rebukes the Corinthians for identifying with their favorite leaders to the exclusion of others. Paul and Apollos were both mighty men of God, but really just "servants" with unique roles to fulfill in the spread of the gospel and the building up of the church. Humans may be impressed to different degrees by the personalities and charisma of different leaders, but God is only looking at the "bottom line" of how each does what he is called to do. This principle applies to every Christian, whether a leader or not. I will not have to answer to God for being Billy Graham's equal; I will have to answer for whether I was faithful in what he assigned to me. (See below, ch. 4.)

Paul uses two different illustrations here—first a plant and then a building. Because Paul actually started the church in Corinth (Acts 18), he says that he "planted" (vs. 6). Apollos arrived later and greatly blessed the young church with his powerful Bible teaching; he "watered." Both performed important work, but the life of the "plant" (i.e., the church) was the gift of God. The Corinthians need to remember that they belong to God, not to Paul, Apollos, or any other minister. Indeed, the ministers themselves belong to God. Everybody in the church belongs to God! ("God's" is three times emphasized in vs. 9.)

3:10-15 Responsibility to the Owner

If the “building” (i.e., the church = the people) belongs to God, then whoever works on the building works not for himself but for God. Paul was privileged to lay the foundation at Corinth, and others (including Apollos) had built on that foundation as they had opportunity. While the builders who come later should show respect for the work of those who laid the foundation, they equally will answer ultimately to God alone for how they have built.

Obviously the foundation-layer (Paul, in this case) can’t do much about the quality of the contributions made after his time. Figuratively speaking, they may build with gold, silver, and precious stones, or with wood, hay, and straw (vs. 12). That is, they may contribute in lasting ways or in ways that will eventually be purged by the fire of judgment (vs. 13). Paul is thinking, in the first instance, of people like Apollos and the others who have built on the foundation Paul had established. But the application is equally valid to all believers, not just to “ordained ministers.”

Essentially Paul is talking about the kinds of contributions we make to the lives of one another. If we contribute things of lasting worth (such as faith, hope, and love, ch. 13), what we give to others will be part of our everlasting joy. On the other hand, some things we put into the lives of others cannot endure, and should not endure, for they are things that would detract from the eternal joy God wants to give. For example, what if our “contribution” to the lives of others has been to teach them envy, strife, and distrust? That doesn’t necessarily mean that we aren’t Christians; we may still be “saved,” but our works will be—must be—“burned up” to make way for God’s perfection. That is at least part of what Paul means by saying, “the builder will be saved, but only as through fire” (vs. 15, NRSV). Part of what all believers will eventually be saved from is the effects of ‘unworthy building materials,’ whether from us or from others, but not without fire.

3:16-17 God’s Temple

In 3:16 we find the first of two places in this book in which Paul speaks about believers as temples of the Holy Spirit. The other text is 6:19. A comparison between the two contexts is enlightening.

In chapter three, Paul is talking about the church as a whole as “God’s temple,” in which “God’s Spirit dwells” (3:16). Thus, he warns: “If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person. For God’s temple is holy, and you [plural] are that temple.” You can see how this follows from the discussion above about how we “build” God’s temple by the contributions we make to the lives of one another. If, instead of building the temple of God (the corporate church), we destroy it, we are destroying God’s property! Anyone who destroys God’s house can expect judgment.

In chapter six, Paul is on a different (but related) topic. There he warns individuals about the consequences of sexual immorality (6:13-20). “Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body” (6:18, ESV).

Paul makes individually applicable what he had earlier spoken of as corporate: “your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit” (6:19). Just as the whole church belongs to God (ch. 3), so does the individual believer: “You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” (6:19-20, ESV). The main point in this context is the utter inappropriateness of using our bodies for sexual immorality, because these bodies are God’s dwelling, claimed by him to be a holy dwelling. [The Corinthians, with their Greek ways of thinking, perhaps thought that what they did with their bodies was spiritually inconsequential. The typical Greek attitude (influenced by Plato) was that the body was little more a prison cell for the spirit or soul. Their ingrained Greek thinking in this respect made it necessary for Paul to present a sustained argument for the necessity of our eventual resurrection (ch. 15), not something their background would have trained them to want. See also Acts 17:32.]

Both these passages (1 Cor. 3 and 6) have implications for worship and lifestyle, on the corporate and the personal levels. The congregation as a whole is a temple of the Holy Spirit (ch. 3). We should recognize that when we gather together for worship and hearing the Word of God, we are gathered as a dwelling place of God. The physical building, which can be beautiful or plain, is not the dwelling of God, even if its decorations are meant to remind us of God. The dwelling of God is the people who have gathered to worship, those whom God has purchased individually by Christ’s blood (6:20).

Compared with my attitude toward those around me, my attitude toward the physical structure in which we meet is unimportant. The building may be beautiful, but it is temporary. The people, in contrast, are redeemed to be an eternal dwelling of God, purchased at nothing less than the price of Jesus’ blood. How very precious is God’s dwelling! (See also Psa. 84:1.)

What we do with our bodies as God’s temple (corporately and individually) can glorify God (6:20). Physical actions can glorify God. Just the physical act of showing up for worship is a way to glorify God, but so also can be standing, sitting to listen, kneeling, singing, praying, lifting our hands, bowing our heads, etc. None of us should feel constrained by others to do any of these things, but we should all feel the privilege of doing any of these things (and others, as might be appropriate, see 1 Cor. 14:40: “decently and in order”). What higher privilege could a creature have than to glorify our Creator with our physical actions as well as our thoughts and words? We are temples, indwelt by God’s own Holy Spirit, and we are privileged to respond to him freely with these bodies.

Perhaps it should not need to be said, but let us also realize that the physical response of another person to God is not a matter for our judgment. If I raise my hands in praise and you don’t, who is to say whether you are worshiping God? Only God. I may raise my hands just to be seen by others; the person not raising his hands might be communing quietly but profoundly. We should not try to coerce anyone to conform to our physical worship style; if it’s coerced it’s hard to make it genuine. On the other hand, it is good for us to encourage one another to respond to God freely, as long as it is not a hindrance to others (again 1 Cor. 14:40 can be invoked as the principle).

4:1-5 Faithfulness is all that counts

The first paragraph of chapter four sums up a truly mature attitude toward leaders and toward spirituality in general. What finally counts for all of us is what counts on the final day. That won't be superficial popularity won by personal 'charisma' or 'pizzazz.' It won't be based on pleasing the whims of other human beings. What finally counts is being "trustworthy" (vs. 2, ESV, NRSV) or "faithful" (KJV and others). All of us, no matter how we are regarded by others, are "stewards" of God-given opportunities and resources. (Cf. Matt. 25:14-30.)

To a church caught up in silly comparisons of which preacher is the best, Paul boldly says that "with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you" (vs. 3). In other words, "It doesn't matter whether you are impressed by me or not!" There will be an evaluation of Paul's ministry, but not by the Corinthians' vote: "It is the Lord who judges me" (vs. 4). Unlike humans, who judge by what we can observe outwardly, the Lord knows "the things now hidden in darkness and . . . the purposes of the heart" (vs. 5, ESV). (Cf. 1 Sam. 16:7—We humans often are impressed with the wrong people, or for the wrong reasons.)

First Corinthians

LESSON FOUR

Freedom means you don't do some things.

1 Corinthians 8—11:1

After dealing at length with troubling divisions in the church (chs. 1-4), Paul moves on to a series of issues that had come to his attention, either by reports given to him or by questions directed to him. In chapter 5 he dealt with a publicly known case of sexual immorality being ignored by the church. In chapter 6 he dealt with a lawsuit between members of the church. Later in the same chapter he addressed again the issue of sexual immorality, this time in connection with the pagan temples which were so numerous. That passage was mentioned in the previous lesson, since it relates also to understanding what it means to be God's temple. Then, in chapter seven, Paul answered a question which the Corinthians had asked him concerning marriage.

In chapters 8-10 Paul tackles another issue which requires extensive discussion because it involves the complexity of living as Christians in a pervasively pagan environment. In Corinth virtually every area of life was touched in some way by traditional beliefs and practices associated with the pagan gods. Such mundane things as buying meat in the market place or going to someone's birthday party involved possible contact with some dimension of idolatry.

Not only were the Corinthian Christians surrounded by pagans, pagan temples, and various pagan practices, many (if not most) of the Corinthian Christians were themselves from pagan backgrounds. The Jews in the city, including Jews who believed in Jesus, had centuries-long traditions to draw on for dealing with and avoiding the pollution of a polytheistic society. The Gentile converts to Christ, however, needed more guidance, especially because their spiritually immature pride (already discussed) made them vulnerable to foolish mistakes.

Paul's discussion seeks to answer a question they had apparently sent to him: "Can we eat food that has been offered to a pagan god?" This question was inescapable in the Mediterranean world of that day. You can see the importance of the issue by the number of times it comes up in the New Testament, and the detailed comment it receives (these chapters in 1 Cor.; explicit mention in the apostolic letter of Acts 15:28-29; the related issue about vegetarianism in Romans 14). The question sounds almost too exotic to be relevant to us—perhaps to Christians in India or Africa, but not to us. Paul invokes principles, however, that are applicable to all times and places.

It helps to understand that all meat offered for sale in the market place in Corinth would almost certainly have come directly from the many temples to the various gods. Of course a person could slaughter one of his own animals, or purchase meat from a Jewish butcher, and thus avoid the problem. That, however, was not practical for the large Gentile population of an urban center such as Corinth. Paul's answer will be practical but without compromising important Christian principles.

8:1-13 Food offered to idols

The issue of food offered to idols was important enough to include in the apostolic letter sent out from the Jerusalem council in Acts 15. There the early church had debated whether Gentile converts to Christ needed to receive circumcision and the accompanying obligation to other aspects of Mosaic Law. They concluded that circumcision was not obligatory for the Gentile Christians, but they did ask them to “abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality” (Acts 15:28-29, ESV). These were prevalent things among the Gentiles and particularly offensive to Jews, and sexual immorality is forbidden by the Ten Commandments.

It is interesting that Paul does not simply invoke that earlier decision, which was published for guiding Gentile Christians by a council at which Paul had been present (Paul is writing 1 Cor. in 55 A.D.; the Jerusalem Council was held in 49). Certainly he endorsed the council’s decision not to impose circumcision on the new converts; likewise he certainly taught Gentile Christians to avoid sexual immorality. Paul’s treatment of the question about food offered to idols, however, shows that he did not regard the Jerusalem Council’s decision as binding law. If he had so regarded it, he could simply have told the Corinthians to stay away from food offered to idols. Instead, he gives a nuanced instruction that takes circumstances into consideration. Paul does not try to enforce a law on the Corinthians, nor does he set them free to act recklessly. Rather he tries to show the principles at stake.

Paul agrees with the Corinthian Christians that the pagan gods are actually non-existent, since there is only one God (8:4). The one true God is the Creator of all that is (vs. 6). Therefore, if you eat another created thing (plant or animal), you eat something that belongs to God. Even if someone has offered that food to a false god, it still really belongs to the one true God. On this understanding, a Christian need not raise a question of conscience about buying and eating meat sold in the market. No matter where it came from recently, it came from God ultimately (as Paul will conclude in 10:25-26).

The practical reality is that not everyone knows there is only one true God (8:7). Some who have recently become Christians from pagan backgrounds have all their lives been “accustomed to idols” (vs. 7, NRSV). Although they have formally renounced the pagan gods (at their baptism), their conscience might still be sensitive to the associations that meat in the market has with worship of pagan gods. For such a person, the meat which had come straight from a pagan temple could be “defiled” and defiling. Eating it would cause them not to feel right in their relationship with God. In that case they should not eat it.

Paul goes beyond that, however, to caution the person whose conscience would not be bothered by eating the meat. That person should consider the effect of his actions on the conscience of others (vs. 9; Paul gives the same basic instruction in Rom. 14). The person with the liberty to eat, Paul says, is also free not to eat, and should use his freedom in such a way as to benefit other believers.

Paul suggests a possible scenario in vs. 10 that might seem outrageous to us: “For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols?” (ESV) Why in the world would a Christian be eating in a pagan temple? Perhaps just to show that he had the freedom to do so. More likely, because he had been invited to participate in a family celebration of some kind, perhaps a wedding dinner, or a neighbor's feast to celebrate some other occasion. Such events could very plausibly have been staged in the temple precincts. Paul treats this as different from buying meat in the market.

Meat purchased in the market might very well have come from the pagan temple, but it has in fact been relocated. For a Christian, however, to go into the pagan temple to eat is to invite misunderstanding and offense. Even if the food is the same, the location makes a difference. This is getting too close to the idol and sending the wrong message to others (fellow Christians especially but also pagan neighbors). Christians should stay away from the pagan temple.

Paul puts his major emphasis here on the possible effects on the conscience of another Christian. The principle is that my freedom to do something I regard as harmless is limited by consideration of the effect on others. My “knowledge” (i.e., that there is no such thing as the god “Mars,” for example) should not be detrimental for others “for whom Christ died” (vs. 11). To wound another member of Christ's body is to “sin against Christ” (vs. 12). The food itself is not the problem. The issue is the responsible use of freedom. Paul's position is that he would rather forego some exercise of his freedom than to cause the fall of someone else (vs.13).

