

## George Philip Bible Readings

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### PAUL'S FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS

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### 1:1-3

The story of the founding of the church in Corinth is recorded in Acts 18:1-18, and this letter addressed to it was written by Paul when he was at Ephesus (1 Cor. 16:8) about AD 55. It deals with problems and difficulties in the church which the Christians seemed to be taking very lightly. The specific problems will become clear as we study the letter but we must first consider the situation and atmosphere of the city of Corinth. That there was a church at all in Corinth was a miracle of God's grace. The city was a prosperous double seaport, as a map will show. The constant coming and going made it a restless place, and, being dominated by the Temple of Aphrodite, its morals were indeed permissive. The people were proud of their intellectual and cultural achievements. Their way of life was notorious in indulgence and self-expression, and they resented correction. When Paul wrote this letter, it was clear that the easy-going attitudes of society had infected the church, and wrong behaviour of the grossest kind was accepted without protest (1 Cor. 5:1). Of course, we must not be quick to condemn, because the Christians in the church at Corinth had been converted, saved, out of a terrible background, as 1 Cor. 6:9-11 makes plain. They had naturally a lot to learn. Their whole pattern of thinking, desiring and acting had to be remoulded (Rom. 12:1-2) by the teaching of God's Word, and this is something we need to recognise and remember as we deal with converts in our own generation. When people are willing to be taught, the transformation can be swift and radical, but where there is pride there is resistance to God's Word and a low level of Christian life results. It is clear from Acts 18:11 that the converts in Corinth were taught in God's truth right from the start, but it appears that very soon they became proud of their own spirituality and were to a great extent unteachable. We begin to see how necessary it was for Paul to write to them.

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### 1:1-3

We need to go back again to the founding of the church in Corinth in order to marvel at the sovereign providence and the sovereign grace of God. In Acts 18:1-4 we are told that after his contemptuous rejection by the intellectuals in Athens (Acts 17:16-21,29-33), Paul came to Corinth, no doubt feeling sore in heart because sharing the rejection of Jesus Christ is costly. To his surprise and delight he found in Corinth a Christian married couple of the same tent making trade as himself. Aquila and Priscilla were in Corinth because they had been hounded out of Rome by persecution. That had not been easy for them and no doubt they would have wondered why it had happened, and why God had led them to a terrible place like Corinth. They had been sent by God in preparation for the coming ministry of Paul, which ministry was one of reasoning out of the Scriptures. (The RSV in several places uses the word 'argued' instead of 'reasoned' and this is unfortunate because Paul's method was teaching not confrontation.) Such was the opposition to the ministry that God gave Paul a supernatural assurance which enabled him to go on for eighteen months (18:9-11). Then, when God's saving work continued among the Gentile 'outsiders' (18:6), the bitter slander of the religious Jews knew no limits and they sought the help of the secular authorities to stop the preaching, but without success (18:12-18). The same providence of God, which had brought Aquila and Priscilla to Corinth and Paul to preach, worked through an unbelieving politician to prevent the work being stopped. The fact that Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue was set upon by the crowd of Corinthians shows just how much anti-Jewish and perhaps anti-religious feeling there was in the city. Of course, poor Sosthenes had just taken over as ruler of the synagogue because Crispus had been converted to Christ (18:8). If (but we cannot be sure) the Sosthenes in 1 Cor. 1:1 is the same man, then his sore experiences must have led him to believe what he and Crispus had both heard in Paul's expositions in the synagogue. God does indeed move in mysterious but wonderful ways to work His wonderful works.

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### 1:1-3

Before this 'first' letter to Corinth, there had been another (5:9) of which no trace remains. Paul had had a letter from the household of Chloe (1:11) and also an official letter from the church (7:1). He had, therefore, good grounds for writing to them. It seems Paul was also aware of the effect of the ministry of Apollos in Corinth. It is clear from Acts 18:24-19:1 that Apollos was a far more eloquent preacher than Paul (which does not mean he was a better preacher) and oratory was something that appealed to the Corinthians. Paul did not criticise Apollos but was aware that, possibly unwittingly, he had become a source of division. All of these factors indicate the

need for Paul to begin his letter with a clear, categorical affirmation of his apostolic authority. It seems that Paul had already sent Timothy to Corinth to assess the situation (Acts 19:22), and to exercise restraint on errors of doctrine and practice (1 Cor. 4:17-19). But Timothy had not yet returned (1 Cor. 16:10-11). Paul, therefore, must have been very aware of the significance of what he was now writing by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and he left the Corinthians in no doubt that what he was going to say had to be taken seriously. He addressed his words to the whole church, reminding them that it was God's church, not theirs (Acts 20:28), a church redeemed by God at infinite cost. The church is God's 'ecclesia', called out and called together in Christ, so that these believers no longer belonged to Corinth and were no longer allowed to live as Corinth's citizens but as Christ's men and women. They, who had trusted Christ for salvation, were marked men and women, as we are, whose lives should declare their identity.

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### 1:1-3

There is so much in this introduction that we make no apology for studying it in detail. Paul has made it plain that what he was saying is not up for discussion. He was telling them, and doing so by the authority of God's call. As believers they had to see themselves as sanctified, set apart and made complete in Christ. It was not their doing and therefore they had nothing to be proud about. Their salvation was all of God's grace. They were called to be saints, that is, to live as those set apart for God and to do so in the polluted atmosphere of Corinth. Perhaps already they had begun to think of themselves as something of a special case and particularly spiritual, so Paul reminded them that they were not by any means the only 'trophies of grace'. In the church they were together with all those in every place who call on the name of the Lord. That cuts proud people down to size and at the same time gives great encouragement to small groups of believers in many difficult, unrecognised and forgotten places. In Christ we are part of something of a far greater dimension than we have begun to realise. This is a great corrective to those feelings of depression when we think we, and the work we do, are small and insignificant. If Paul was emphasising the geographical spread of the church, our Lord was emphasising its historical continuity from generation to generation in John 4:37, 38. We do well to think of this when we sing, 'Like a mighty army, moves the church of God.' We belong together, and we share a common calling and life in blessings and in battles (1 Cor. 10:13). To be a Christian is to be someone who calls on the name of the Lord, looking to Him, seeking Him, desiring Him and committing ourselves to Him, recognising and rejoicing in the fact that, in Him, we are fully and gloriously provided for (Eph. 1:3; 1 Pet. 1:3; 2 Pet. 1:3-4). The all-sufficient grace of God and the peace of God that passes understanding are ours from God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul has introduced himself and the Gospel and he is ready to proceed with his letter.

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### 1:4-9

Although fully aware that he had stern things to say to the Corinthians Paul recognised that God had worked in them by His grace, bringing them to salvation, from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God (Acts 26:17,18). That was a cause for thanksgiving and Paul rejoiced because in his preaching he had been the human instrument under God whereby this great transformation had been accomplished. The Corinthians themselves were aware of the changes in their lives but we must note how wisely and carefully Paul reminded them that all they now had was the gift of God's grace in Jesus Christ. These Christians seem to have been very self-conscious of their new spirituality: their capacity to speak about spiritual things, their knowledge or grasp of the truth of the Gospel, their spiritual gifts, and their attitude of expectation regarding the coming again of the Lord Jesus Christ. When Paul remembered what lives these people had been living and what they were now, his heart could only rejoice and in v.6 he says that the preaching of the Gospel had been confirmed or validated in them and their transformation. Paul's words were a 'genuine expression of his heart, not just a clever softening up of their attitude in preparation for the hard things yet to be said. This is an important element of pastoral counselling on every level. Even when, we see wrongs that have to be righted we must still see, acknowledge and give credit for the good that is manifest and operative. After all, counselling is to correct, to restore balance and to set free to operate effectively. It is not intended to crush and to destroy. In dealing with each other we must always set ourselves in the context of God's amazing grace and His purposes for us. In that way we will learn to deal with others as graciously as He has dealt with us.