A point that Paul does not make here nevertheless comes to mind in view of his earlier teaching on the status of believers (individually and corporately) as temples of the Holy Spirit (3:16; 6:19). If I am a temple of the true God, what could I possibly be doing in the temple of a false god? [Obviously I am not speaking of being a tourist in a temple of another religion, but rather of participating in an activity which aims to honor a god I know to be false.]

9:1-27 A positive example: Paul limits his exercise of freedom

It appears at first that Paul has left the subject of food offered to idols and gone on to something else, as he launches into a fairly long statement about his freedom and authority as an apostle of Jesus. Chapter 10, however, makes clear that Paul describes *his* freedom for the sake of teaching the Corinthians how to use *their* freedom responsibly. Thus you see the connection with the end of chapter 8.

Apparently some in Corinth were arguing that they were free to eat in a pagan temple since they knew the pagan gods were not gods at all (recall 8:1-4). Paul has just urged them not to use the full range of freedom theoretically afforded by this “knowledge,” because not everyone has this knowledge. In the last sentence of ch. 8, Paul has said that he personally would not indulge a freedom that caused a brother to stumble.

His opening questions of chapter 9—“Am I not free? Am I not an apostle?”—put the spotlight on his use (or non-use) of his freedom. If Paul, the apostle whose work brought the Corinthian church into existence (vss. 1-2), did not use the full range of his freedom, then the Corinthian church should not mind limiting their exercise of freedom for the benefit of others.

Paul had not used his freedom to let others supply his physical necessities while he preached (9:6-11). According to the principle spelled out in the Law of Moses (Deut. 25:4), Paul had a right to expect the Corinthian church to support him, just as the ox should not be muzzled while treading the grain (1 Cor. 9:9). Instead, while in Corinth, he had worked with his hands to make a living. He preached “on the side,” until he received a generous offering from the Philippian church, which enabled him to devote full time to preaching and teaching (see Acts 18:1-3, 5; Phil. 4:10-19). (Note 2 Cor. 11:7-9—Some in Corinth noted how Paul used his freedom to work and criticized him for it! Perhaps they felt insulted that he did not let them support him. Hard to please some people!)

Paul points out repeatedly that he had not used the right to be supported, although he clearly recognizes it as a right he could have claimed (1 Cor. 9:12, 15, 18). He emphasizes this to use himself as an example to the Corinthian Christians, for them to follow his lead and not insist on using the full range of freedom available to them.

The full exercise of my freedom is not the most important priority. Love (concern for the effect on others) takes precedence. So does the evangelistic aim of Paul: “For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them” (9:19, ESV). Paul’s primary aim is not to see how free he can be; his aim is to do whatever he does “for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings” (vs. 23, NRSV). Paul knows what his goals are—the spread of the gospel and the maturity of the church—and he does not let himself be distracted by petty issues about personal freedom. Just like an athlete exercises self-discipline and restraint for the sake of winning the contest (vss. 24-27), so Paul keeps his eye on the prize. (See also Phil. 3:12-14.)

10:1-13 A negative example: Israel’s misuse of freedom

As we continue into ch. 10, it becomes evident that Paul has not finished the topic he began in ch. 8. If you read ch. 9 by itself, you would not think he was talking about activities associated with idolatry. Here it is clear that he has been all along. In ch. 9 he gave himself as a positive example of self-restraint and limitation of freedom for the sake of others. In ch. 10 he presents Israel’s wilderness generation as a negative example of how disastrous it can be to throw off restraint and explore one’s freedom to the fullest. And surely there is a lesson here for our times!

Notice in these verses the repetition of “all” (vss. 1, 2, 3, 4), followed by the contrasting words “most” (vs. 5) and “some” (vss. 7, 8, 9, 10). The point of the contrast is that marvelous spiritual experiences do not make us exempt from the consequences of later foolish or rebellious actions. All of Israel at the time of deliverance from Egypt had seen and heard unprecedented miracles. They had all seen the cloud of God’s presence leading them; they had all walked through the Red Sea on dry land. They had shared this

experience with Moses; thus Paul says they were “baptized into Moses” (vs. 2), i.e., they were identified with him through this experience of salvation. All of the Israelites “ate the same spiritual food,” the manna which came miraculously, day after day, year after year. They all “drank from the spiritual rock that followed them,” which Paul says “was Christ.” Christ is our miraculous provision in a way analogous to God’s provision for Israel in the desert.

Much more could be said about the events to which Paul refers here. It would be especially interesting to reflect on the connection between the rock and Christ. That, unfortunately, would take us away from our main focus in this particular study and might actually cause us to miss the point Paul wants to make to the Corinthian Christians and to us. **All** the people who experienced the marvelous deliverance of the Exodus did not make it to the Promised Land! Of that generation, only two men—Joshua and Caleb—lived to see Israel cross over the Jordan into Canaan. Thus it is understatement when Paul says, “God was not pleased with **most** of them” (vs. 5).

“Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did” (10:6, ESV). Paul is saying the same thing could happen to us, even though we have experienced the saving, delivering power of God. We need to remain alert and careful about what we desire. Evil desires doomed “most” of the generation who were delivered from Egypt.

“Some” of them “sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play” (10:7, quoting Exod. 32:6). What’s wrong with eating and drinking, or, for that matter with playing? The context of the OT quote is vital to Paul’s point. Exodus 32 records the sin of Israel with the golden calf. The eating, drinking, and revelry were all part of that reckless and costly adventure into idolatry. Paul directs this sobering example toward those who might be arguing that they could with impunity attend banquets and parties in the pagan temples. Paul says, to the contrary, we don’t want to be like the golden calf partygoers.

“Some” indulged in sexual immorality, “and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day” (10:8, referring back to Num. 25:1-9, which recounts another episode of idolatry).

“Some” of the wilderness generation “put Christ to the test . . . and were destroyed by serpents” (10:9, referring back to Num. 21:5-6). Note that Paul says they tempted “Christ,” by which he means they ungratefully presumed upon the grace which God had shown them. They were complaining rather than giving thanks for God’s provision in the wilderness. For us (as for the Corinthian believers) God’s provision is Christ. If we let our desires for personal pleasure and comfort drive gratitude out of our hearts, we are ‘putting Christ to the test,’ for we are treating God’s provision with disrespect.

“Some” grumbled (“murmured,” KJV) “and were destroyed by the destroyer, which perhaps refers to a recurrent pattern among the wilderness generation, rather than just one incident (see Exod.16:2; 17:2, 7; Num. 14:37).

The sum of all these “somes” is the “most” of vs. 5, those with whom God was not pleased. Paul’s point of application (vss. 11-12) is that those who have experienced God’s miracles of deliverance are not immune from God’s wrath, if they choose to behave recklessly and ignore God’s guidance. In particular he is warning the Corinthian Christians that they are not immune from the wrath which rightly comes against idolatry. By going into the pagan temples to eat, drink, and party, Christians would be acting dangerously, tempting God.

So, as Christians, we should be confident of God’s mercies, but we should not presume on them by playing with idolatry as though it is a harmless diversion. How might this apply to us today, who do not have to walk past pagan temples on our way to church or work? Our idols today are not usually graven images inside special buildings; they are more apt to be selfish ambitions engraved on our hearts. The things we crave can be our ‘gods.’ Indeed, twice Paul says that covetousness is idolatry (Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5). We often treat money as a god, for which we make sacrifices, sometimes even of our families. Pleasure itself is held up as a life-fulfilling god.

Certainly our culture idolizes entertainment (and entertainers). And that can be an issue in worship: Do we come to church to honor God or to have a good time? There is nothing wrong with enjoying worship, but what is our goal, our motive? Perhaps God alone knows. But how do we evaluate worship? By its pleasing effect on us? Or by its faithfulness to God’s purposes? Do we approach church services as consumers or as true worshipers?

The Corinthians lived in a world saturated with idolatry. So do we, although it is dressed up differently. If anything our world is more saturated because of the pervasiveness of media. The messages, the stimuli just don’t stop! And most of it encourages us to indulge ourselves, to acquire and to experience more and more. It takes deliberate effort to focus our attention (for more than a few seconds) on God’s will for our lives.

In light of the challenges of our society, vs. 13 can be taken as a word of encouragement: “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it” (1 Cor. 10:13, ESV). If we are faced with many temptations (as were the Corinthians), we can know that there is a “way of escape.” What is it?

“Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry” (1 Cor. 10:14). That’s the way of escape to seek first—stay away from the temptation; run away from it. Deliberately turn away and face another direction; set your will to go with God’s will. (Note how submission to God’s will precedes the request to be kept out of temptation in the Lord’s Prayer.) It would be foolish presumption to put ourselves deliberately in a position where we would be tempted and then try to blame anyone else for our falling into sin.

For the Corinthian believers the way to avoid many of the temptations they could face was to keep away from the house of the idol. The meat slaughtered there did not have

magical power to pollute the souls of those who ate it (thus 10:25), but the atmosphere and influences at work in the idol's house were seductive.

Paul carries his argument forward by reminding the believers of the significance of Holy Communion. When we eat and drink the bread and the cup in our sacred meal, we understand that in some way we are sharing in the body and blood of Jesus (10:16). Besides connecting us to the Lord, the meal connects us to one another (vs.17). He also observes that the Jewish sacrifices of the OT likewise made the worshipers "partners in the altar" (vs. 18, ESV). In other words, there are real consequences of eating and drinking as part of an act of worship. Participating in a meal in a temple is not inconsequential.

Paul remembers that he had already agreed that idols were not really gods (8:4), which was why he said the believers should not worry whether the meat in the market had come from a pagan temple. He reiterates that here, denying that idols or food offered to idols have innate power. In themselves, neither the physical idol nor the food offered to them is "anything" (10:19). But the **act** of worshiping the idol is something else. When people sacrifice to an idol, "they sacrifice to demons and not to God" (vs. 20). While the physical object used for the idol has no real power to affect the food offered to it by a worshiper, the demon which inspires the act of worship does have power to affect the worshipers, who become "partners" (NRSV) or "participants" (ESV) with the demons.

This is the spiritual basis for the nuanced instruction Paul gives concerning meat offered to idols. To buy it in the market, without asking where it came from (vs.25), is acceptable and should cause no worry. To eat it in a pagan temple along with those who worship the idol puts the eater in serious danger of being affected by the demonic forces at work in the pagan worship.

Paul obviously has a more vivid sense of spiritual reality than most "modern," secular people do, even more than most Christians do. He thinks it has an effect on you when you eat and drink at the Lord's Table. He thinks it has an effect on you when you take part in fellowship meals with demons. He considers it absurd for Christians, who participate in Christ's body and blood, to participate in pagan worship in any way (10:21).

Someone among the "enlightened" Corinthians might say, "All things are lawful," but Paul counters that "not all things build up" (vs. 23). Once again he stresses that we should consider the effect of our actions on others, even if we think we are immune from the dangers (vs. 24). This is the controlling theme in Paul's instruction on the question of meat offered to idols. He mentioned it in 8:9-13, here in 10:23, and also in Rom. 14, when dealing with related questions about diet.

The principle of avoiding offense to another's conscience is invoked yet again in 1 Cor. 10, when Paul describes a third possible scenario. What if a pagan neighbor invites you to his home for a meal? Should you go? Should you eat? If you want to go, it's okay, says Paul. "Eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of

conscience” (vs. 27). No matter what you might assume about how the meat came to be there, you don’t need to fear that it is inherently tainted by the pagan hands that have handled it. “But if someone says to you, ‘this has been offered in sacrifice,’ then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience” (vs. 28, ESV). He clarifies that he means the conscience of the other person, who would not have mentioned it unless he thought it was significant (vs. 29). Even though I could be genuinely thankful for the meal, I shouldn’t eat it because of the possible effect on someone else (vs. 30).

Paul sums up by saying that all our actions, including our eating and drinking, should be “for the glory of God” (vs. 31), and that we should try (it won’t always be easy) to avoid giving offense to anyone, whatever their faith or lack of it (vs. 32). It would hardly be to the glory of God for Christians to send mixed messages to the rest of the community—in church on Sunday taking communion, in the pagan temple another day feasting there.

The policy Paul teaches is the one he follows (vs. 33), motivated by the strong desire to make the gospel persuasive to everyone, although he does not expect everyone to accept it. The first verse of chapter 11 is actually the conclusion of this long discussion of what to do about meat offered to idols.

What about us? Not many of us are likely to face this particular issue of meat offered to idols, although it was a pervasive issue in the early church’s expansion into the Gentile world. If we don’t face that particular dilemma, what challenges do we face? Are there social or work situations where we are tempted to “play by the rules” of non-believers? Do we have to consider carefully just how loyal a Christian can be to things that can be good but which some people turn into idols? (Examples: wealth, fame, good looks, pleasure, nationality, race)

First Corinthians

LESSON FIVE

Proper Order in Worship: Things that change and things that don't. 1 Corinthians 11:2-34

Paul has already touched on issues that affected worship, but in chapter 11 he begins to focus on the actual times when the church is gathered for worship. In this chapter he discusses women's head-coverings and the proper conduct of Holy Communion. In chapters 12 and 14 he will address the use and misuse of spiritual gifts. Right in the middle of that (ch. 13) he will sing the praises of love as the greatest virtue.

In this lesson we will give attention to chapter 11, where we find corrective guidance from Paul on two separate issues causing problems in the Corinthian church. The first concerns the presence and participation of women in the worship services—particularly their head-coverings. The second is the conduct of Holy Communion. Besides being interesting and important in their own right, these two issues placed side by side provide an opportunity to see a distinction between things that are central and things that may be significant in their own context but not central to the faith or to worship.

11:2-16 Women in worship

In 11:1, Paul concluded his exhortation about the responsible use of Christian freedom by urging the Corinthians to imitate him as he imitated Christ. In a way, verse one is also transitional to the next topic. Now he wants to encourage them to follow his lead (and the pattern of other churches) in the way women of the church conduct themselves.

He begins by commending them for the way they maintain “the traditions just as I handed them on to you” (vs. 2, NRSV). This positive word of appreciation diplomatically introduces an area where they have not been following so closely—the dress and decorum of women in the church. Paul is wise to begin diplomatically, since this was a sensitive issue then as now.

The basic instruction Paul gives here is that women of the church should have their heads properly covered. Apparently some women were coming to church without the customary covering expected in that culture (not just in the church). It is a matter of speculation as to why they might have been doing this. From the context of Paul's words, and from what we know about the society, however, the following is a fair guess:

The message of the gospel announced a new kingdom and a new order of humanity (see 1 Cor. 15:45; 2 Cor. 5:17, for example). Some women and men were perhaps so excited about the new order that they were flouting the rules of the old order, perhaps deliberately to show that they were people of the new order and that the old rules did not apply to them. Perhaps they even quoted Paul's teaching: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28, NRSV). If such a statement is taken absolutely (and beyond the intent of its context), then all gender-specific roles are abolished in the new order, and we

can ignore societal norms. The refusal to live within the strictures of the “old” ways can be rationally justified by those who see themselves living in a totally “new” world. [Theologians speak of this attitude as “over-realized eschatology,” acting as though human history (and humanly ordered society) is over and the kingdom of God is already fully present.]

Whether for reasons such as this or some other, at least some women in the Corinthian church were behaving in ways that scandalized even the pagan community surrounding the church. The “liberated” women of the church were creating a stumbling block for people who might otherwise believe the gospel! While Paul’s instruction to the women of Corinth might seem to us to be narrow-minded and even “sexist” discrimination, if we listen to him in the context of the times we can more easily see the “common sense” practicality of his words.

Whether his advice would be common sense now would be a question of assessing the present context. What about Christian women living in Pakistan or Iran? Would it be prudent for them to wear a head covering? Perhaps, but that would be for people in those areas to decide. What about in the USA? For those who try to take the Bible as a strict rulebook, I suppose they would have to insist that women wear hats or scarves to church. Not many people would agree with that as a rule, however. I know I would not want to enforce such a rule, since I believe it would have the unwanted effect of becoming a stumbling block. Ironically, trying to make women wear head coverings in our culture would have the same effect as women refusing to wear head coverings in first-century Corinth!

Those with missions experience in foreign cultures or those with good memories of our changing American culture can provide illustrations. I have taught in schools for third-world pastors where women were not allowed in the classroom, not because the teachers did not allow it but because the men simply might not show up for classes if women were going to be present. What would you do—refuse to teach them unless women were admitted, or work with them where they are in the hope that eventually their culture will be sufficiently affected by the gospel to make changes in this regard? Choices like this are not easy sometimes.

Wherever the gospel has gone issues like this have arisen. The challenge has always been to discern which cultural practices can be accommodated without compromising the gospel, and which cultural practices simply have to stop immediately when someone becomes a Christian. (The early church had to deal with this in Acts 15, when they were faced with the influx of Gentiles into the church, as mentioned in the previous lesson.)

Some things are just matters of different culture and acquired tastes; other things are matters of morality. Thus, some of Paul’s instructions in this chapter involve culturally conditioned styles—ways of thinking and acting that are important only on the surface. To say that they are important only on the surface does not mean that they are unimportant to the people involved at the time; it’s just to say that surface matters do change. Other things are not surface matters but essential and unchanging.

Consider some other examples:

Can I worship God in English? Can I worship wearing jeans? Jesus didn't, but that is not the same thing as saying Jesus wouldn't or couldn't. Jesus also did not worship while wearing a silk necktie. How about worshipping in front of a statue of Buddha? Jesus didn't do that either, but then he wouldn't.

Another example: I have seen a picture of the “young married couples class” of our congregation from about 1925, outside the “red brick church,” before our present sanctuary was built. Every woman in that photo was wearing a hat! What would they think of our congregation's attire now? How much does that matter? What if we made it a rule that people had to dress like those in that picture?

Most of us can see the common sense of allowing for differences in dress and language, etc., especially if we are talking about a different era or another country. It gets a bit more difficult, however, when the cultural differences invade our own space. “How could someone come to church dressed like that?” I have asked, at least in my thoughts! “How could anyone worship with that music?” is a question that many people have asked—from both ends of the spectrum of musical tastes.

If human worship can be described as a response to the reality of God, then we have to allow that human limitations will necessarily shape the response. Part of our humanity involves how we are shaped by the culture in which we were born, where we learned our basic values and ways of doing things. So worship by humans is always (in this world) going to be *culturally conditioned*. This cultural conditioning does not invalidate the worship, provided the humans are genuinely responding to God and his revelation of himself and his will. We can express culturally conditioned responses to God as a “trans-cultural” reality. [God, as our Creator, is the Source of our human capacity to form and transmit culture. If, however, we identify God with our culture, we make an idol of our way of doing things. It would be absurd, for example, to insist that all converts to Christianity learn to speak English so that they could worship properly! It would be just as absurd to insist that all true Christian music must be “Southern gospel,” which is the music of my youth.]

So, what about Paul's instructions to the Corinthian church? What was he dealing with in terms of their cultural context, and how much—if any—of this is applicable in our situation?

Paul begins by making the point (11:3) that order is godly. Every man has a “head” in Christ, and even Christ has a “head” in God the Father. It is not a unique imposition, then, to say that “the husband is the head of his wife.” Order is necessarily part of human relationships, and our behavior should reflect proper order (cf. Paul's later statement that God is not the source of “confusion” [14:33, ESV; “disorder,” NRSV] but of “peace”).

Exactly how to express proper order is, to a large measure, culturally conditioned as discussed above. Paul considered it improper (at least for the Corinthians in that time)

for women to pray or prophesy with the head “unveiled” (vs. 5, NRSV; “uncovered,” ESV). For a woman to do that, in that culture, was a clear statement that she acknowledged no “head” over her. In contrast, the way a man should acknowledge Christ’s headship over him was to leave his head uncovered when he prayed or prophesied (vs. 4). While the expressions are different (covered or uncovered), the principle is the same—everyone should acknowledge the headship of another. No one is his or her own “head.”

What is meant by “head” in this context? The traditional understanding has been that “head” means “authority over.” In recent decades a number of scholars have argued for another meaning, “source” (see Gordon Fee, in the *New International Commentary*). Support for taking it as “source” rather than “authority” is found in 1 Cor. 11:8, where Paul refers back to Genesis 2:22. On the other hand, support for interpreting it as authority is found in 1 Cor. 11:10, where Paul actually uses the word “authority” in his obscure (to us) reference to angels. [Paul seems to be saying that angels are observing human worship, and humans should not wish to be seen in disarray. Possible references back to Gen. 6 are too problematic to pursue for the purposes of this lesson.]

The best definition for “head” continues to be a matter of debate, but perhaps an exact definition of figurative language is not vital. What is vital is the principle that no one is exempt from the necessity of acknowledging responsibility and accountability to someone else, whether that be understood as “higher authority” or as “source” for one’s own place in the order of relationships. I cannot be my own “head”—either my own authority or my own source. I cannot authorize myself or originate myself. If my authority was not given to me, it is not legitimate. Just as my life is a gift to me—ultimately from God, but not without human agency—so also human exercise of spiritual authority comes ultimately from God, but not without human participation.

What this means in the most general way is that human exercise of spiritual authority (by men or women) has to acknowledge other human beings (and our dependence on them), and it has to be acknowledged by other human beings. The exact shape of this will vary from one cultural setting to another, but the principle must be adhered to or there will be anarchy and chaos. Practically speaking, in our own setting, this means that anyone praying or prophesying should do so “under authority,” with appropriate “authorization.” That may be different for a Sunday School class or small group than for worship in the sanctuary, but the principle is the same.

Having asserted the necessity of respecting “headship,” and having ‘reined in’ the scandalous behavior of certain women in the church at Corinth, Paul nonetheless supports a remarkable degree of freedom for Christian women. Obviously he expects women, as well as men, will pray and prophesy in the worship setting. He would not have regulated their attire had he strictly forbidden these activities. [Later, in 14:34, when Paul says that women should be “silent in the churches,” he is probably referring to their talking out loud in the balcony or from the other side of the building, instead of asking “their husbands at home” (14:35).]

At another point Paul moves away from the traditional, male-dominating views of his culture when he says, “Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God” (1 Cor. 11:11-12, ESV). In other words, men should not see themselves as innately superior to women. After all, we all have mothers! The theological point is that, although the first woman was created out of the substance of the first man, every man since then has owed his very existence to a woman. I cannot claim the absolute priority of Adam, when I am a son of Eve. All claims among humans to exercise authority over one another must be seen as relative and subject to change as circumstances change. What is absolute and unchangeable is the last part of 11:12: “all things are from God.”

So, is it okay for women to pray out loud, prophesy, read Scripture, and even preach? I think so, because culture has changed, and that means that the cultural context for the church has changed. (Of course all do not agree on this point.) What has not changed is the principle that those who speak should do so in ways that respect and reflect authority. A woman who has not been duly authorized should not preach or prophesy in the congregation, but then neither should a man. (In a small group or Sunday School class, there is an ‘implied consent’ for individuals to make contributions to the discussion, or even to ‘bring a word from the Lord.’ That is part of the reason for small groups. Of course this ‘implied consent’ may have to be revoked if a person abuses the privilege by dominating others. Revoking that privilege (i.e., forbidding them to speak) is not something to do lightly, and should probably not be undertaken without the intervention of the pastoral staff.)

11:17-34 Proper behavior at the Lord’s Table

When the issue is appropriate music or appropriate clothing, care must be taken not to make peripheral things central. If we can make peripheral things central, we can also make central things peripheral, and everyone loses if we do that. The next section of chapter 11 provides an example of failure to appreciate things that are central.

Notice that Paul’s tone was more diplomatic in 11:2 when introducing the subject of women’s head coverings. In 11:17, by comparison, he bluntly says, “I do not commend you.” There’s nothing to commend regarding their misbehavior at the Lord’s Table. It is so out of line, he says, that they are meeting “not for the better but for the worse.” They are worse off for having come to church!

Possibly at the root of the misbehavior in Communion are the divisions in the church discussed at the beginning of the epistle—divisions based on preference for one minister or another. It is also possible that 11:18-19 reflects another kind of division—the gap between rich and poor.

Apparently the church in Corinth was celebrating Holy Communion as part of a community meal, a “love feast,” as such meals were called in the early church. But those with lots to eat were not sharing with those who had little (11:21), thereby making a

mockery of the oneness with Christ and one another supposedly symbolized in Holy Communion. By such selfish behavior they denied the witness of Holy Communion. Therefore, Paul says, they are not really eating “the Lord’s supper.” This is not the meal the Lord intends to serve, when they are intent on serving only themselves.

If they want to have a big meal, why not just eat at home? (vs. 22) Paul indignantly repeats his refusal to commend them. He also repeats for their benefit and ours the basic outline and interpretation of the Lord’s Supper (vss. 23-26). They had heard this before but obviously did not yet fully appreciate “what I also handed on to you” (vs. 23). Some things are so important and so central that they need to be explained over and over again, and done over and over again, so that we do not lose sight of their importance. Certainly Holy Communion is one of those things.

Depending on what dates are accepted for the writing of the four Gospels, this may be the first time these words of Jesus were actually written down. (Most scholars believe that the first Gospel was not written down in its present form until sometime in the 60s A.D. First Corinthians was written about 55 A.D.) The Corinthian Christians had heard these words of Jesus repeated by Paul, along with Christians in every place where Paul or other evangelists had taken the gospel. All of the words of Jesus are important to share with others, but the message of the cross is definitive, providing the only adequate context in which to interpret everything else Jesus said and did.

We cannot hope to exhaust the subject of Holy Communion in this lesson or in all the lessons we could put on paper, since the significance of Christ’s death for us is infinite. Yet in the context of this series of lessons we can, I trust, make some observations that will encourage and guide us in our worship.

First, notice that this sacred meal is the *Lord’s Supper* (11:20). It is not ours to treat as we will. We are guests; he is the host. This understanding is the basis for the Methodist tradition of welcoming all Christians to participate in Communion with us, regardless of church membership. It’s the *Lord’s Table*, not ours.

We are guests of the Most Noble Host. We should be grateful and behave in a way that honors him. That also means not showing disrespect for those whom God has honored by inviting them, too!