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## 1:4-9

Without qualifying, let alone contradicting yesterday's comments, we note that Paul praises the Corinthians for their spiritual gifts but not their spiritual maturity. Speech and knowledge were natural tendencies for the Corinthians and it is possible for 'gifts' of various kinds to conceal the truth about spiritual shallowness and even hypocrisy. In Isa. 29:13 and Ezek. 33:31 God complains that His people are being false and hypocritical, saying the right things while their hearts and lives were wrong. Paul will yet deal with the Corinthians on this level but here he sets the lives of these Christians into the context of the full, historical plan of salvation. They must not think of themselves as having 'arrived' spiritually nor must they doubt the reality and security of their salvation. In spite of the worrying reports he had received about the Corinthians, Paul refused to be dismayed. The God who begins the work of salvation will see it through to completeness (Phil. 1:6). The God who calls His people effectually is faithful and He will establish them in faith and life (1 Thess. 5:23-24; 1 Pet. 5:10). But note also that Paul speaks not only of being called into salvation but into the fellowship of the Son of God. Fellowship signifies being together, sharing together, living and working together in mutual support and respect and, as we shall see tomorrow, one of Paul's first concerns was the fact that the fellowship of the church in Corinth was being disturbed and hindered. Now, if we are all one in Christ Jesus; if all we are and have is given to us in Christ Jesus; if the call of our lives is to live for Jesus; and if such service is a privilege as it indeed is, then why are we at sixes and sevens with each other? This is the question Paul goes on to deal with.

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## 1:10-12

From this point down to 4:21, Paul is dealing with divisions in the church. Although he affirmed his apostolic authority in v.1 here he appeals, and he does so in Jesus' name and for Jesus' sake. He calls on them to agree, to end the dissensions or splintering into groups or cliques within the congregation. He calls them to be of the same frame of mind and opinion in things that matter. There is an echo here of Paul's words in Phil. 2:5-8, where he calls the believers to have the mind of Christ and to be willing like Him to yield their rights as well as their preferences. When Paul called them to be 'united' in the same mind, the word he used could be translated as 'knit together'. It is the word used in Matt. 4:21 for mending nets so that they will be useful again; in Gal. 6:1 for restoring someone who had fallen; and in 1 Thess. 3:10 for supplying what was lacking in faith. Paul was obviously concerned about the work and witness of the church which can only be hindered if Christians are preoccupied with disagreeing with and competing against each other. Paul did not hesitate to say clearly where he got his information about the disturbances in the congregation, and it seems that more than one of Chloe's servants had brought reports back to Ephesus. It is clear that Paul believed the reports and the word 'quarrelling' indicates that feelings were running high. It was a situation with explosive potential and it could tear the church apart. Whatever lay behind it, Paul was in no doubt that the attitudes being taken and the reactions expressed were not 'spiritual'. Indeed in Gal. 5:19-26 he declares strife, anger and party spirit to be the works of the flesh and a contradiction of the presence and work of the Spirit of God. These Christians were being worked on and motivated by a spirit that was alien to and opposed to Christ. That would be a shock to the spiritually proud Corinthians.

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## 1:10-12

Paul was shocked that the quarrelling, division, and, of course, the mutual criticism, were all being carried out in the name of spirituality. It seems there had been successive biblical and spiritual ministries in Corinth, although we do not know of Peter having been there. There is no suggestion of the ministers having been in competition, although no doubt their personalities, eloquence, methods and emphases differed. Paul was a poor speaker, in eloquence, but not in content (2 Cor. 10:10). Apollos was attractive as well as eloquent (Acts 18:24). Peter had been one of the original twelve and perhaps was more acceptable in Jerusalem which was regarded as the central 'office' of the church. Each group had its 'hero' or 'war cry' just as nowadays groups and denominations give themselves 'brand names' and all too often in doing so 'brand' others as not quite sound because they do not conform to every theological dot and comma. In Corinth they said, 'I am ...', 'I am ...' and you can almost feel the spiritual pride oozing out. Then there were those who, just as in our own day, said 'I do not belong to any denomination, I just go with Christ.' They were the proudest of all. Each group was claiming

spiritual superiority but each was demonstrating spiritual immaturity. There was little sign of the spirit of esteeming others better than themselves (Phil. 2:1-5). We must let Paul's words expose ourselves. It is so easy to give people spiritual place and emphasis just because we like them and get on well with them, or even because they are, in our eyes, gifted or important. But there is no place for this in Christ's church (Jas. 2:1-4). Look back over this chapter and see how often Paul speaks of 'The Lord Jesus Christ'. He is the only one who has the rightful claim to our love and loyalty.

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### **1:13-17**

What a challenge is in v.13! Those who were dividing the church were trying to divide Christ as if He belonged to them. It is interesting and significant that Paul addressed his rebuke to those who were boasting in his name. He did not mention Apollos or Peter, but he made it very plain that he had never had any desire to make a name for himself. He was saying that some of them were putting far too much emphasis on Paul who, after all, was only a messenger of the Gospel, a man who regarded himself as nothing (Eph. 3:8; 1 Cor. 15:9; 1 Tim. 1:15). Of course, this does not mean Paul was devaluing himself or his ministry; nor does it mean in any sense that it was wrong for those who had been brought to salvation, blessed and built up in their faith by Paul's ministry to express their gratitude and their affection. Those who never express their thanks tend to become hard and even a bit inhuman. Jesus spoke about this lack of gratitude in the story of the ten lepers in Lk. 17:11-19. Paul knew how much human expressions of love and loyalty could encourage (Gal. 4:15; Acts 20:37), and he himself was not slow to show tenderness (1 Thess. 1:7-8). Jesus was encouraged in His holy task by the woman with the box of ointment when none of His disciples showed their care (Man. 26:6-13). Jesus was also hurt and His burden added to when His closest friends who owed Him most were totally insensitive to His agony (Matt. 26:36-46). God Himself expressed at times the hurt of His heart at the lack of any expression of gratitude from His people (Isa. 1:2-3; Jer. 2:32; 3:19-20). But Paul's great emphasis is that it was Christ who was crucified for him and for them and it is to Christ that all our love and loyalty need to be shown.

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### **1:13-17**

If Paul was aware of the danger of people 'idolising' their ministers, he was also aware of the great danger of self-seeking on the part of ministers. It is indeed a temptation, when you are aware that God is using you, to seek to make a name for yourself or for your congregation. There are many applications of Paul's words about 'dying daily' (1 Cor. 15:31) and he made it his business to be nothing so that Christ could be everything (1 Cor. 9:19-23). His attitude was similar to that of John the Baptist: Christ must increasingly be the focus, and he, the servant, must fade into the background (John 3:30). Paul's reference to baptism does not necessarily mean that the rite of baptism was the issue causing the contention and division. What he says is that in the providence of God he had made it his practice not to take part in the baptism of converts lest anyone should think that the rite in any sense bound the person baptised to the one baptising. It is so easy for people to link the 'significance of the sacraments to the person administering them. This can lead only to 'priestcraft' and to the suggestion that Baptism and Communion in some way 'work' faith and salvation. In the Church of Scotland Report advocating the admission of children to the Lord's Table there is the appalling statement regarding 'the capacity of the Sacrament to generate faith' and in Glasgow Presbytery's Report this was taken to mean 'the capacity to create faith'. This is a total distortion of the Gospel and highlights the constant danger of the main emphasis of the church being on the Sacraments rather than on Christ crucified and on the preaching of the Gospel which calls for faith. There are issues of truth regarding which we must not give ground, as Paul makes plain in Gal. 1:6-9. But there are other issues about which Christians become obsessive so that they are blind to every other consideration except their own convictions, failing to recognise that their knowledge and understanding may be defective. Christ must be everything. But that is what some were saying in Corinth and they were 'writing off' everyone else as not 'sound'.

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### **1:13-17**

Verse 17 is so important it needs full consideration by itself. The priority for every preacher, and indeed every Christian, is to preach the Gospel. Nothing must be allowed to get in the way of this glorious objective, not even

the two sacraments of the church. If we allow organisation and administration, necessary as these are, to grow so complicated; if we allow 'extra' activities, even Christian activities, to drain away our best time and energy; if we give priority to family, friends and hobbies; and if we allow our verbal cleverness and personality extravagances to fill the stage so that the pulpit simply becomes a platform, then we do terrible damage. We may not depart from sound doctrine and people may regard us as front-rank evangelical preachers, but in our handling of the Gospel we drain it of its power. The eloquent wisdom Paul speaks about does not refer to careful use of words, thorough preparation and worthy presentation. After all, the Gospel deserves and calls for our best capacities and diligent study. Paul is referring to those in Corinth who, by their sophisticated language, their cleverness of technique and perhaps their jokes and extrovert gesticulations, made sure that they held the centre of the stage. That is the process that impresses gullible people with the preacher's personality but does not present them with Jesus Christ in His glory and saving power. 'No man can bear witness to himself and to Christ at the same time. No man can give at once the impression that he himself is clever and that Christ is mighty to save.' (3 Denney) We are not called to please, entertain or be acceptable. We are called to preach, teach, instruct and to present Christ in His complete sufficiency and Lordship. Any methods, be they drama, music, mime or many visual aids, that leave people entertained rather than challenged must be questioned.

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### 1:18

This one verse explains why Paul is so radical in v.17 and sets the scene for what follows in the rest of the chapter. In our witness to the Gospel we are dealing with two classes of people: those who are perishing and those who are being saved. This brings into focus the whole issue of eternal destiny and, if our Gospel is drained of its power, if it is being hidden by the smokescreen of 'self' intruding on the preaching of it, then it is being hidden from the very people who need it most desperately (2 Cor. 4:1-4 AV). The 'word of the Cross' refers to the preaching of Jesus Christ and Him crucified as the only Saviour of sinners and the only way to Heaven. The preaching of the Gospel bears in on men and women with the message that they are sinners and need to be saved. To some, the message is totally incomprehensible and unacceptable. It is foolishness. They cannot (or will not) see how such a message and methodology can have any relevance to the human situation and the pressing needs of life. But to others, from the moment they begin to hear the message, it 'registers' as the answer to their predicament regarding the guilt and power of sin. The gospel is indeed the power of God unto salvation for those who hear and believe it (Rom. 1:16-17). We must not, of course, forget the active work and ministry of the Holy Spirit who, through the word preached, convicts and converts (John 16:7-11). But it is a fact of experience, stated clearly in Scripture, that all will not be saved. Right from the start the preaching of Christ is to some a pointer to life and to others something of a death-knell (2 Cor. 2: 15-16). There is mystery that is beyond us, but aware of the issue we need to be absolutely clear in presenting the message. The same Word that undermines the sinner's self-confidence and convicts of sin and need, resulting in resentment and refusal, to others is a word of tender love, help, healing, comfort, hope, salvation and life. How we need to pray for the preaching of the Gospel both before and after the preaching!

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### 1:19-25

The whole of this passage is really a rebuke to those who are wise in their own eyes. The quotation in v.19 is taken from Isa. 29:11-14, which passage seems to speak of those who are totally bemused and simply cannot see, let alone understand, their true condition and need. Human wisdom is quite incapable of seeing and solving the human situation, and human wisdom of itself cannot work out the message of the Christian gospel. The gospel is not the product of human reasoning nor is it something that can be grasped only by intellect. It is God's gospel, given by God, revealed by God and it stands over against all human attempts to solve the human predicament. Right from the Garden of Eden, men and women have thought their way better than God's declared way, and the results have been catastrophic down through history. This does not deny the great achievements men and women have accomplished. After all, even in fallen human nature, there remains operative some of the 'genius' of being made in the image of God. But the whole of history testifies that, in spite of all his achievements, man has signally failed to recognise, meet and answer the basic need to be delivered from what he is by nature, choice and practice: namely a sinner. People still go to see the ruins of great civilisations, marvelling at what past generations accomplished. Paul says in v.20, 'Where is it all?' Tennyson spoke well

when he said, 'Our little systems have their day, they have their day and cease to be.' The hymn-writer echoes the same message, 'Pride of man and earthly glory, sword and crown betray his trust; what with care and toil he buildeth, tower and temple fall to dust.' There are many who are hungrily seeking for a 'god' to look to and to trust in, but they look in the direction of man and his achievements. There is no hope there!

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### 1:19-25

Remember that Paul had come to Corinth from intellectual, cultured Athens where he had seen an altar to the unknown God (Acts 17:22-23). Human wisdom had demonstrated the foolishness of its claim to be the guide and deliverer of humanity and God had demonstrated its incompetence. God says, 'Look at the world situation you have created. Is that the wisdom you are so proud of?' Of course, even if men believe in God and in His eternal power and deity (Rom. 1:19-21), there is neither solution nor hope if they still do not yield to Him in faith and obedience. It is true that the heavens declare the glory of God and the earth shows His handiwork (Ps. 19:1) but man can spend his time examining and researching Creation and all we mean by space, and still remain in ignorance of God in terms of solving human spiritual need. By his own searching man cannot find out God (Job 11:7 AV), but God in His sovereign wisdom decided to reveal Himself and His way of salvation and life by means of the message of the Cross, as that message is preached, proclaimed, taught or read. It is through the foolishness of preaching (v.21 AV) that faith is awakened (Rom. 10:17) and this, of course, is a great challenge to all of us in terms of witness and in the business of being the prayer-partners of those called to preach. Think well of the urgent appeal of Paul in Eph. 6:18-20; Col. 4:2-4; and in 2 Thess. 3:1, and never allow yourself to say there is nothing you can do in terms of Christian service. There is no more vital service than to pray for the going forth of God's Gospel, because it is by this method that God is pleased to bring men and women to salvation. Of course, there are still those, both religious and secular people, who regard preaching as a secondary activity or even an irrelevance. They say, 'What use is that in the face of the world's needs?' The fact is that God saves, delivers and empowers men and women in newness of life by a crucified and risen Saviour. There is no other hope; no other way. (John 14:6; Acts 4:12).

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### 1:19-25

These verses are crowded with eternal truth that is totally contemporary. There are still those who, like the Jews, demand signs and wonders before they will believe. But 'proofs' leave no room for faith. People asked Jesus for signs, but He refused, and when the great sign of the Resurrection was given they still did not believe (Matt. 12:38-40; 28:11-15). The intellectuals, like the Greeks, seek to think their way to God, reasoning according to the pattern and principles of the world. To both categories the preaching of the Cross is a stumbling block. The religious are offended when told that their religion and good works cannot get them to Heaven. The intellectuals, the humanists, with their grand ideas of man being the master of his own fate are offended when told that in the most important area of life they cannot do it themselves and that they, like the religious, must come to God as empty-handed sinners and receive salvation as a gift. Let us face the facts clearly. So very many inside the churches and outside the churches believe that all in the end will go to Heaven. This idea of 'universalism', instilled into generations by unfaithful preaching and by sheer wishful thinking on the part of even the most dissolute, has been and still is one of the great barriers to the Gospel. If all will be saved then there is no real urgency in the Gospel. There is nothing to worry about. People take the attitude so contemptuously expressed by the atheist, 'God will forgive, that's His job.' But it was Jesus who said to some very religious, and proudly religious people that they would die in their sins, and that they were of their father, the Devil (John 8:21-24, 42-47). The issues of the Gospel are not a game. They are eternally serious.

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### 1:19-25

Read through the chapter from v.4 and see that Paul is setting the urgency of the Gospel over against the pride and squabbling of the believers in Corinth. They were so taken up with themselves that they were forgetting the salvation of sinners and forgetting that God in His sovereign grace had laid hold on them and brought them to Christ. This was not their own doing. While they were still sinners God had shown them His love (Rom. 5:6-8). While still dead in sin and in bondage to their personalities, their carnal way of life and the power of Satan, God

had saved them by His sovereign grace (Eph. 2:1-5). While they had been passing the Saviour by His love had laid hold on them. Jews and Greeks, insiders and outsiders, derelicts and achievers, had all alike discovered that Christ was in fact and practice the power of God unto salvation to all who believe (Rom. 1:16; John 3:16). Do not be distracted by the word 'called' as if it signified that God's 'election' to salvation was something mechanical, detached from the preaching of the Gospel and the call to faith. It pleases God in and through the preaching, hearing and responding to the Gospel to bring to pass the salvation of sinners. Think of the balanced words of the Catechism (Q.31), 'Effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the Gospel.' The Cross, and the death of the only sinless Man who ever lived, seems on the face of it to be weakness, defeat and tragedy but in fact it demonstrates both the wisdom of God and the power of God to remedy the human situation by dealing once for all with the guilt and the power of sin. Man had made Corinth the rotten city it was. God, in the Gospel, had already shown His power to change it.

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### 1:26-31

The first thing to note in these verses is the description of the membership of the church in Corinth. They were, by and large, ordinary people. The account in Acts 18 names only Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, as a well-known figure. That there were others who were high-ranking is clear from the fact that Paul says that not many wise, noble or powerful were called. But these men and women, whether upper class socially, intellectually or economically were not regarded as different from or better than the ordinary people. Nor are talented gifted people, or people who are 'personalities' any more valuable to God or useful in His service than so-called ordinary people. This is something that needs to be remembered in our own day when there is a tendency to make a great fuss if a politician, a pop star or a big-business man is converted. Whatever our background or capacity (and talents, cash and capacities can be dedicated to God, or can be held back from God), the truth is, as the old hymn has it, 'I'm only a sinner, saved by grace.' It is amazing and it is wonderful to consider just how many very ordinary people, often written off and despised by the world, God has called to be His instruments of blessing. When we take time to forget about ourselves, to trace God's goodness and mercy to us, and to recall how He has been pleased to give us the privilege of being used in His service, all thoughts of pride should be quenched. Indeed, especially when there have been evidences of God working through us, our immediate reaction, knowing ourselves as we are, should be to say without hesitation, 'This is the Lord's doing.' The glory is His and His alone. That is the attitude that keeps us usable in His service.