Notice that Holy Communion puts the focus on what God offers us, not what we offer God (11:24). True worship celebrates God’s goodness toward us, not applauding ourselves but God. It is easy to get our attention so riveted by what we are offering to God (our songs, our prayers, our tithes, even our attendance) that we forget we are there to respond to what God offers us in Jesus. The simplicity and profundity of Holy Communion puts our attention back on Jesus and the provision of salvation made by grace.

What God offers us is far more important than anything we can offer him, for what he offers us is life. Without his offer of life, we would have nothing to offer him. All we have to offer, really, is just thanksgiving for what God offers us.

That is why Holy Communion is also called “Eucharist,” from the Greek word meaning “to give thanks.” In the liturgy for Communion in the hymnal you will see the title, “The Great Thanksgiving,” for that is what Holy Communion is all about.

Paul quotes Jesus’ commandment for his disciples to “do this in remembrance of me” (vss. 24-25). Note that he didn’t say to “think” this, although obviously his words claim the attention of our thoughts. Jesus gave us something *to do*, an action that says more than words alone can say. By his breaking and giving of the bread, Jesus showed us that the action of giving his body would be for our salvation. He didn’t just give us words of wisdom and instruction by which we might save ourselves. He *did* something with his body to save us. He commands us to *do* something with our bodies as a way of acting out our thoughts and words of belief. This act of worship is physical, in response to the physical act by which Jesus saved us.

The “remembrance” here (vss. 24-25) is more than mental, first of all because it is also a physical act. But in the Bible memory is always more than mental. It is a way of realizing and acknowledging the effective presence of that which is remembered. When the Jews (down to this present day) remember the Passover, they acknowledge that they are who they are as a people because of what happened many generations ago. When God saved their ancestors he was saving them, the present generation. That’s the concept of “remembrance” that Jesus intended. When he tells us to remember him by eating the bread and drinking the cup, he wants us to realize that his gift of life is present right now, making us his, making us new. Eating the bread and drinking the cup of Holy Communion is a way of letting him be present to us.

Once we see the present implications of Holy Communion, we can see that it is comprehensive in its time references. By remembering, we are allowing a *past* event (Jesus’ sacrifice) to be effectively *present*. But Paul says that we “proclaim the Lord’s death *until he comes*” (vs. 26). By participation in the Lord’s Supper we are allowing our lives to be shaped by Jesus’ second coming as well as by his first. His *past* sacrifice becomes our *present* assurance of the *future* he wants to give us. All of time and all of our personal history—Jesus brings it all together for us in Holy Communion.

The cup of communion is the sign of the new covenant (vs. 25). The provision of a New Covenant was prophesied in the Old Covenant (Jere. 31:31-34). Acknowledgement of the New Covenant is acknowledgement that God keeps his promises and works on a large historical scale. More immediate to us personally, however, is the recognition that the New Covenant is a costly gift, paid for entirely by our Savior: “the new covenant in my blood.” Again we see that it’s what he offers us that really matters. What could we ever offer him in repayment? Our only way to “repay” is to accept with thanksgiving what he offers. (See Psalm 116:12-13, 17.)

Paul does not tell us how often we should receive communion, nor does the NT ever spell that out. Historically the frequency has varied greatly and still does today from one church to another. (John Wesley was a great proponent of frequent communion, several times a week in his case, during his adult life.) But Paul does say “as often as you” do it, realize what you are doing: “you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (vs. 26). *How often* is a significant issue but apparently not as important as *how* (in the sense of “with what meaning”).

How we participate is the focus in 11:27-34. Paul even speaks of the possibility of participating “in an unworthy manner” (vs. 27). What does that mean?

Paul **does not** mean that we have to become worthy to receive the gift. That is impossible (remember Eph. 2:8-9). No one is good enough to receive Holy Communion. Anyone who was good enough wouldn’t need the Savior’s sacrifice. Only those who need it are welcome, and that is all of us!

By “unworthy manner,” Paul means the kind of thing the Corinthians have been doing in not showing proper respect for the significance of participation in the meal. Paul tells us in the context that “unworthy manner” means eating and drinking “without discerning the body” (vs. 28). Eating unworthily would involve not appreciating the fact that you are receiving the benefits of Christ’s broken body and shed blood.

In this context, Paul is dealing with the Corinthians’ disrespect for one another (vs. 21). Their failure to discern “the body” also means failure to recognize that we are one body in Christ. In the context of Holy Communion, to show disrespect for another believer is to show disrespect for “the body.” If I discern properly that my participation in Holy Communion shows forth my vital connection to Jesus, I need to see also that I am vitally connected to all those who are vitally connected to him.

If I deny or despise my connection to you in the body of Christ, I am failing to discern the body. Especially if I turn Holy Communion into a self-centered exercise by which I deliberately shut you out, I am failing to discern the body. At the very least, this would mean that I am not likely to receive the full benefit of participation because I am deliberately limiting the significance of my participation. Paul tells the Corinthians who are abusing the Lord’s Table, “That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died” (vs. 30, ESV). Some have interpreted this to mean that divine judgment brought the sickness, and that is certainly a fair interpretation of the words (especially in light of vss. 29, 34). This judgment was not eternal separation from God’s presence but rather temporal chastisement in physical problems and even physical death.

But this could also be a way of saying that the Corinthian abusers had missed much of the blessing of Holy Communion. They could have received more of the healing touch of God had they been more open to the full significance of what they were doing in eating and drinking the Lord’s Supper. By not discerning the body of Christ, they paid a price in their own bodies. This is at least part of what Paul referred to in verse 17: you are

coming together in worship but are worse off rather than better as a result of your attitudes toward one another.

To discern the body in Holy Communion means recognizing what Jesus did with his body (died for us). In that position of faith and gratitude we can expect to receive the saving, healing effects in our own bodies. We can nullify this, however, if we deny the effect by which Jesus' body connects us to other believers, i.e., if we fail to discern the body.

So Paul tells them to “wait for one another” (vs. 33). He means they should not do what he mentioned in verse 21. This should not be interpreted as a precise instruction for having all the believers in a congregation eat and drink at the exact same moment, which in many cases would not be practical. But it does mean that there shouldn't be competition to see who gets there first or who gets the best spots at the communion rail!

First Corinthians

LESSON SIX

Proper Order in Worship: Leave room for the Holy Spirit.

1 Corinthians 12

Paul expects that when Christians gather for worship and prayer, more than one person will be permitted to speak. Indeed he expects that God might even speak! Not audibly in a thunderous voice from the sky, but through human voices expressing God's perspective as the Holy Spirit gives insight. Paul also expects the Holy Spirit to prompt human actions which express God's will, and that God will accomplish through these human actions what only God can do—miracles! Like the rest of Scripture, Paul does not give us a formula for getting miracles to happen on cue, but all of Scripture and Paul teach us to seek and be ready for the activity of the Holy Spirit. Especially we should expect the Holy Spirit to be present and active when we gather as Christ's body to worship and pray.

Based on the way Paul begins 12:1, "Now concerning . . .," it appears that he continues to respond to a series of inquiries from Corinth (cf. 7:1; 8:1). They had raised questions about spiritual gifts, but not because they were totally ignorant of such things. Indeed, Paul mentioned at the beginning of the epistle that they were "not lacking in any spiritual gift" (1 Cor. 1:7, ESV). Judging by what he says in chs. 12-14, their problem was not ignorance of the gifts but rather unbalanced enthusiasm for some to the neglect of others. Paul intends to help them (and us) see the value of all the gifts and how they are parts of a harmonious whole. In ch. 14 (next lesson) he focuses more particularly on proper guidance for those who prophesy and speak in tongues.

In the first part of ch. 12 (vss. 1-11), Paul identifies various spiritual manifestations and describes them as works of one and the same Holy Spirit who is given to every believer. Then in the last part of the chapter (vss. 12-31) he provides an important illustration and an exhortation based on unity and variety.

12:2-3 God's Holy Spirit is not mute.

Paul begins his discussion by noting the Corinthians' experience before their conversion, when they (along with their entire culture) "were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak" (vs. 2, NRSV). They had not had experience, that is, with God speaking to them or through them. Now, as Christians filled with God's Spirit, they are having a different experience: God is communicating; he is not mute!

The concept of a "god" speaking was not actually foreign to the Greeks. In fact there were a number of reputed "oracles" at certain pagan temples, the most famous being the "Oracle of Delphi." Inquirers traveled there over long distances to present their questions to an intoxicated priestess, whose gibberish answers were interpreted by the priest of Apollo (often in enigmatic words that could be taken in more than one way). Also recall the Philippian "slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling" (Acts 16:16, ESV). The spirit within her was demonic, of course,

and she lost her ability (and her profitability) once the demon was cast out (Acts 16:18-19). Casting out that vocal demon got Paul and Silas cast into prison.

Nonetheless, such “divine communication” was not the common experience of pagan worshipers, certainly not the experience of having the “god” speak through you! That’s why those who could afford it traveled to places like Delphi, and paid significant sums of money to people like the owners of the Philippian slave girl, in hopes of gaining an answer for a problem. Hearing from their “god” was not the pagans’ general expectation, and they did not expect at all for their “god” to speak through them.

Now that they are Christians, the situation is different. Now, as believers in Jesus, who have all been “made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13), each of these former pagans has an indwelling, living, speaking, divine Presence. Any one of them might receive communication from God to pass on to others. If every believer has this capacity (because every believer has received God’s Spirit—Rom. 8:9), then it is absolutely vital to recognize what is truly from God and what is not. Discernment is critical.

While “discernment of spirits” is one of the spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12:10), the discernment Paul identifies in vs. 3 is fundamental and can be implemented by any believer: “no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says ‘Jesus is accursed!’ and no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:3, ESV). This is fundamental discernment, for it involves the most basic touchstone of Christian belief and discipleship. Christianity is all about Jesus, and who we say Jesus is. What we say about Jesus determines whether our words are truly Christian.

Understand that Paul is not providing some kind of magic phrase with the words, “Jesus is Lord.” It is perfectly possible for someone who doesn’t know Jesus to utter those words, just as it is possible for a believer to read aloud the words, “Jesus is accursed,” but without making that a confession of belief. There’s nothing magic in the syllables themselves. Someone can say the words, “Jesus is Lord,” but not mean them in the sense that Paul does. To say “Jesus is Lord” (in Paul’s sense) is to confess that Jesus of Nazareth is the Incarnation of the same God who revealed himself to Abraham, Moses, and other OT saints as “the LORD” (i.e., “Yahweh”).

This can be shown quite clearly by reference to Philippians 2:9-11 and the OT text which is echoed there, Isaiah 45:22-23. The LORD declares (in the Isa. text) that he is the only God there is, and that eventually “every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance.” Paul says (in Phil. 2) that Isa. 45:23 will be fulfilled precisely in the confession that “Jesus is Lord.”

This objective, theological content is the most fundamental touchstone by which to discern whether a spiritual impulse or claim to spiritual inspiration comes from God. Paul does not say that this is the only element that might be involved in discernment, but it would have to be considered fundamental in the sense that, if this test is failed, all the other points of evaluation would be irrelevant. In other words, “content” matters, not just “inspiration” or how we “feel” about what is said and done.

We can ask this content question about the *implications* (as well as about explicit words): “What does this teaching (or action) say about Jesus?” If a person says, “Jesus is Lord,” but then teaches or acts in ways that contradict Jesus’ unique role as Savior and Lord, or in ways that deny his Lordship, then that person is (to that extent) not motivated by the Spirit of God but by some other motivation or energy.

This is an important point to make in an age like ours, when people tend to go so much by their feelings. It has been said (by Ravi Zacharias, I believe) that young people today “think with their feelings.” That is perhaps an oversimplification and certainly not fair to all young people, but it accurately reflects the tendency in our media-saturated culture to emphasize image, impression, and feelings, often at the expense of rational inquiry and analysis. Even in church (where we bring our culture with us) we can fall into patterns of wanting what makes us feel good more than what is good for us. For many people today “doctrine” is almost completely irrelevant in their evaluation of ideas or actions. If they like the way it makes them feel, or they see that it makes other people feel good, then they decide it is okay, or even “good.”

An example of this, which would get us off the subject if we pursued it, is the acceptance of homosexual behavior by many well-intended Christians. Personal experience counts so heavily in our society that it is easy to allow it to outweigh the clear testimony of Scripture. Note what it says about Jesus, however, when the ultimate reality and “norm” is one’s personal disposition, attraction, or experience rather than the Lordship of Jesus. If everyone in the world gets to decide what is “good” based on what seems attractive to them, then what is the role of a “Lord” to *show* me the way and to *impart power* to walk in the way he directs?

What empowerment do I need to choose what I have already felt inclined toward anyway? What deliverance do I need if I am not really imprisoned? What Savior do I need if I follow only my desires? “Lord”? I don’t need a Lord if my biological impulses (or my sociologically acquired tastes) are rightful authorities for how I live. If I ask Jesus to empower me for my desires, I am using him but I am not serving him. I may be employing his name to promote my agenda (like the PETA billboard that said, “Jesus was a vegetarian”), but I am not truly (or fully) yielded to his agenda. I may have *said*, “Jesus is Lord,” but I am not allowing him *to be* my Lord. Perhaps we could say it this way: *truthfully* to say “Jesus is Lord” requires the work of the Holy Spirit.