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### 1:26-31

The last two verses emphasise that God in His grace is the source of our life in Christ Jesus. Paul expresses it beautifully in 2 Cor. 4:6-7. First he says God gave us the light of life, and then he says we have the treasure of the stewardship of the Gospel in earthen vessels, literally 'clay pots'. The 'jug' does not matter and does not need to be noticed; it is the contents that matter. Today's verses declare that Christ is everything, that everything we need is in Christ, and only in Christ. It is wonderful, inspiring and challenging to see just how Christ-centred Paul was. Jesus Christ simply filled his horizon. He speaks in Col. 1:15-18 of how Christ stands pre-eminent. In Eph. 1:3 he rejoices in the fact that God has blessed us with everything there is to get, in Christ. In Gal. 2:20 he speaks of how the Son of God loved him and gave Himself for him. In Gal. 6:14 he speaks of the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ and in the light of that Cross he pours contempt on all his pride and refuses to boast of anything. We do well to read or sing the hymn, 'When I survey the wondrous Cross,' and to ponder the words of C T Studd: 'If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, no sacrifice is too great for me to make for Him.' Paul says that believers individually and corporately are 'in Christ'. That is their position, that is how God looks on them, that is the close personal relationship that binds them to Christ and to each other. The wisdom of God has come to us and touched us in Christ and has brought to us righteousness or justification (Rom. 5:1-2; 8:1; 2 Cor. 5:21), sanctification or holiness, and redemption, which is our final salvation on the great and final day. All that is ours from God in Christ, who paid the full ransom price for us (Heb. 9:12). If we are to boast at all, then it must be in terms of 'Hallelujah, what a Saviour!'

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## 2:1-5

It seems from v.5 that the objective of Paul's reasoning right from 1:10ff was to ground the faith of the Corinthians in God and in what God had done for them in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul was wise in his understanding of human nature and of the wiles of the Devil. He knew how easily people can be beguiled by both the eloquence and personality of those who preach the Gospel and how this focuses attention on the preacher rather than on the message preached. But 'hero-worship' is very different from saving faith, and Paul declared that, from the start, his ministry, which was one of teaching from the Scriptures, was concerned to present Christ in His person and work in plainest terms. The message was not an attractive one because it concerned sin being dealt with on the Cross and sin being dealt with in the lives of those who believed. The message of the Cross is a 'self' denying one, as Jesus made plain (Matt. 16: 24-26). The testimony of God, the revelation of His redeeming love, is so glorious and yet stark that it does not need the adornment of lofty words or wisdom to make it acceptable. In fact, the Gospel of the Cross will never be 'acceptable' because its basic message declares the fact that all have sinned, that all stand guilty before God, and that God judges sin (Rom. 3:9-20). The Cross declares that man is unable to work, earn or achieve his own salvation. The Cross proclaims forgiveness, life and salvation but it also calls for surrender and sacrifice. It may have been that the Corinthians, like so many in our own day, wanted preachers who would 'offer' them a Gospel of triumph and satisfaction that would make them feel good, and there is always a temptation for preachers to so clothe the message in attractive words and concepts that they will be popular, acceptable and successful. Paul was not prepared to be that kind of preacher, firstly because his concern was to be approved by God not men, and secondly for the sake of the good of those to whom he preached.

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## 2:1-5

Following on the close of the last note, read Acts 20:17-27, to see how seriously Paul regarded his ministry, because he knew that one day he had to give an account to God. Now we must consider both the determination of Paul to be faithful to the exclusiveness of his message and what it cost him to be faithful. Paul was quite clear that there is only one way to God, and this must still be made clear in a day when confusion about religion is so extensive. There is no excuse for religious bitterness, bigotry or persecution, but we cannot move from Jesus' own testimony in John 14:6. He is the way and no-one comes to God except through Him. All religions are not saying the same or leading to the same safe haven! In a different context Paul will say in 9:16, 'Woe is me, if I preach not the Gospel.' He was not ashamed of the Gospel (Rom. 1:16) and indeed there is nothing to be ashamed of on either intellectual or the moral level. The Gospel is grounded in God's unshakeable righteousness (Rom. 3:21-26). God does not excuse sin or close His eyes to it. He pays the righteous price of judgment in the death of His own Son. When Paul spoke of weakness, fear and trembling, he was not referring to cowardice or even to being afraid of the people and their reaction to him and his preaching. He was saying he was very aware of being nothing in himself; having no capacity of his own; being aware of the hand of God on him making him the spokesman of God, an awesome responsibility; and aware of the fact that he faced a society in which the powers of Satan were well established. That is enough to make any man tremble. Let no-one ever think that true preaching is easy. Apart from the burden of responsibility there is the daily dying to 'self' so that no one will be seen or heard except Jesus. Read 2 Cor. 4:7-12 and ponder the principle of fruitful service.

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## 2:1-5

A man greatly used by God over many years was being driven to a preaching engagement and his friend said, 'You are very quiet.' The reply was quiet and simple: 'It doesn't get any easier.' Now read 2 Cor. 1:8-11; Col. 1:24; and then ponder the burden and travail of our Lord Jesus Christ when he was at the heart and high point of His God-given task (Mk. 14:33; Lk. 12:49-50). Note also the contrast between v.3,4 in today's passage. Paul felt his weakness but his message carried with it the very power of God. This was not some one-off occasion. The very same thing happened when he preached in Thessalonica, as he describes it in 1 Thess. 1:4-7,13. But again we must go behind the scenes to the secret cost and explanation of usefulness in God's service. Read 2 Cor. 12:1-10. 'When I am weak I am strong. When I am content to be nothing so that Christ can be everything then I am the kind of man God can use.' Now read v.4,5 of today's passage and see again the connection. Paul was not

praising his own preaching but simply recognising that God's powerful blessing attended his poor words, and the objective was to point people to and anchor their faith in the saving power of God in Jesus Christ. If our faith is beginning to focus too much on a minister, or a fellowship, or on a building with its hallowed associations, then there is danger. God may have to take these things away from us or take us away from them, so that our faith will be in Christ. But there is a final lesson here. Paul is quite clear that when God's Gospel is being preached the situation is neither incidental nor negative. It is not like going to a concert or watching a play; in the preaching of the Word, God is present and there is a 'divine encounter', a meeting with God and a dealing with God. That is why we should never come to church in a rushed way or in a casual frame of mind.

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## 2:6-8

We must grapple with these difficult verses, remembering that they were first spoken to comparatively young converts, brought to Christ from a dark, pagan background. There is a lesson here for evangelism. Paul placed before his converts, right from the beginning, the strong meat of the Word, expecting them to be hungry and to get down to business. Nowadays we seem to expect far too little from converts, especially young people, and are too concerned to 'provide' easily digested Christian truth and undemanding service. Perhaps, as the atmosphere of society grows darker, more devilish and more persecuting, we will all be more realistic about Christian commitment. When Paul refers to the 'mature', he seems to be referring to those who are weaned away from the wisdom of the world and perhaps is hinting, not too gently, that the Corinthian Christians were not nearly so spiritually mature as they thought they were. In fact he says this bluntly at the beginning of the next chapter. He has referred to the limitation of human wisdom (5), but he was not despising all human wisdom, but only 'worldly' wisdom that has no root in faith, nor in the fear of God which is the beginning and the principal part of wisdom (Prov. 1:7; 9:10). Paul speaks of the wisdom of this age and the rulers who are under the impression that they hold the reins of history and that they have the capacity to direct and control, and to make the decisions of destiny. But they are deceived because on the one hand they have no power at all save what God has given them (John 19:11; Dan. 4:17) and on the other hand they are, even at their peak, in the process of passing away. If the truth be told, as it is told in the vivid imagery of the Books of Daniel and Revelation, and stated clearly in 1 John 2:15-17; 5:19, these worldly rulers are often simply the dupes of the Devil, being used and then cast off just as Judas was (Matt. 27:3-4). This is solemn but need not cause us fear, as we shall see tomorrow.