12:4-11 The Holy Spirit can do a variety of things.

God loves variety—a fact apparent to any observer of the universe, at whatever level. Just think of the varieties of bugs! And within our solar system, God made one planet with rings! In creating humanity God has given us variety, too. Different shapes, sizes, colors, and abilities in a seemingly infinite variety of combinations.

As God loves variety in the created order, he also loves it in the order of redemption. Although we are all saved by trusting the same grace, God works in and through us to accomplish a variety of tasks. Each of us has unique circumstances (called

opportunities), and each of us has a unique combination of experiences and talents with which to respond. Going beyond “natural” differences, however, God also works by his indwelling Holy Spirit to achieve things beyond our “natural” abilities, things which require God’s “supernatural abilities.” In the context of this chapter, we call these supernatural abilities, “spiritual gifts” or “gifts of the Holy Spirit.”

Note how Paul uses repetition to emphasize two things: 1) the variety of gifts; 2) the one Source. This is the main thrust of vss. 4-11, but it is especially obvious in vss. 4-6. Whether we call them “gifts,” “service,” or “activities” (ESV, NRSV), or by some other terms (cf. KJV: gifts, administrations, operations), the Source is the “same Spirit,” the “same Lord,” and the “same God.” Whatever term we use for these actions, they are *acts of God, accomplished by the Holy Spirit, serving the purposes of the Lord* (recall vs. 3).

We should also note (in vs. 7) that these *acts of God* are given “to each” (i.e., no one is left out), and that the purpose of God’s activity is “the common good” (i.e., God always means to bless more than one person by his acts). As a Christian, then, I should be alert and available for times when God might prompt me to speak or act for the blessing of others, and I should trust the power of God to accomplish more through my obedient words and actions than I could possibly achieve on my own initiative.

God’s initiative is key to each of the spiritual manifestations mentioned. We are not talking about our decision that God should do such and such because we want him to. Rather we are talking about *our availability and responsiveness* to what God wants to do. (Dr. James Buskirk, one of our previous pastors, said it this way: The initiative is God’s; the hospitality is ours; and the glory goes to Christ.)

In verses 8-10 Paul names nine different manifestations or gifts. Nothing in the context indicates that he thought there were only nine. (In fact, in 1 Cor. 12:27-28, Rom. 12:4-8, and Eph. 4:11-12, Paul lists other kinds of “giftings” for ministry. Each list should be read as examples of the kinds of things the Holy Spirit empowers, rather than exhaustive lists of the only things the Spirit does.) Notice again how frequently Paul repeats that these manifestations are “through the Spirit,” or “according to the same Spirit,” or “by the one Spirit.” To make sure we don’t miss this emphasis he underlines it again in vs. 11. The focus is not on the human involved but on the Holy Spirit’s initiative and power.

To discuss each of the nine fully would require too much time, but it may be helpful to have a brief, working definition of each:

vs. 8—“**the utterance of wisdom**” or “the word of wisdom”—God imparts his **perspective** through something someone says. Others in the group may recognize this as God’s wisdom more than the person who first speaks it. Note that, literally, it is “a word of wisdom,” i.e., for a particular situation. The person who speaks “a word of wisdom” will not necessarily be a fountain of wisdom all the time. An immature Christian might speak a word of wisdom. A wise person, in contrast, is marked by consistency in his or her judgment.

In the context of 1 Corinthians it is interesting that Paul mentions “wisdom” first. Recall the lengthy discussion in chs. 1-2, where Paul contrasted the wisdom of the world (which fascinated so many Corinthians) with the wisdom of God found in the cross of Jesus. An “utterance of wisdom” inspired by the Holy Spirit would help us to see reality in the light of the cross (see 2 Cor. 5:14-21 for an example).

vs. 8—“**the utterance of knowledge**” or “the word of knowledge”—God gives **information**. This could come in a moment of insight (Acts 5:1-11) or through prayerful study of Scripture; in either case God is the Source. Again, literally it is “a word of knowledge.” The person who speaks forth knowledge in this manner will not be able to read everyone’s mind or know the secrets of their lives *unless God chooses to impart that knowledge, for God’s reasons*. God often imparts a word of knowledge in the context of prayer for healing, but that is not the only setting in which insight from God could mean a breakthrough for God’s purposes.

vs. 9—“**faith**”—God imparts the **ability to believe** his promises and his power for a particular thing. Although the faith to believe for salvation could be considered a work of the Holy Spirit, and a gift in that sense, the context here indicates something distinct from the faith that all believers have in Christ. The Spirit’s manifestation of “faith” in this context is for the miraculous intervention and action of God (1 Kings 18:30-39 is an example). This is often described as “mountain-moving faith,” as Jesus mentioned in Mark 11:23 and Paul refers to in 1 Cor. 13:2. Thus, some have described the “gift of faith” as being supernaturally emptied of doubt and filled with faith for a specific need to be met. As such, it obviously overlaps other gifts listed here, particularly the next two.

vs. 9—“**gifts of healing**”—God performs **healing**. The word “healing” tends to make us think of physical healing, but emotional, mental, and spiritual healing should be included. Note that in Greek both words are plural: “gifts of healings.”

The principal beneficiary of a “gift of healing” would be the person healed. It is not incorrect, however, to speak of a person whom God uses to heal people as “having a gift of healing” (see 12:30). On the other hand, it might avoid some problems to say that the person through whom the gift operated is God’s *agent*, but *not the owner* of the gift. Certainly it is God who does the healing, but he does use people in the process. So it does not matter whether someone was healed through the prayers of one person or many, or through a combination of medical care and prayer. What matters is that the need was met, and God gets the glory. (The same should be said for all these gifts. Probably more discredit has been brought on the gifts by this than anything else—the human tendency to claim the gifts as “ours” and, consequently, to set ourselves up as the source of the blessings rather than pointing people to the Source.)

vs. 10—“**the working of miracles**”—God’s **power** at work through a person to accomplish a miracle. This gift often overlaps with the gift of faith, but not necessarily. The person through whom God does the miracle might not have great faith for it to happen. On the other hand, sometimes a person experiences a supernatural filling with faith, but God uses someone else to perform the miracle.

vs. 10—“**prophecy**”—God’s **word** for a particular situation. A prophecy could also be a word of knowledge or word of wisdom. It does not have to predict the future (see 1 Cor. 14:3). More on this in the next lesson.

vs. 10—“**the ability to distinguish between spirits**” or “the discernment of spirits”—God enables **recognition** of the motivation or spiritual forces at work in a situation, or perhaps in an individual. Experiences of supernatural discernment are often vital to the ministry of praying for freedom from controlling or dominating energies in a person’s life. This gift (as distinct from the fundamental discernment discussed above—vs. 3) is a *subjective sense* (or “feel”) of the reality behind the surface. This subjective sense can be tested by the sense that others have, but ultimately it can be verified objectively by whether the discernment leads to deliverance of the person or a breakthrough in the situation. We cannot always trust our “feelings,” but if many mature Christians share the “feeling” that something is wrong or right, that is usually significant.

vs. 10—“**various kinds of tongues**”—God imparts the **ability to speak a language** that one has not learned. More discussion of this is found in ch. 14 (next lesson), indicating that misuse of this gift was perhaps a problem at Corinth.

vs. 10—“**the interpretation of tongues**”—God gives the **ability to interpret the meaning of what was said in an unknown tongue**. More about this also in the next lesson.

Emphasizing again the central role of the Spirit in all of these manifestations (vs. 11), Paul makes it clear that God has the initiative in deciding when and through whom these gifts might operate: “who apportions to each one individually as he wills” (i.e., God or the Holy Spirit).

12:12-13 Introduction of the body analogy and our unity in the Spirit.

The unity of these diverse gifts or manifestations is grounded in the *one Source* for all of them, as Paul emphasized in vss. 4-11. Their unity could also be analyzed in terms of the *single focus* toward which genuine works of the Holy Spirit bring us: the recognition and exaltation of Jesus as Lord (1 Cor. 12:3; see also 1 John 4:1-3). Still another way to evaluate spiritual manifestations (and whether they are being integrated properly into our Christian fellowship) is to consider the *effect* they have on individuals and on the church. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are from One Source and they glorify One Lord, Jesus Christ. They also have the effect of bringing together and building up One Body. If this is not the effect, it is either because (1) the “gift” was not really from God, or (2) people responded wrongly due to human frailties (sin, pride, ignorance, immaturity, fear, etc.).

In vs. 12 Paul introduces an important analogy that he develops in some detail (see also Eph. 4:4, 11-16 for a shorter use of the same analogy). Paul says that the human body—which is “one” but has “many members”—is like “Christ,” by which he means the “body of Christ” in which each believer is connected to Christ, and each is connected to everyone else who is connected to Christ. In this verse Paul states the complementary

truths he will emphasize in the rest of the chapter: the *one body* with *many* members, and the inclusion of *all the members* which make the one body.

There is a sense in which the unity of the body of Christ is a *task*, even a challenge, to which we have to devote attention and care. First, however, this unity is a *gift*, a “given,” resulting from the prior act of God (see Eph. 4:3, “maintain the unity”). God gave us this unity when he gave us all the same Holy Spirit: “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body— Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13, ESV).

Let’s not get distracted prematurely by questions about a “second experience” of being “baptized in the Holy Spirit,” a distinctive emphasis of the Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal. Whether a person needs or should expect a second experience is an important question, but not more important than the point Paul wants to make in vs. 13. Paul’s point is that everyone who is part of the body of Christ is such because of the work of the Holy Spirit—“baptized into one body.” And everyone who is part of the body of Christ has received that Spirit who made them part of the body—“made to drink.” This is clear in this context, and it is consistent with another unambiguous statement by Paul: “Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him” (Rom. 8:9, ESV).

With a grasp of these two clear passages (Rom. 8:9 and 1 Cor. 12:13), and recalling the truth of 1 Cor. 12:3—no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit—we are now in a better position to consider the possibility of a “second experience.” Many people do have an experience of the reality and power of the Holy Spirit which is distinct from their initial conversion. But such experiences are indeed a “second experience” *of the Holy Spirit*, since conversion to Christ would have to be called an experience of the Holy Spirit. You cannot have a relationship with Christ except by the Holy Spirit. Even people who love Jesus but are frightened by the words, “Holy Spirit,” have had an experience with the Holy Spirit.

The question can be put this way: If you are a believer in Jesus and (as a result) have received the Holy Spirit into your life, what have you allowed the Holy Spirit to do? Instead of asking how much of the Holy Spirit I have, perhaps the better question is how much of me does the Holy Spirit have? How much of me have I allowed the Holy Spirit to fill? Hunger for more of what God wanted to do was the driving force behind the explosion of the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement in the twentieth century. The diagnostic question I need to ask myself is not whether I *have had* this or that experience in the past, but this: How much room am I making in my life for God today? How much of God do I want now?

If honest hearts ask that question and then prayerfully pursue a greater hospitality to God and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, that may well lead to a “second experience,” and praise God for it! In pursuit of the “more” that God wants to do, however, we should not lose sight of *what God has already done*, since that is the foundation for understanding (and discerning) what God wants to do now and in the future. God has already given his Holy Spirit to every true believer in Jesus. That is the basis for our unity as the body of Christ

(in the congregation, across denominational lines, across cultural and national lines, etc.). Appreciating what God has *already* done in giving his Spirit to all believers helps us to be more open and receptive to the *new things* God might want to do through any one of us.

12:14-26 The body analogy

Once we acknowledge the truth of 12:13—that we are in fact “one body” of Christ and have all received the same Holy Spirit—the applications of vss. 14-26 cannot be disputed.

Because it is a “body,” the church has “members” which should not be expected to be identical (vs. 14).

Even if someone discounts his or her worth because of being unlike another member, the facts are not changed by such misperceptions (vss. 15-16). **You are needed** in the body of Christ, whether or not you think so.

To function as a unified body, the differences are not only tolerable; they are necessary (vss. 17-21). We need the different gifts, not just some but all of them. **You need** the body of Christ (all of it), whether or not you think so.

Our tendency to honor some members (or gifts) more than others is contradictory to the inescapable necessity of having all members play their distinct roles and make their unique contributions. We have inescapable connections to every other one in the body of Christ (vss. 22-26). You may not be proud of me, and you may not appreciate the way I make my contribution to the body of Christ, but we cannot get rid of one another. What happens to one of us happens to all of us (vs. 26).

12:27-31 Equality does not mean disorder.

Paul reiterates the foundational truth that we are indeed the body of Christ, each one of us as believers (vs. 27). In vs. 28 he also repeats his emphasis on the initiative of God (cf. vss. 6, 11, 18). But this time he adds a more specific ordering of God’s appointments: “first apostles, second prophets, third teachers.” By numbering the first three Paul clearly indicates what could be called a “hierarchy” or a priority of authority. (This could be compared with Eph. 4:11, which also lists “evangelists” and “pastors.” Pastors in that listing could be the same as “teachers.”)

Whether Paul means to indicate an order for the remainder of this verse is debatable. It seems that “miracles, gifts of healings, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues” are not listed in order of importance or value. Which is most valuable would change with the moment. When administration is needed, it is the most important; when a miracle is needed, administration is relatively less important, etc. Notice that healings and miracles are in the opposite order of vss. 9-10.

The questions of vss. 29-30 reiterate the point made earlier by the body analogy. Every part is not the same; everyone is not called or equipped to do the same thing. From the

logic of the questions it is apparent that Paul expects us to answer “no” to each one. This is even more apparent in the Greek language, which uses a distinct form for questions which expect a negative answer. “Of course,” we answer, “not everyone will be an apostle; not everyone will be a prophet or teacher; not everyone will be prominently involved in God’s working of miracles; not everyone will have gifts of healing; not everyone will speak in tongues and/or interpret them.”

Paul concludes this chapter with an exhortation to “desire” (“strive for,” NRSV) the “higher gifts” (vs. 31). What are they? Again, common sense would say that the most valuable gift at a particular moment is the one that is most needed. But Paul doesn’t leave this question to common sense (always a risky thing, anyway!). He launches into one of the most exalted and well-known passages in the Bible, to tell us that love is the most important thing (ch. 13). Set in the midst of this long discussion of spiritual gifts, which includes all of chs. 12 and 14, this praise of the surpassing value of love is not simply a celebration of the poetic ideal (although it can certainly be read that way). Rather, Paul is saying that **love is the standard by which to evaluate and exercise the spiritual gifts**—notice the gifts mentioned by name in 13:1-2, 8-9. He is not dismissing the gifts as unimportant, since God loves his children through the gifts, blessing them to bless others. Paul insists that all the gifts can be rightly employed and appreciated only to the extent that we let God’s love show us their true purpose. Foolish human pride in the exercise of gifts will be a temporary thing, but God’s love for us, in us, and through us will last forever.

First Corinthians

LESSON SEVEN

Proper Order in Worship: Regulating the Spontaneous. 1 Corinthians 14

In the previous lesson we considered the diversity of spiritual gifts, or “manifestations,” and how each is important to the proper functioning of the whole. In this lesson we look more specifically at prophecy and tongues.

From what Paul says, we know a fair amount of what typically happened in the Corinthians’ worship services. We know, for example, that they celebrated Holy Communion, although in such a way that Paul needed to correct and exhort them in strong language (ch. 11). From chs. 12-14 we know that spiritual gifts functioned in the church, but again in ways that required Paul’s lengthy correction and further teaching. There were also hymns and songs (14:15, 26). In addition to these clues from Paul’s words, we know from many sources that early Christian worship was built on the ancient practices of the Jewish synagogue. Thus we can be sure that prayers and teaching of Scripture were prominent in their worship.

Paul did not have to correct everything in Corinth, although it would be easy to get that impression! The Corinthian believers, perhaps because many of them lacked a Jewish background, required a lot of correction because they brought their Greek culture to church with them. Many things about their culture had to be rethought, revised, or even rejected. We are the beneficiaries, of course, of all their problems and Paul’s corrections. We don’t have to make the same mistakes they made, and we have the complete Scriptures to draw on, which they did not.

Their mistakes with regard to tongues and prophecy prompted Paul’s special attention to these gifts. By contrast, he did not say much about the “gifts of healings” and how that should be handled in the church. That means, probably, that it wasn’t creating a problem at the time. It also means, however, that we have to extrapolate principles from Paul’s teaching about tongues and prophecy that we can apply to the exercise of the other gifts, such as healing, discernment, etc. Fortunately, Paul’s discussion is rich in such principles. So even if tongues and prophecy are not problems for us (because we have them all figured out or because we don’t do them), we can profit from a study of this chapter. In fact the principles taught in ch. 14 apply in the whole life of the church, quite apart from the exercise of spiritual gifts. For example, the sentence at the end of this chapter obviously has broad application: “But all things should be done decently and in order” (1 Cor. 14:40, ESV).

14:1-5 The excellence of prophecy

Paul begins and ends this chapter with a commendation of prophecy. In 14:1 he says, “Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy” (ESV). In vs. 39 he says, “Be eager to prophesy” (NRSV). He commends it so much that we need to remember that he placed love even higher (13:2, 8).

Why does Paul praise prophecy so much? He tells us in vss. 2-5. Notice that he specifically contrasts the value of prophesying with the value of speaking in tongues. From this we infer that Paul seeks to correct some in Corinth who are so enthusiastic about their gift of speaking in tongues that they have lost perspective on the purpose of the gifts. Recall that Paul placed ch. 13 in the middle of all this discussion of spiritual manifestations, and that was no accident.

Paul does not say tongues have no value. Quite the contrary, he says that a person speaking in tongues “speaks . . . to God,” “utters mysteries in the Spirit,” and “builds up himself” (i.e., gains personal strength). These are not bad things! Indeed, Paul says it would be good for “all to speak in tongues” (vs. 5). But Paul wants them to grow up into greater maturity by seeing the importance of being a blessing to others and not just having a good time with personal spiritual experiences. In contrast to potentially self-absorbed concentration on tongues, Paul recommends that we aspire to prophesy, so that we can speak to others for their benefit and build up the church.

Paul says (vs. 3) that prophetic speech brings “upbuilding” (edification, strengthening), “encouragement” (exhortation), and “consolation” (comfort). The key word here is “upbuilding” (“edification”), for that is the word Paul comes back to in vs. 5. It is also the key word in an earlier contrast in 1 Cor. 8:1: “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (NRSV). Since genuine love is the supreme value, even greater than faith and hope (13:13), love is the standard by which to measure the usefulness of the spiritual gifts in the church. It is far better to do something which benefits others (love) than to be indulging myself. In private prayer, speaking in tongues (without interpretation) benefits me. In public worship, speaking in tongues without interpretation does not benefit others—at least not in the way that prophecy (and other gifts) can. The general rule stands: **love is the standard by which to evaluate and exercise the spiritual gifts.**

But what does it mean to prophesy? As pointed out briefly in the previous lesson, the distinct character of prophecy is that it is a word from God. It is what God has to say about something, a divine message for a particular situation. A prophecy could also be a word of knowledge or word of wisdom. As God’s word on something, prophecy obviously comes with considerable authority, which makes it all the more important to examine anything presented as prophecy to ascertain whether it is in fact from God. (See the discussion below on 14:29).

A “prophecy” from God does not need to be prediction of the future. It does need to be a word that “builds up” the people of God, not necessarily by making us *feel better* but certainly by tending to help us *be better*. Because of its immediate capacity to edify, exhort, and comfort those who hear it, prophecy is “greater” than speaking in tongues (vs. 5). Paul indicates, however, that if the speaking in tongues receives an interpretation, the combination of tongues and interpretation can be of equal value. The standard of measurement for this evaluation is the benefit to the church, not how the person speaking feels about it. To put it in terms of ch. 13, prophecy is greater than un-interpreted speaking in tongues because it demonstrates more love for others.

14:6-12 Intelligible versus unintelligible

What Paul has already said to compare tongues and prophecy, against the backdrop of the guiding value of love, would seem to be enough, but Paul is not even close to being done. The Corinthian church must have had significant problems caused by public speaking of un-interpreted tongues, prompting Paul to continue his detailed discussion.

His main point in this paragraph is that un-interpreted speaking in tongues is “not intelligible” (vs. 9). That is to say, someone who hears it will not know how to respond. Random sounds do not make recognizable music (vs. 7). Even more seriously, a bugle which “gives an indistinct sound” will be unable to rally the troops for battle (vs. 8). Likewise, someone who speaks in tongues is simply “speaking into the air” (vs. 9) as far as others are concerned. They cannot respond one way or the other.

Verses 10-11 acknowledge that there are many different languages in the world, which are intelligible to some people but not to others. If I wish to communicate with someone, we have to find a mutually useful language, one which we both know sufficiently. Paul makes this observation with regard to the usefulness of speaking in tongues which are not interpreted. The principle applies to using the language of the people you want to reach but also to other aspects of communication. For example, if we want to communicate the gospel to an un-evangelized tribe we need to use their language. We may also need to use their music! Obviously this has application not only across the borders of nations but also across the generations within our own culture.

14:13-25 With or without the mind?

Verse 13 begins a new paragraph with the word “therefore,” which establishes a logical connection with what has just been said. *Because* we should want to excel in things which benefit the whole church rather than simply making us feel better personally (vs.12), the “one who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret.” An interpretation is not necessarily a strict “translation,” but rather a statement of the significance of what has been said. What is spoken in an unknown tongue is spoken to God (vs. 3); the “interpretation,” however, may be phrased as either spoken to God or to the congregation. Paul is thinking particularly of the one who feels inspired to speak in tongues in a public setting. (Although there might be application to the interpretation of tongues spoken in private, Paul is not really discussing that here.)

The implication of vs. 14 is that prayer can involve different aspects of our being. Praying in a tongue is prayer of the person’s spirit enabled by the Holy Spirit, but if left un-interpreted the “mind is unfruitful.” Again, Paul is not saying that praying in tongues is bad. He is simply saying that it does not do the kind of good that needs to be done in a public worship setting. If the mind is unfruitful, there is nothing to share with another person. On the other hand, if the significance of the prayer or praise can be stated in understandable language, then the mind of the speaker is benefited, but so also are the minds of others in the group.

Sometimes people who think they are being “spiritual” make disparaging comments about the “mind” or human reason. Certainly Christianity is not simply about the mind, but neither is it simply mindless enthusiasm and feeling. In other texts (Rom. 12:2, Eph. 4:23) Paul tells us how to be transformed by the “renewal” of the mind. The human mind needs to be renewed; it should not be discarded. The human race was created with a mind so that we could make responsible choices based on observation and reason. People who tell you to “set your brain aside” usually want to make choices for you. It is not wise to trust them.

Paul is all for the full involvement of our spirits in worship and prayer, but he is also all for involving our minds: “I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also” (vs. 15). Not only is that the best balance for us as individuals; it is essential for the communication that builds up the body of Christ. It is also essential for the communication that extends the body of Christ through effective outreach.

Even non-believers should be able either to agree or disagree with what we say in worship. An “outsider” can say “amen” if he agrees with your thanks to God, but he cannot join in the gratitude at all if he does not know that you are giving thanks (vss. 16-17). If the “outsider” does not understand what is said, then he can neither agree nor disagree. If his understanding is not addressed, his will cannot respond.

If “outsiders or unbelievers” are present at the church’s worship, they need to hear words they understand in order to perceive the choice they need to make (vs. 23). If all they hear is meaningless gibberish, they will not see any need to respond to people who are out of their minds. If, on the other hand, they hear Spirit-inspired prophetic words which they understand, they now have to decide what to do with what they hear. In the best-case scenario, the outsider sees the reality of God in the life of the church and also his/her need for God (vss. 24-25).

The response made possible by understandable words is the choice to “worship” (vs. 25). Paul is talking about tongues and prophecy, but this truth applies in other aspects of public worship. For example, what if a stranger to Christianity comes into our service and finds the music fascinating and enthralling? Imagine that person getting “with it” as far as the melody, beat, and sheer beauty of the music. Is that person worshipping? I wouldn’t want to throw cold water on that person’s enjoyment of the music, but I would say that, at best, that person is on the “edge” of worship, enjoying the surface expression perhaps but not able to say a genuine “Amen” to the belief expressed by the music. Genuine worship (for rational beings, which is how God made us) becomes possible only when the will is confronted: “If this is true, then God has a claim on my life; how should I respond?” The emotions and even the imagination may be engaged, but until the will is addressed worship in the fullest sense has not occurred. Worship for rational creatures must be an act of the will.

So, for the sake of other believers and for the sake of the “outsider,” Paul says that he would “rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue” (vs. 19).

Since that is Paul’s estimate of the value of intelligible speech in the group setting, he must be referring to times of private prayer when he says, “I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you” (vs. 18). Obviously Paul finds the self-edification of praying in tongues to be very beneficial, but when he is in church he puts the benefit of others ahead of his own. To be employed properly, the gifts of the Spirit should serve the purposes of love.

[It is possible that the “spiritual” experiences of some Corinthian Christians involved more of the emotional than the rational. Some seemed to be so enthralled by the experience of speaking in tongues that they left other aspects out, considering their tongues to be a “sign” of their spirituality. But Paul says that tongues are not a sign for believers “but for unbelievers” (vs.22), by which he seems to mean that their inability to make sense of the tongues is a sign that they are unbelievers, but it is *a sign they do not* (cannot) *understand*. Paul’s logic is a little hard to follow here, but that seems to be the point of his quotation from Isaiah 28:11-12 in 1 Cor. 14:21. Perhaps we could say it more simply this way: “You aren’t going to reach other people by speaking in tongues in your church service. All you will do is drive them away, confirmed in their unbelief. If you want a ‘sign’ gift that will be effective in reaching others, seek to prophesy.” Again, love is the ruling value, rather than exhibition of one’s gift.]

14:26-40 All things in order

Based on the importance of love and intelligibility, how should we proceed in the conduct of public worship? Paul says there should be room for various contributions from many people—“each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation” (vs. 26). This is a list of examples, not an exhaustive list of all the possibilities. But Paul restates the guiding principle for how all these and other contributions are to be made: “**Let all things be done for building up**” (vs. 26, ESV). For the sake of “all things” and for the sake of “building up,” there must be order. So Paul proceeds to give further instruction for the regulation of tongues and prophecy in vss. 27-33.