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## 2:6-8

When a Christian faces up to the reality of Satan's power and activity operating contrary to God, he also thinks of the fundamental fact that Satan is a defeated foe (Col. 2:15) and can operate only within God's strict limits (Job 1:6-12; 2:1-6). This is the secret wisdom of God, not a secret society but a secret made known in the Gospel, the good news that sin and Satan have been conquered. But Paul is saying more than that. He is still speaking of our salvation and he causes us to think of the plan of God which was laid before the worlds were made, which plan has in a detailed way incorporated our salvation and our glorification. God's thoughts about us are on a vast scale, as we shall see in the following verses. For today, think first of the wonder of our salvation as it is spoken of in Eph. 1:3-6, as having been specifically chosen in Christ right from the beginning. It makes you think of the hymn, 'And while I passed my Saviour by, His love laid hold on me.' This salvation is all so sure, as Rom. 8:29-30 declares so grandly. God will see to it that we do not fall by the way. And in Phil. 3:20-21 we are told what we shall yet be, set free from every limitation. All of this is by no means clear and visible as yet (1 John 3:2). It is God and His glorious purposes and working that are hidden, while evil struts the world's stage as if it was all powerful. Sometimes we need to take time quite deliberately to ponder the ignorance of worldly men and women, and how wrong they are with regard to their activities and objectives. People who regarded themselves as clever, competent leaders must have been devastated to be charged with the terrible crime of crucifying the Lord of glory. They did it deliberately with passionate, evil hatred, determined to get rid of this Jesus who so disturbed their complacency, challenged the reality of their religion, stole their power from them and accused them of being sinners. Their actions were evil and deliberate, but without their knowing it, they were doing the will of God (Acts 2:22-24).

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## 2:9-10

Time and time again Paul emphasises that the Gospel is something that God has revealed and made known. It is not the product of human reasoning. No amount of human thought could have produced the 'solution' to the world's need, and only eyes and hearts opened by the work of God's Spirit are able to see in the grim death of Jesus on the Cross the glorious light of salvation. Over against the enlightening work of God's Holy Spirit there needs to be set the blinding work of Satan, as Paul speaks of it in 2 Cor. 4:4. When we face the total ignorance, indifference, apathy and resistance of people towards the Gospel, we must recognise the work of Satan. He deceives and he blinds in such a way that people are unaware that they are victims of the malicious person of evil. Only the sovereign enlightening and enlivening work of the Holy Spirit can bring men and women to faith. What Paul is saying here is in accord with the teaching of Jesus, regarding the work of the Holy Spirit, in John chapters 14-16. (John 14:15-17, 25-26; 15:26; 16:7-15) No one knew better than Paul that when Jesus Christ is being preached the Holy Spirit is at work doing what is quite beyond the power of any man or woman to do, namely convicting of sin, opening minds and hearts, and enabling sinners to respond in faith and to find salvation. It is then that believing sinners begin to discover that what God has planned for salvation and life is far beyond anything they ever imagined. Paul is quoting from Isa. 64:4 and emphasising that the whole of man's scientific capacity, the collation and interpretation of statistics, the whole deductive method - eye, ear, mind and even imagination -could never have discovered the glories and promises of salvation-life. When Jesus speaks of fulness of life (John 10:10) and His disciples speak of the words of eternal life (John 6:66-68), we need to let our imagination run riot to try to imagine the meaning of the glorious pictorial images of blessing in the Book of Revelation (Rev. 21:1-7; 22:1-5). This is what God has revealed to us. This is Gospel indeed.

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## 2:11-13

Note in v.8-13, remembering that the Lord of Glory is Jesus Christ the Son of God, that we have emphasis on the three Persons of the eternal Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. These three are one, and yet each is spoken of in terms of specific activity. The Father gives the Son and the revelation of Him; the Son, by the eternal Spirit dies the atoning death (Heb. 9:14); and the Spirit is the active agent, applying and working out in human lives what God has done. In v.10b we must not think of the Holy Spirit 'searching' to find out information, because there is total unity and harmony within the Trinity. It seems to mean that the Spirit penetrates into all things and all areas. There is no limiting of the Spirit's activity. As Jesus said to Nicodemus, we will never be able to understand the Holy Spirit nor the wonder of His working, nor will we even be aware at times that He is present and working. But what we will see and know is the effect and result of His working (John 3:1-10). In v.11 Paul helps us to understand the working of the Spirit by a human illustration. 'Nobody can really know what is going on inside a man, nobody except the man's own spirit. From outside other men can but guess.... In the same way.... no-one outside God can know what takes place within God. Nobody can know but the Spirit of God Himself. That is to say, the Spirit knows God from the inside. There can be no question but that this passage ascribes full deity to the Spirit.' (Leon Morris) We must never think of the Holy Spirit as a mere influence, or as something that can be divided up, or as some 'spiritual power' that we can manipulate. He is a Person, a Divine Person, whose main desire and function is to concentrate our attention on Jesus (John 15:26).

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## 2:11-13

In v.12 Paul contrasts the spirit of the world with the Spirit of God and shows that the motivation of believers and unbelievers is quite different. The 'spirit of the world' may refer simply to the attitude of self-centred, self-sufficient worldly wisdom, in which unbelievers address themselves to the business of life. This is worldly thinking as spoken of in Phil. 3:19; 2 Tim. 3:1-5; Rom. 8:5-9. There may be some hint of the influence of Satan in worldliness, as Paul speaks of it in Eph. 2:1-2 and perhaps in Col. 2:8, where he speaks of the elemental spirits of the universe. We who believe have received the Spirit of God (Rom. 5:5), in order that we might understand the things that have been freely given to us by God. Reading v.11 in this way keeps us from the distraction that comes when the words 'gifts' is used. The emphasis is that whatever we have, we have it as the gift of God's grace and therefore there is never ground for spiritual boasting. When people concentrate on what

is generally thought of as 'the gifts of the Spirit', there is a tendency to narrow down the working of God's Spirit to certain specific areas of human experience, whereas in Scripture we are shown a glorious wideness and variety in the activity of God's Holy Spirit. From the beginning, God's Spirit has brooded over the chaos of the world, bringing order and light, and that same Spirit is the Divine agent whereby the God-breathed Scriptures have been given to us (2 Tim. 3:14-17; 2 Pet. 1:20,21). Both when he was preaching and when he was teaching by means of his letters, Paul was quite sure he was engaged in something more than just human instruction. The message he had been given from God by the Spirit he passed on by the same Spirit, and we must see our own 'ministry' whatever its exact nature, as being by the same Spirit. After all, mere human words by themselves, although they can minister great care and help, cannot by themselves bring spiritual enlightenment. That is the work of the Holy Spirit.

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## 2:14-16

In some versions there is a gap between v.13 and v.14 but this is artificial. The end of v.13 is translated in different ways. 'Interpreting spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit' (RSV) leads on naturally to a comment on the 'unspiritual' man, that is the man without the Spirit. 'Expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words' (MV) is a translation that accords with Paul's earlier words about using right language in preaching, a necessary caution in our own day when preoccupation with informality tends to lead to a casual and careless approach to the things of God. 'Comparing spiritual things with spiritual' (AV) gives a wise counsel about using biblical language and categories rather than worldly ones to teach and illustrate scripture. Perhaps we are near the heart of the meaning of v.13 when we think of the promise given by Jesus to His disciples to the effect that they would be given the necessary words to speak and that they need not fear. This is a great comfort and encouragement in the matter of witnessing to Christ and in using wisely the opportunities that open up to us, often unexpectedly. Think of God's encouragement to Moses when he was alarmed at his call to speak for God (Exod. 4:10-16), and God's words to Jeremiah in a similar context (Jer. 1:1-12). God's gracious, enabling, encouraging Spirit is active to cause what is truly spoken in God's name to accomplish what it was sent to do (Isa. 55:10,11). These encouragements are very necessary because in Christian service we will, sooner rather than later, come up against the dogged refusals of unbelief. The most spiritual truth expressed in the most winsome, biblical language and backed up by the earnest prayers of God's people will at times leave the hearers totally unimpressed and unmoved. This we must consider tomorrow.

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## 2:14-16

It is a fact of experience that the 'unspiritual man', the 'man without the Spirit', the 'natural man', simply does not accept 'the things that come from the Spirit' (NIV), the things of the Spirit (AV), the 'gifts of the Spirit' (RSV). The last of these phrases is the least accurate. We are not talking about 'the gifts of the Spirit' as they are referred to later in the epistle (tongues, prophecy, healing, helps and the like) but about the truths of the Gospel. The man without the Spirit's enlightenment cannot see, understand, appreciate or desire spiritual things, because he sees no value or relevance in them. This is why in earlier days Christian workers would speak of people having their eyes opened or seeing the light. Apart from Christ, there is a blindness and ignorance and it is the work of the Spirit to remedy this, and it takes place in the context of preaching, teaching, speaking or gossiping the Gospel. Think of Jesus' words to the good, religious man Nicodemus (John 3:1-12). You can speak to people about the most detailed and complicated subjects of politics, economics, philosophy and they will grasp what is being said and follow the argument to its conclusion. But speak in clear, simple, basic terms of Jesus Christ and Him crucified as the way of salvation and they remain bewildered. Only a supernatural work of God's Spirit can open eyes, convict of sin, and lead to Jesus. We must see clearly how once again Paul is presenting the radical difference between believers and unbelievers. It must never be said that we are all the same. We are not. Read Rom. 8:8-11, noting the interchange of terms, all defining what a Christian is. Then make sure you are a Christian. If you have Jesus as your Saviour then you have the Holy Spirit, and you are therefore teachable in spiritual things.