Without order some things that need to happen will get crowded out. Without order even good things will not do all the good they should do. An example would be the energy needed to move your automobile. If all that energy is released at the same moment, you don’t move forward; you blow up! When that energy is released in a controlled, orderly sequence, the whole vehicle moves forward. An immeasurable amount of energy is in the universe, from the level of the atom to the level of the galaxies, but without order there is no universe, there are no atoms, and there are no galaxies. So, for the sake of “all things” in the universe, order is necessary. For the sake of “all things” in the church, order is necessary.

As the problem in Corinth seems to be unbridled speaking of un-interpreted tongues, he gives specific limitations to them: “Let there be only two or at the most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret” (vs. 27, ESV). Since Paul felt the need to give this instruction, there must have been many speaking in tongues at one time, perhaps even competing to make themselves heard! Paul reins them in, for the sake of “all things” and for the sake of “building up.” If only two or three are permitted to speak in tongues, time will be available for other things which need to be done. And if two or three speak in tongues, there should be interpretation to state the significance of what is said. If there is no one there to interpret, Paul says they should keep quiet or just speak to God quietly, in a way that doesn’t interfere with what else is being said or done (vs. 28).

Likewise Paul puts a general limit on prophecies. Two or three may exercise that gift, and other prophets can “weigh what is said” along with the rest of the congregation (vs. 29). This “weighing” would perhaps involve discernment of spirits (12:10), but certainly it would mean thinking about what is said and how to respond. Whether the “prophecy” supports or undermines the Lordship of Jesus would be one test (12:3). Another would be agreement with the known teachings of Scripture. (Unlike “prophecies” given in church or prayer meetings, Scripture has already been validated by the whole church as the standard by which to judge all theological and spiritual claims. A “prophetic word,” if deemed genuine, would still not have the same level of authority as the Bible.)

A prophetic word is usually recognized as such because its inherent authority is recognized. Whether it comes as part of a “prepared” message or “spontaneously” is less decisive than its being discerned by others as, in fact, God’s perspective on things (see also 1 Thess. 5:19-21). Sometimes persons who believe they are delivering a prophetic word preface it with “Thus says the Lord.” That does not in any way relieve Christians (especially those in leadership) of the responsibility to weigh what is said and either commend it as God’s message or treat it as one person’s opinion, or (what can be the case) a mixture. (Obviously, to dismiss something claimed to be God’s message needs to be done carefully and with due consideration of the feelings of the person who brought the message (see vss. 29-31).)

An important implication of Paul’s instructions for speaking in tongues and prophesying is that *the Holy Spirit’s inspirations are not irresistible compulsions*. If the movement of the Holy Spirit was irresistible in a person, Paul would be wasting his time to instruct the church to limit the audible speaking in tongues to two or three, and to take turns at that. The movement of the Holy Spirit does not negate the human responsibility to do things in an orderly fashion, for the sake of “all things” and for the sake of “building up” (vss. 26, 40). Persons who feel inspired to speak in tongues *can* “keep silent in church” if the situation requires it (vs. 29). Persons who believe that God has given them a prophetic word to speak *can* “be silent” to let someone else speak for a change (vs. 30). It doesn’t have to be the same person every time; others should be encouraged to “learn by doing” (vs. 31). A genuine prophet should not speak out of turn and then say, “I couldn’t help myself,” since “the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets” (vs. 32).

As stressed earlier in this lesson, Paul invokes principles which are applicable in more than just the exercise of spiritual gifts. For example, often people sincerely feel God wants them to do something, but poor human judgment about *when* and *how* can bring negative results. That doesn't necessarily mean the inspiration for their action was not from God. We might like to have guarantees that as long as the Spirit is inspiring us we are bound to succeed, but the truth is that fallible human responses are always going to be part of the picture—the imperfect human responses of those who feel led by the Spirit and the human responses of those who hear the words or observe the actions. Divine action does not negate human response-ability. That is why even when the Holy Spirit of God is moving among us, humans have to exercise responsibility for appropriate order.

Appropriate order allows room for the Holy Spirit's inspirations and a certain amount of spontaneity, but without descending into chaos. If our meetings become chaotic and confusing, it is not the fault of the Holy Spirit but a failure of human leadership. "For God is not a God of confusion but of peace" (vs. 33, ESV). Don't blame God for chaos or confusion at church!

One of the issues creating confusion at Corinth was the disruptive behavior of certain women. As discussed earlier (in Lesson 5), Paul expected women, as well as men, to pray and prophesy in the worship setting. In ch. 11, Paul stressed the importance of proper head coverings when women prayed or prophesied. Here, in 14:34, in what seems like a contradiction to his words in ch. 11, Paul says, "Women should keep silent in the churches" (14:34). Since we have to assume that Paul would not deliberately contradict himself so flagrantly, we rightly seek a more reasonable explanation for his words in 14:34.

What Paul seems to refer to in 14:34 is not absolute silence in the sense of non-participation in the gifts of the Spirit, but rather avoidance of the disruptions caused by asking questions or making comments at the wrong time. In view of the immediate context, in which Paul has been talking about letting prophets speak and then letting "the others weigh what is said" (vs. 28), he probably has in mind the questioning of the prophets by women, perhaps even a wife raising questions about a prophecy spoken by her husband! It's not hard to imagine the disruption and distraction this would cause! (That may be the implication of vs. 35).

In those days, in that culture and following the synagogue pattern, women sat on the other side of the building from the men, or in the balcony if there was one. If women were making comments to their husbands or asking them questions during the worship service, it would necessarily create a distraction. Thus Paul's instruction: "let them ask their husbands at home" (vs. 35). If Paul demanded absolute silence from women in worship, the place to say that was in ch. 11. In this context, Paul has been dealing with the chaotic exuberance of people speaking aloud in tongues without interpretation, and perhaps too many people wanting to prophesy and not keeping proper order. In this case, his words, "it is shameful for a woman to speak in church," refer to the shameful disruption that was caused. He does not mean that it is inherently shameful for a woman to take part (provided it is done in proper order). [The questions surrounding this text are

far more complex than I have indicated here. While I generally like and agree with Gordon Fee's commentary (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1987), on this passage I lean more toward Anthony Thiselton (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 2000).]

As discussed in Lesson 5, cultural patterns and expectations have changed. We no longer segregate the genders in different sections of the sanctuary. The principle of avoiding disruption, however, would naturally still apply.

Paul's words in vss. 36-38 enforce his guidance (at least in the principles, which have to be applied in regard to other activities and in other cultural settings) as "a command of the Lord." Some in Corinth, however, resisted Paul's leadership in this and other issues, and Paul had to write much stronger words of rebuke in 2 Corinthians (see especially chs. 10-13).

To conclude this section, which began in 12:1, Paul repeats his commendation of prophecy. He also forbids the forbidding of tongues (14:39). Regulation does not mean ruling out. And the final verse gives us the general principle in succinct form: "all things should be done decently and in order" (vs. 40). As noted above (in commenting on vs. 26), Paul's theme has been "all things" for "upbuilding." As someone said, first you have to let **all things be done**, but the responsibility for keeping them in order is inescapable.

First Corinthians

LESSON EIGHT

Worship in the Light of the Resurrection.

1 Corinthians 15

Paul has finished dealing with issues directly involving behavior at worship. With the question of the resurrection, you could say he is now dealing with belief rather than behavior. But of course behavior and doctrine are inseparable. What you believe affects how you act. How you are committed to act also affects what you are willing to believe.

Some beliefs are integrally related to specific acts of worship. For instance, belief in the Trinity shapes the wording of certain prayers and acts of praise. Belief in the resurrection affects not only the words we speak in worship but also the attitude and posture of our hearts. That in turn can make a great difference in what we receive from worship.

The historical and theological basis for *Christian worship* as such is found in this chapter. First of all, belief in Jesus' resurrection serves as the basis for worshipping *Christ* by *name*. The recognition of Jesus as Lord is tied to his resurrection (see Rom. 10:9-10; John 20:28; and recall 1 Cor. 12:3). Indeed the confession and worship of Jesus as Lord is the most distinctive and essential element of Christian worship. Without this confession (explicitly or at least implicitly) the worship may be sincere, but it cannot be called Christian.

Another implication of the resurrection, not spelled out in 1 Cor. 15 but nonetheless important for thinking about Christian worship, is what we call "the communion of saints" in the Apostles' Creed (see also 1 John 1:3; Col. 1:12). In light of Jesus' resurrection we can see our worship as part of the larger group of saints on earth and in heaven who worship the Lord. Death did not defeat him; it has not defeated those who belong to him. Although the saints in heaven died on earth, they live in Jesus' presence and they praise God. When we worship we "join their unending hymn" (from the liturgy of Holy Communion, *The United Methodist Hymnal*, p. 13). Our loved ones may not be with us any longer "in the flesh," but when we worship we are in their company, for they likewise worship

Jesus' defeat of death sets a *tone* for Christian worship; it even helps to set the *time* of the most traditional Christian worship service: Sunday morning, the first day of the week, the day of the resurrection. Instead of the Jewish Sabbath on Saturday, Christians early developed the custom of gathering for worship on the first day of the week (see 1 Cor. 16:2). Every Sunday worship service should be a "little Easter," a celebration of Jesus' victory and the assurance of our (eventual) victory because of Christ. Participation in worship, especially corporate worship, expresses this victory. Gordon T. Smith said it this way:

Each gathering of God's people represents another victory, another proclamation, verbal and nonverbal, that despite the headlines in the daily newspapers and despite the discouragement each Christian faces in the world—either in making a

home, in fulfilling an occupation, or in the frustration of failure, unemployment, or death—Christ Jesus remains on the throne of the universe, still forgiving sins, still speaking truth, still filling his people with his Spirit, and still granting his benediction upon all who call upon his name. [*The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, ed. Robert Webber, vol. 7, pp. 331-32]

As we go through 1 Cor. 15, we will see how other elements of Christian belief and worship likewise depend on the truth of Jesus' resurrection and the expectation of ours.

15:1-11 How firm a foundation?

Paul has dealt with various issues in this long epistle, but he has left until now the need to "remind" the Corinthians of the basics of "the gospel" (vs. 1). This is not new, and from Paul's argument in 1 Cor. 15, it seems that the Corinthian believers had received and confessed the truth of Jesus' resurrection. Paul is concerned, however, that "some" (vs. 12) do not "hold fast to the word" as he preached it (vs. 2), or perhaps they just did not understand fully. Either way, it is worth his time to go back over what he had already "delivered" to them "as of first importance" (vs. 3). These gospel basics must not be forgotten or neglected, no matter how good or exciting other aspects of worship might be.

The first point is "that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures" (vs. 3), i.e., Jesus' death was purposeful and according to God's plan and promise, and we are the beneficiaries. "That he was buried" (vs. 4) may seem trite, but it points to the reality of Jesus' death and the credibility of the eyewitnesses to the resurrection (the Gospels also record the witnessing of Jesus' burial; see Matt. 27:57-61; Mk. 15:46-47; Lk. 23:55).

Paul lists first the witnesses who would carry the most weight at Corinth: "Cephas" (Peter, recall 1 Cor. 1:12) and "the twelve" (vs. 5). The number of eyewitnesses alive at the time of Paul's writing (ca. 55 A.D.) was still in the several hundreds (vs. 6). Any honest investigator would have no trouble verifying the facts in the case, provided such a person was willing to accept the evidence usually regarded as best for the courtroom—eyewitness testimony. Paul also counts himself as a witness to Jesus' resurrection, although his encounter with the Risen Lord was after Jesus' ascension (vss. 8-9). Whether it was Paul's testimony, Peter's, or that of several hundred others, the Corinthian believers had accepted the account of Jesus' resurrection when they embraced the gospel and became Christians (vs. 11). There is no believing the gospel apart from these facts; indeed there is no gospel. The historical nature of Christian belief cannot be escaped.

Paul has brought forward powerful arguments (eyewitnesses) for the truth of Jesus' resurrection, but he will spend more effort persuading the young Corinthian Christians of the certainty of their own, future resurrection.

15:12-19 Christ's resurrection and ours

At the time of Jesus and Paul, most Jews would have believed in the resurrection at the end of the world (see John 11:24). The Sadducees represented a minority opinion (Matt. 22:23; Acts 23:8). Among the Greeks, however, there was belief in the immortality of the soul but not resurrection of the body. The Greek philosophy pervading their culture

regarded the spiritual dimension as unchanging reality, and the only thing that was truly 'good.' The body, along with all material things, was not meant to last forever (according to their Greek thinking). Recall how mention of the resurrection affected Paul's Greek audience in Acts. 17:32. (Paul has to emphasize this again in 2 Cor. 5.)

The contradiction in the Corinthian church was that "Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead," and yet "some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead," i.e., no general resurrection in the future (vs. 12). Paul points out the logical inconsistency of this in vss. 13-16. If "the dead are not raised," then Christ was not raised. The Greek Christians cannot have it both ways—they cannot believe the gospel witness and hang on to their Greek philosophy about the human body and material reality. If we believe the historical testimony of those who saw the Risen Lord Jesus, we have to adjust our philosophy about the future of humanity accordingly.