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## 2:14-16

Some of Paul's words are hard to understand, as even Peter admitted (2 Pet. 3:16). The spiritual man (15), as distinct from the natural man, makes judgments or decisions about all aspects and issues. This does not speak of 'gifted' people being super-competent but refers simply to those who have the Spirit, and who consequently partake of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4). The believer is equipped by the indwelling Holy Spirit to understand and to cope with life. This does not necessarily mean that the advice of a Christian is better than that of others. When we are ill we need a good doctor, not necessarily a Christian doctor! Paul does not assume that all who are indwelt by the Spirit always run their own lives rightly, let alone give good advice to others. A great part of this epistle is critical of and corrective of the Corinthian Christians, because their thinking and practice were defective. In v.15 Paul seems to be saying that the spiritual man cannot be judged by the non-spiritual man because they live and operate on different levels. Christians may be able to understand non-Christians but the opposite is not true. Of course, worldly people with no Christian belief, and therefore no indwelling Spirit, can and do criticise and judge Christians when their behaviour falls short of what it should be. The question Paul asks in v.16 is quoted from Isa. 40:13-14. Paul's next statement does not suggest that we are ever in a position to instruct God, but simply that, because of the indwelling Spirit, we are able to know, understand, desire and follow the mind of Christ. Note how easily Paul moves from speaking of the mind of God (Jehovah in Isaiah) to speaking of the mind of Christ. Again and again we are faced with clear affirmation of the deity of Christ and the reality of the eternal Trinity. Read Paul's words about having the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:1-11) and see how Paul was teaching his converts to view and to deal with the whole of life from the viewpoint of Jesus Christ. He is the key to everything.

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## 3:1-4

We have been studying difficult verses and we begin to see why Paul has gone into such detail. The Corinthian Christians were far too sure of their own spirituality so much so that they felt they 'knew it all'. In fact, they were spiritually immature and were becoming unteachable. They would have agreed with Paul's statement in 2:12 that believers have in fact received the Holy Spirit. They had known certain 'experiences' which they believed had been given them by the Holy Spirit and had concluded they were spiritually mature or even advanced. They were sure they were able to judge or assess spiritual things without consulting any other person. That was probably their understanding of 2:15 but this was leading not only to spiritual arrogance but spiritual competition (2 Cor. 10:12). Now, as a true pastor, with gentleness, referring to them as 'brethren', and yet with searching sternness and plainness of speech he took them to task. He was aware that spiritual pride is dangerous in Christian life and a hindrance to Christian service, and even though they were now devaluing his ministry, preferring to listen to other more 'popular' voices, he spoke as their teacher, under whose ministry they had been brought to faith. They were saying they wanted 'deeper' teaching than Paul had given them but he pointed out that when he first came to Corinth they were in every sense 'carnal', men of the flesh, totally ignorant of spiritual things. When they believed the Gospel and were born anew of the Holy Spirit (John 1:12-13) they were babes in Christ and needed the milk of the Word (1 Pet. 1:23-2:2). He taught them the basic elements of the faith and of life in Christ, showing them that Christ is everything, and that they had in Him a full and secure salvation. They had not been ready for more comprehensive teaching then, and Paul says here that they were still not ready. That must have shaken them.

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## 3:1-4

There is no suggestion that Paul, as the teacher, wanted to keep his converts always in submission to himself. That is a temptation ministers must guard against because the converts are not theirs but Christ's. True ministry should lead people to be able to stand on their own feet and to become 'ministers' in their own right. It is a joy and thrill to sit under the ministry of those you may have led to faith years previously. But there is a wrong way as well as a right way to speak as the Psalmist does in Psalm 119:99. Paul did not challenge the Corinthians as to their conversion but he says there was no evidence that they had grown up spiritually. Indeed, he says there was evidence to the contrary, because they were indulging in childish bickering, jealousy and competitiveness, showing themselves to be self-centred and man-centred rather than Christ-centred. They were behaving like

ordinary men, not Christian men; like worldly men, not spiritual men as they claimed. They were making great claims about Christian belief but Paul says there was little sign of Christian behaviour. What they were saying in v.4 seems to be, 'I am more spiritual than you,' 'My group is more biblical and reformed than yours,' and 'Our teaching is deeper than yours.' In due time, in 4:6-7, Paul will demolish their pride by reminding them that apart from Christ they were nothing. There are lessons here for all of us. It is so easy to be proud; to regard ourselves as men and women who are now 'spiritual'; to look down on others, especially those who are 'new' Christians, as if they were of less value to God and less important to the fellowship and work, forgetting that even the smallest member is vital (12:22) and that a child needs and deserves more attention than others. Adulthood, human and spiritual, manifests itself in a willingness to serve, not in self-centredness. Remember the words of Jesus in Lk. 22:24-27.

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### 3:5-9

Paul takes great pains to make clear that there was no competition or conflict between himself and Apollos, and certainly no desire to devalue Apollos. Both men were servants of God and of the church. The word used for 'servant' is not that translated 'bondslave' but the word for 'deacon', which really means a working servant: a word originally applied to the service of a table-waiter, and used here deliberately by Paul to signify lowly service. A servant carries out the orders of a master, doing the work the master has assigned to him, and this is a wonderful description of those called to the ministry. There is a thrill in being aware that God puts us in our place of work and specifies the work we have to do. There is no need to compare ourselves with others or to be envious of them or to become ensnared by statistical assessments of one work over against another. The different kinds of work belong together and are interdependent. Some are called to plant the good seed, others to water it, and others again to tend the growing crop and to gather the harvest. Indeed, some are called to be clearers of the ground, spending years doing away with accumulated rubbish and then long labour ploughing up the ground in preparation for the one who will sow the seed. All aspects of the work are valid and valuable, but it is God, by the working of His eternal Spirit, who gives the growth and increase. If there are converts, they are God's converts. If they happen to come to faith in our church under our ministry, that is a privilege and a responsibility, but we can never claim them as our converts. The planting and watering, the preaching, praying, counselling, providing the funds for the work, and the cleaning and heating of the church are equal aspects of the work, and in the work we are fellow-workers with God, in the same squad as God. What a thought!

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### 3:5-9

It is God who divides and allocates the work, and the vital thing is to be where God wants you to be, doing what God has allocated to you. No matter how gifted or enthusiastic you may be, if you are in the wrong place you are not only negative you may be a hindrance, no matter how much people praise you. Note also that God rewards according to labour not according to success. It is obedience and faithfulness that count. Think of the story of the building of the walls of Jerusalem in Nehemiah 3: 13-14. How would we have reacted if our allocated station had been at the Dung Gate? It is still true that some have to do the humble tasks and Jesus enunciated the spiritual principle that it is those who are faithful in the little things who are trustworthy regarding the bigger things (Matt. 25:14-29; Lk. 16:10-13). Note in today's verses that the words 'Lord' and 'God' occur six times. Paul was seeking to fix the thoughts of the Corinthians on God rather than on themselves. The agricultural metaphor Paul uses is clear, but it is not quite clear what he means by referring to the Corinthian believers as God's field and God's building. It may be that he is saying that God was at work in their lives and situations as a farmer works in his field, with clear objective and looking for specific fruit. Or he may be emphasising that in and through them God was building His kingdom: building His church for His pleasure, worship and service (1 Pet. 2:4, 5, 9, 10). What is clear in the illustrations is that the work takes time, patience and effort and it is long-term work. Whether field or building, there must be from the beginning a clear plan, a master-plan, and this is something we tend to forget. It is emphasised in Heb. 11:10, a chapter that calls us to think in terms of the passing generations of history. But the idea of a 'building' should remind us that a building site often seems chaotic. It is only when the work is complete that the genius of the architect can be seen and admired.

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### 3:10-15

The basic theme of these verses is obviously reward and loss but they teach basic lessons regarding the whole of Christian life and service. The foundation is and must be the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is on Christ, the solid rock, we stand for salvation, and all other ground is sinking sand. There is no hope for sinners apart from Christ. The whole of life is built on Christ and we must see to it that we bring ourselves back to Christ again and again. Commissioned by God's grace (that is what the word means) and enabled by that grace, Paul had laid in Corinth the foundation. He did so wisely and with skill, fully aware that others would build on it both personally and for the ongoing work of the Gospel. Right from the start, Paul's concept of the work of the Gospel was long-term, and there is a lesson here for preachers, teachers and all who are in any way engaged in the ministry of the Gospel to others. We must see to it that we dig deep and lay good foundations or else what is built will prove to be unstable and temporary. There are no shortcuts; there is no place for cheap materials or careless workmanship. What is done on the cheap soon shows itself to be of no real value. Think of all the time, effort and money that goes into shallow Christian activity that has more to do with entertainment and enjoyment than building for God's future. In the end of the day you are left with the fruit of what you have set out to do. You may have had, for a fleeting few years, the praise of men and women but what you leave behind will not be remembered except with sadness. Of course, if our work has been careless and our 'materials' cheap, we will have become like that ourselves in the process. Paul seems to say in 2 Cor. 5:10 that we are making our 'heaven' now.

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### 3:10-15

The AV translation of 2 Cor. 5:10 says that we 'receive the deeds done in the body' whether good or bad. Rev. 14:13 speaks of believers in Heaven and says, 'their deeds follow them'. In Matt. 6:19-21 Jesus spoke about a way of life that lays up treasure either on earth or in Heaven. It is in such a context that Paul speaks about building our lives on Christ with either quality or shoddy materials. Think how easy it is to live our lives for ourselves rather than for Jesus; for our pleasure rather than His. Think how easy it is to stand aside in a congregation and let others do the really costly work and take our place (hopefully in the front row) when something 'big' is on. Perhaps the thrust of Paul's words can be expressed in the contrast between the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit in Gal. 5:16-24. The same thought of growing to maturity and building up our lives in Christ is found in Heb. 5:11-6:1; 2 Pet. 1:3-i 1; and Jude 20-21. To the Corinthians, Paul speaks of the Day of the Lord, which will certainly be for believers a day of joy but at the same time will be a day when every person's life and work will be made manifest. There is no suggestion that a person can ever lose their salvation. That issue is gloriously settled, as Rom. 8:1, 31-39 and John 5:24 make plain. But in terms of how we have used the time, the privileges, the teaching and the opportunities given to us, we may suffer loss or gain reward. We can come to the latter stages of life with regrets or with the quiet confidence shown by Paul in 2 Tim. 4:6-8. A story is told of the man being shown by an angel to his heavenly mansion. He was led past many grand houses and shown to a ramshackle hut that was his place. He protested, but the angel said, 'We did the best we could with the material you sent.'

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### 3:16-17

Later in the epistle, in 6:19, Paul speaks of the individual believer as being the temple of the Holy Spirit, but here he is speaking of the church, the gathered company of believers, as the temple, the dwelling place of God by His Holy Spirit. Paul is gently suggesting that this is something they should be aware of in a very practical way. The 'church' was not theirs to handle and deal with as they chose. It is God's church, purchased and redeemed by the blood of His own Son (Acts 20:28). It is to be guarded and stewarded for God and for God's service and honour, and to that end all personal considerations and preferences must yield. They must remember that God Himself was amongst them by His Spirit and He is holy (Eph. 2:19-22). All their bitter wranglings and jealousies were taking place in the presence of God, grieving Him who had done so much for them, and distracting them from the service of God. No doubt the pagan citizens of Corinth would be aware of the Christians fighting among themselves and that would certainly not be a good witness. Paul left the Corinthians in no doubt as to the serious damage they were doing to God's church. He says they were destroying it; and they

were doing so by spiritual competition among themselves. They were concentrating on making a name for themselves, not a name for God. They were destroying or undermining or working against God's church, and such serious sin would bring serious rebuke and punishment from God. After all God had planted His church in Corinth to be the light of salvation to the city and they were distorting and hiding that light.. Would it be right for God to let them go on as they were doing? In our own particular situations we need to ask ourselves if we are working with and for God or against Him. It is grievous sin to be pulling down what others have built up at great cost. We are privileged servants in God's church. We are not masters who rule, let alone manipulate.

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### 3:18-23

Spiritual pride is a terrible thing, especially when you remember that all we are and have is the gift of God's grace. We do well to sing the hymn of the Holy Spirit that enables us to confess that, 'Every virtue we possess, and every victory won, and every thought of holiness, are His alone.' If God were to withdraw His grace and take from us the indwelling and enabling of His Holy Spirit, we would soon see just how little we had to be proud of. If, in the church ('among you'), people begin to think they are better than or superior to others, then they are thinking the way the world's people think ('in this age'). The world's values are not those of the Christian, and the world regards Christians as fools. This is not surprising because Christians live their lives on the basis of things the world can neither see nor understand. The worldly mind simply cannot grasp what it means to live on the basis of what is unseen and eternal (2 Cor. 4:16-18). The methods of the church will always be a mystery to worldly people because we do not operate on the basis of 'business methods' (2 Cor. 10:4). Cleverness, personality, gifts, wealth and social standing are the things worldly thinking regards as important. Pleasure and enjoyment are great objectives for worldly people, who fail to realise that their pleasures are temporary and are fading even as they are being enjoyed (John 4:10-15; 6:35; 7:37; Heb. 11:24-26). The two quotations from the Old Testament are from Job 5:13 and Ps. 94:11. 'God knows men better than they know themselves and sees how limited their understanding is. So the Scriptures bear out the apostle. In all ages, God has warned men about the folly of intellectual pride.' (Deluz) We must learn to see our pride and our self-regarding as being quite out of place in the lives of those who claim to follow the Man who was born in a stable, who had no place to lay His head, and who died a criminal's death surrounded by mockery and contempt. He was willing to be despised, devalued and rejected, and to be regarded as cast of f from God at the very moment of His greatest spiritual service. In the light of the Cross we must indeed pour contempt on all our pride.

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### 3:18-23

At v. 21 Paul sums up the whole argument and his words of rebuke give place to words that seek to focus the minds and hearts of the Christians on Christ. There is no suggestion that we should despise, devalue or take for granted those whom God has given to minister to us in the things of the Gospel. Indeed we are told in 1 Thess. 5:12-23 to value them highly, and for good cause as Heb. 13:17 makes plain. But neither are we to idolise God's messengers, lest they fill our horizon to the exclusion of God. After all the messengers are servants, and all that Paul, Apollos and Peter had received from God had been given to enable them to be wise and faithful servants of God's people. The sweeping affirmations of v.22, 23 are given to encourage believers to stand firm and to give themselves in free and glad service. God's mighty servants have been given by God to serve believers; (Eph. 4:11-16). The world order as constituted under the power and providence of God is under the headship of Christ in the interest of the church (Eph. 1:18-23). Whether we live or die we are in God's good hand for blessing and service (Phil. 1:19-26). Whatever the present contains or the future brings, all things will work together for good (Rom. 8:28). Everything is yours, says Paul, because God has blessed us who believe with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, so that we are provided for in every possible contingency (Eph. 1:3; 2 Pet. 1:3.ff). 'All things belong to God's children, but they belong to Christ so that all these gifts they so richly enjoy must be used in His service. Christ's glory is that He is Himself the servant of God.' (Deluz) If all God's goodness, mercy and blessing flow into our lives without there being a corresponding outflow in service, then we simply become spiritually stagnant.. They said of Jesus, 'He saved others, Himself He cannot save' (Matt. 27:42). That is the principle of spiritual service. We die to self, so that Christ may be everything. If we keep everything to and for ourselves we will lose everything (Matt. 16:24-26). That is the folly of spiritual



pride, which is simply self-centredness.

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#### 4:1-5

Keep in mind that Paul is dealing with the life, work and witness of the church in the world, emphasising that it is a continuing, long-term process. In a sense, it is a comfort and encouragement to realise that the apostolic church was far from perfect and not without its problems. Here Paul is challenging and correcting the factions arising in the church because of too much importance being given -to names of preachers, and we might add, to schools of theology. In Corinth Christians were almost excommunicating each other on the grounds that their 'positions' were not 'sound'. Paul seeks to put Christ at the centre, so that, as in the story of the Transfiguration, even the greatest men fade into insignificance compared to the glorious Christ (Matt. 17:8). Preachers are servants of Christ and that is an honoured and privileged position (Eph. 3:8). They are God's servants and, as such, servants of God's people. The word 'servant' is different from the one used in 3:5 ('deacons'). Here the word refers to a lowly position, a man who labours on the lower rank of oars on a ship. Servants are working men, sweating it out along with others. They are not heroes but there is no progress without their effort. Preachers are also stewards, trusted servants or overseers, answerable to their Master who trusts them and does not watch their every action. While He is absent the Master leaves His business in the hands of His stewards. The principle applies to every believer, not just to ministers (1 Pet. 4:10-11). The mysteries of God are not things that are mysterious but things which God has revealed, things man could never have discovered by himself. This is an important point which we must grasp. The whole of the Christian Gospel is a message that has been revealed. God has made Himself known. God has spoken down the generations and has spoken fully and finally in His Son Jesus Christ (Heb. 1: 1-4). And, in sovereign providence, in order to guard that revelation, God has caused it to be written down and preserved by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 1:20-21). We are not allowed to have our own ideas about God. God has made Himself known and 'the Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man,' (Shorter Catechism).