We cannot pick from the Christian menu, cafeteria style. If the resurrection is dismissed, the preaching of Paul and the other apostles "is in vain," and the church's "faith is in vain" (vs. 14). The apostles have been lying about God, if God did not raise Jesus from the dead (vs. 15); in that case we should not trust anything the apostles teach. Christians are deluded to think that their sins are forgiven, "if Christ has not been raised" (vs. 17). And, sadly, believers who have died, quite simply "have perished" (vs. 18). Believing in Jesus might have added some cheer to their earthly life, but it was false hope because it had no future in it (vs. 19). If the dead are not raised, we are "most to be pitied" for allowing a false hope to delude us. If, on the other hand, Christ has been raised, then our hope is too big to be contained in this earthly life.

15:20-28 Firstfruits and full harvest

"But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead" (vs. 20), a fact which all the Corinthian Christians had professed to believe. Paul proceeds to show how belief in Christ's resurrection (as a *fact*) necessarily brings with it the belief in our resurrection (in the *future*). He uses an illustration from the Old Testament—"the firstfruits." Leviticus 23:9-14 commanded the offering to God of the first part of the harvest, as a way of giving thanks and as a testimony of confidence that more is coming. Jesus' resurrection is the beginning, already, of the renewal event which includes our own resurrection. (In Rom. 8:23 Paul uses the same illustration for the presence of the Holy Spirit in us, serving as the "firstfruits" of the fullness of life, which includes resurrection.)

In vs. 21 Paul introduces a comparison between Jesus and Adam, which he comes back to in vs. 45. His point is that just as Adam bequeathed us death (in the physical body as well as spiritually) so Christ bestows life (not only spiritually but also physically). But there is a timeline: *first* the firstfruits (Jesus' resurrection which has already happened); *then* "at his coming those who belong to Christ" (vs. 23). Just as surely as Christ rose from the dead during his first coming, so also we will rise at his second coming (see 1 Thess. 4:14-18).

Until then, Christ reigns as Lord, but every enemy of God's purpose has not been totally subjugated (vss. 24-28). "The last enemy to be destroyed is death" (vs. 26). Death is not

just our enemy; it is God's enemy in the sense that death is not his will for the human race he created for his pleasure (Rev. 4:11). Death came in because we got out of God's will into sin. In doing God's will, Jesus saves us not only from sin but also from the death that follows as a consequence. For Christ's victory and reign to be complete, the physical deaths of believers in Christ must be overcome; our bodies must be raised. Then, "when all things are subjected to him" (vs. 28), the Son's reign will be complete, and he will have completely fulfilled the will of the Father, "that God may be all in all" (vs. 28). Our resurrection is a necessary part of the triumph of God, a triumph already assured by Jesus' resurrection but still in process until our own. We cannot "opt out" of this part of salvation, even if the Greek-thinking Christians in Corinth did not like it!

15:29-34 Present behavior and future hope

The first verse of this paragraph is one of the most obscure in the NT, because we don't know what Paul meant by "being baptized on behalf of the dead" (vs. 29). A very *unlikely* interpretation is that of the Mormons, who receive baptism for the salvation of their ancestors (thus their interest in genealogy). More likely (but far from certain) is the possibility that certain Corinthians had been baptized because of the witness of loved ones who had since died. Another possibility is that Paul is saying Christian baptism is identification with a dead man, Jesus, unless he was raised from the dead! In that case, baptism identifies you with a bodily-raised Savior, and you will be raised, too! Whatever activity Paul is talking about, his point is that the Corinthians would have no reason to be doing it (and he assumes they are) except for the hope of resurrection.

That is clearly the point of Paul's own example (vss. 30-32). He risks physical death on a daily or even hourly basis. His behavior is insane unless there is truth in the hope of resurrection. "If the dead are not raised," the most reasonable way to live is to maximize temporal pleasures (vs. 32). Paul's rebuke in vss. 33-34 indicates that rejection (or neglect) of the doctrine of the resurrection will lead to a breakdown in morality.

The Greeks' inherited way of thinking about the human body was part of the reason for Paul having to teach them about the sacredness of their bodies as God's temple (1 Cor. 6:19-20). The typical Greek attitude (influenced by Plato) was that the body was little more than a prison cell for the spirit or soul. What you believe about the future of your body affects your attitude toward it in the present. (See 1 John 3:1-3.)

15:35-41 God is the answer to "How?"

The "someone" of vs. 15 is not necessarily anyone actually in the church in Corinth, although it could be. Paul is imagining the kind of objection which "someone" might raise. "How?" and "what kind of body?" are not bad questions, but Paul is dealing with them as questions raised by someone who doesn't want to believe, someone who is using questions as an evasion. So Paul calls that person "foolish" for not taking God into account.

God gives each seed "a body," a physical form which changes dramatically once "it dies" to produce a new plant (vss. 36-38). If God can do that, he can turn our mortal bodies into something very different, too! Don't limit God, Paul is saying. Even now we look

around us and see that all the “flesh” God has made is not the same: humans, animals, birds, and fish all have different kinds of flesh, but all the different kinds are from the same God (vs. 39). If God is capable of that, he is certainly capable of giving us a different kind of body in the future! Paul goes on: “there are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies,” and God made them all. The same God who made us made the sun, the moon, and the stars (vss. 40-41). It is ridiculous to say that the only kind of human body God can make is the kind we have now. God has already demonstrated his power to make all different kinds of physical forms. “How are the dead raised?” “God knows how.”

15:42-44 Sown natural, raised spiritual

It is helpful to keep the previous paragraph in mind while reading these verses. Paul is not talking about some “natural” necessity or inevitable outcome of burying a corpse like sowing a seed. (After all, we know that a seed has life in it; a human corpse does not.) Rather, Paul is saying that *God*—who is capable of making different kinds of physical forms—can take “the perishable” and turn it into “imperishable” (vs. 42). What is “sown in dishonor” God can raise “in glory”; what has succumbed to the “weakness” of our mortal nature, God can raise “in power,” not its own power but power imparted to it from God (vs. 43). We are not talking about the inherent indestructibility of the soul (whether that is true is not the point here). We are talking about *God* injecting a new quality of life, a power not inherent in us but found only in God. We are not talking about the survival of the soul; we are talking about the raising of the body.

The body that is buried is “a natural body” (vs. 44, ESV, NIV). Another translation is “a physical body” (NRSV), which reflects (in sound, at least) the Greek word used here: *psychikos*. *Psychikos* is an adjective from the noun *psyche*, the normal word for “soul.” (Yes, we get our term “psychology” from this word.) Perhaps a more literal translation for *psychikos* would be “soul-ish.” The contrast here, however, is really a comparison between the body we have at present (*psychikos*) and the body we will have in the future, which will be “spiritual” (*pneumatikos*). Whether we call the present body “natural,” “physical,” or “soul-ish,” the point is that it is not “spiritual.” We could simply say that the *psychikos* body is an “unspiritual” body.

This *psychikos/pneumatikos*, natural/spiritual contrast involves the same two words used in 1 Cor. 2:14-15, where the NIV renders *psychikos* as “without the Spirit.” That is more an interpretation than a translation, strictly speaking, but it helps us see the true contrast, in both 1 Cor. 2 and 1 Cor. 15. In 1 Cor. 2, the “natural” or *psychikos* person is one whose mindset and attitude are not open to God’s Spirit. Being “natural” or “unspiritual” in that context means either lacking God’s Spirit altogether or being inattentive to the Spirit. In 1 Cor. 15, the “natural” or *psychikos* body is the body that all of us have on earth, whether we are believers or not, and no matter how filled with the Spirit we are. The body we have at present is not “spiritual”; it lacks the capacity to receive the fullness of life which the Holy Spirit brings. That is why these present bodies *must* be changed to inherit everything God wants to give us (1 Cor. 15:50).

Paul is saying (in 15:44) that the present body, the mortal body that cannot live forever in its “natural” state, will be transformed by the power of God into “a spiritual body.” The

body we have now is not fully awake and open to the life-giving Spirit of God (see John 6:63). Inwardly we can experience the renewal of the Holy Spirit day by day, but outwardly we are aging and vulnerable to injury, sickness, and death (2 Cor. 4:16). That will not always remain the case, but it is the case until we receive “a spiritual body.” Just as surely as we now have “a natural body,” we will (in Christ) one day have “a spiritual body” (1 Cor. 15:44).

15:45-49 The new and final Adam

Paul quotes Gen. 2:7—“The first man Adam became a living being” (ESV, NIV). In light of vss. 42-44 and the discussion above, it is helpful to know that “being” translates *psyche*. Adam became a “living soul,” that is, the kind of being who could pass on *psychikos* life, the kind of life our bodies have. In contrast, “the last Adam became a life-giving spirit [*pneuma*],” i.e., the kind of being who can pass on “spiritual” life, including a “spiritual” body (a *pneumatikos* body).

It is clear from this statement about the “last Adam” that “spiritual body” does **not** mean “**not** physical.” If Paul had meant that, the Corinthians would have been agreeing with him already. From the Gospels we know that Jesus’ resurrected presence was not a mere spirit (see particularly Luke 24:39; John 20:27). His body was tangible, touchable, and recognizable as the same body which had been crucified; yet it was a body not bound by physical limitations. It was a body fully alive by the power of God’s Spirit and, more to the point here in 1 Cor. 15, a body through which Jesus could give his Spirit to us (see John 20:22; Acts 2:32-33). Jesus, by his resurrection, “became a life-giving spirit,” the kind of being who could give life by his Spirit. The first Adam could not do this; the last Adam does.

By calling Jesus “the last Adam” Paul pictures Christ as the new beginning for humanity. What Adam lost, Christ has regained. The will of God for humanity is now found, not in Adam and the kind of life he has propagated down the centuries, but in the last Adam and the kind of life he propagates. (See Rom. 5:12-21 for further comparison of Christ and Adam.) God’s will for humanity is to have the kind of life that Jesus now has, in a resurrected body.

The kind of life we now have in the body is not God’s final will for us. At present our “natural” life, from the “first man,” is “from the earth,” subject to the natural limitations of earth. But the life of “the second man is from heaven” and is “spiritual” (vss. 46-47), not limited to earth’s potential but filled with heaven’s potential. And “just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven” vs. 49, ESV). We know from experience what it is to have Adam’s kind of life; we know from Jesus’ experience what our lives will be like (see Phil. 3:20-21). To see our future, we don’t look at our past (as a human race); we look at Jesus, who is the new beginning for humanity. God’s will for us is to have the kind of life that Jesus has.

15:50-57 Inheriting the incorruptible

For our hope in Christ to be fulfilled, we must have our capacity increased! “Flesh and blood” (vs. 50) refers to the kind of life we have now, vulnerable and limited to the kind

of energy that “flesh and blood” can muster. It is inherently “perishable” and incapable of receiving the fullness of God’s kingdom. In contrast, the “spiritual” body we inherit from “the last Adam” will be open to all the energy heaven can provide. It is inherently “imperishable,” having already defeated death. From observing the limitations of our bodies and the limitlessness of God’s kingdom, it is obvious that we need a change in our beings to enter fully into God’s will for us as his children. Just as surely as we have to be born again of the Spirit in order to see the kingdom of God (John 3:3, 5), so we must receive a new body in order to inherit the kingdom in its fullness.

Speaking of the necessity of change brings Paul to reveal “a mystery” which goes beyond even what he had written earlier in 1 Thess. 4:15-17. There he had said that “we who are alive” at the time of Jesus’ second coming will join the resurrected saints and meet the Lord in the air. Obviously the bodies of the resurrected saints will have undergone a change—from dead bodies to alive! But Paul says nothing there about a change in the bodies of those alive at the time of Jesus’ return. Here he insists that “we shall all be changed” (1 Cor. 15:51). At the sound of “the trumpet” (vs.52, also 1 Thess. 4:16), “the dead will be raised imperishable,” and the living believers will be changed likewise into imperishable bodies.

This change is a necessity: “For this perishable body **must** put on the imperishable, and this mortal body **must** put on immortality” (vs. 53; the word translated “must” is actually the first word in this sentence, putting great emphasis on it—“it is necessary”). When this necessary change is complete, “then shall come to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory’” (vs. 54, quoting Isa. 25:8). Then we can join the taunting song, “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” (vs. 55, quoting Hos. 13:14). Or, if we choose, we can join the song of deliverance right now, since Jesus (our final Adam) has already won this victory for us!

Christ Jesus has already defeated “the sting of death,” which is sin. He has already delivered us from “the power of sin,” which is the law’s condemnation of our sins, which are now under his blood. Although we still have our mortal bodies, incapable of forever evading our enemy, death, Jesus has defeated this enemy for us. And Jesus is not going to allow death to have the victory over any part of us, not our spirits, our minds, or our bodies. Indeed, “thanks be to God, who gives us the victory”—such complete victory!—“through our Lord Jesus Christ” (vs. 57).

15:58 Future hope and present behavior

The certainty of this hope for the future makes a difference in the present. Because we know the eventual outcome, we can be “steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord.” Knowing that our efforts and even our struggles are “not in vain” energizes us. We worship in light of the resurrection; therefore we worship with hope. We will not always struggle with limitations and frailties, but we will always worship, eventually in bodies that are fit to last and glorify God endlessly.