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#### 4:1-5

Stewards have to be worthy of trust, and we must ask ourselves if God can really trust us with the work He has committed to us. We are to guard and administer the Gospel given to us. We must make it our business to pass on the truths of the Gospel to men and women who will in their turn prove trustworthy so that the work will go on from generation to generation. This was Paul's counsel to the young minister Timothy (2 Tim. 2:1-2; 2: 15-19; 4:1-5). At the same time, Paul was sure that God would not leave him to work and serve in his own strength, as is seen in 2 Tim. 1:11-12 (RSV). The great danger in Christian work is that we allow ourselves to be brought unduly under the influence of people around us, allowing their criticisms or their praises to qualify both what we say and the way we say it. Of course, crude language, harsh attitudes and unfeeling denunciations are never justified, but at the same time we must be careful that we do not 'tailor' our ministry in such a way that we remove its cutting, sanctifying edge while still allowing ourselves to be 'recognised' as being evangelicals. There were many who criticised both Paul's person and ministry and at times he was not slow to defend himself (Acts 20:17-20, 26-27; 24:16). He was careful, not careless, in life and work, but he did not demean or devalue either his person or his ministry. That would have been wrong, since it was so clear that God honoured his ministry. At the same time, Paul did not refuse constructive criticism, but he stood back from carping criticism because it was in relation to God that he stood or fell (Rom. 14:4). Only God knows the full truth about our service, its battles, struggles and cost. Only God knows the secret tears when we feel we have failed. This is why we must not jump to conclusions about others. Paul also says that self-judgment is limited. All we can ever say is that as far as we know our own hearts we have been faithful. This is why we need to walk closely with God so that we will not deceive ourselves about ourselves, but will deal rightly with God's Gospel and with all those with whom He has set us to work.

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#### 4:6-7

It is very foolish, when God has given men quite different kinds of ministries (and the gifts and capacities to

exercise those ministries), to draw the conclusion that somehow the men and their ministries are in competition or even contrary to each other. But this is exactly what the Corinthians were doing and therefore Paul links his name closely with that of Apollos, both of them being trusted stewards of God. 'Later in the epistle Paul speaks of how he encouraged Apollos to visit Corinth again but Apollos was not at all keen to do so. Neither Paul nor Apollos were interested in having a 'fan club' in Corinth because that would hinder rather than help the Gospel. Both men were making it plain that there were other congregations of believers who needed and valued their ministry as much as and perhaps more than the Corinthians. As Paul wrote these two verses he must have been aware that his words would be resented, because he was telling these Christians that they were not living according to the Scriptures. They thought they were, and they thought they were doing so far more spiritually than others, more even than Paul. But Paul says they were 'puffed up', spiritually proud. It never crossed their minds that they might be wrong or that they still had a great deal to learn. This is still a snare, especially to those who have sat a long time under biblical, expository ministry. It is all too easy to listen to sermons with an attitude that is really checking up to see if the preacher is theologically sound, rather than with the attitude that sees every occasion of ministry as an opportunity to learn more about God. Granted, we may have to hear truths expounded again and again but Paul says repetition is both necessary and safe (Phil. 3:1). If we really know our own hearts we will acknowledge that we are in fact very slow to learn. Perhaps all of us need to go back to the old pattern of education and to learn 'our tables' by memory, so that spiritual patterns and principles will become virtually second nature. How well do we know our Bibles? How well would we cope in prison with our Bibles confiscated? Are we as spiritual as we think we are? If we think we are spiritual, then remember all we have and have achieved is the work of God's grace. There is no room for pride.

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#### **4:8-13**

Paul's powerful and impassioned words are full of irony. He says, 'We wish we were like you! After a year or two as Christians you are filled, rich, living like kings, while we battle and struggle, seeking to be faithful in God's service.' Read the contrasts in these verses and see how different the lives of these proud Corinthians were from the lives of Paul and his companions. Spiritually the Corinthians thought they had 'arrived', they sat in self-approval, with arms folded spiritually. They engaged in 'higher forms' of spirituality and were not to be found down at the 'work-face' or the battle front. We had better pause to consider just where we are likely to be when there is the real, hard work of the Gospel to be done. Can we be counted on to be present and to share in the ongoing prayer of the congregation? Will we be available when new people, needy people, and difficult people need to be spoken to or will we be speaking always to our own special friends after every service? Paul challenges the Corinthians' attitude, which really was that they did not feel they needed his ministry any more. They knew it all. Some felt they knew more than Paul. They did not hunger and thirst after righteousness nor did they press toward the mark for the prize (Phil. 3:4-15). They had not suffered the loss of all things for Jesus' sake. They were not the poor in spirit whom Jesus said would be blessed (Matt. 5:3). Although not aware of it they were indeed disastrously poor (Rev. 3:15-22). They were not like Jesus who was persecuted Himself and who said His true followers would be persecuted in the world (John 15:18-20; 2 Tim. 3:10-13). Had these Christians any idea what it cost Paul to be a true and faithful minister of God's Word? If they had they would have shown far more gratitude and far more human care. Ministers and missionaries are not super-human, nor are they sub-human. They are totally human, just as Jesus was and feel the same feelings of sorrow, disappointment, hurt and encouragement. Read and consider: Lk. 19:41; 13:34; John 4:6; Matt. 26:36-43; Acts 28:14-15; 2 Tim. 4: 9-16. Wherever you read in Paul's epistles, make sure you note how he puts on record his appreciation of those who went out of their way to minister to him and to show their care. Onesiphorus is one glorious example (2 Tim. 1:15-18). Think of him visiting prison after prison until he found Paul. Nothing was too much trouble. It is difficult to imagine one of the Corinthian Christians doing that kind of thing.

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#### **4:8-13**

We consider these verses again in terms of the cost of fruitful ministry in order to encourage all those who feel themselves in hard, unyielding situations, who feel they are making no progress, and who are beginning to feel that other 'successful' Christians are regarding them as not much use. Some may feel, because of various pressures and a sense of failure, that all their work counts for nothing, forgetting that God has said reassuringly

that our labour is not in vain in the Lord (1 Cor. 15:58). As far as prominence and importance, Paul is seen as 'last in the line'. So often were he and his colleagues in battles and difficulties that they were regarded as finished, under the sentence of death. Paul often felt like that himself (2 Cor. 1:8-10; 4:8-12). Paul's ministry was ridiculed and people would not go to hear him except to mock. To many Paul and his fellows were a 'spectacle', a sorry sight, but so was Jesus as He was pushed from pillar to post and mocked even in his dying agonies (Isa. 53:2-3). We should read v.11-12a and resolve never to complain or to feel sorry for ourselves again. But we also need to ponder and to copy the attitudes of Paul in v.12b-13. We have the same theme in Rom. 12:9-18 and the same example in Phil. 2:3-8. We have a similar catalogue of costly service and suffering in 2 Cor. 11:23-30. To put it all into context read Acts 5:40-42 and Phil. 1:29-30. There was little sign of these graces in the Corinthian Christians who were so self-consciously proud of their spirituality. Jesus spoke well when He said that people are known by the fruit of their lives (Matt. 7:15-20). He also said of some self-confident 'disciples' that He never knew them (Matt. 7:21-23).

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#### **4:14-21**

We have here Paul's personal appeal to the Christians in Corinth and his stern, searching words give place to words of real tenderness. He wanted them to know that he had been speaking the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). His desire was not to shame them but to admonish, that is, to speak seriously to them, as a father who loves his children and wants the best for them. He was not slow to tell the congregation that he loved them and cared for them. He knew full well that they were listening to many guides or counsellors who were giving them advice, and they might well be gaining some help from them. But Paul claimed a closer, deeper and higher relationship with them than that of a trusted servant (which is the meaning of the word 'guides'). In a spiritual sense Paul was their father in the faith through the Gospel and this creates, or should create, a special bond of love, loyalty and trust. He urged the believers not just to listen to his teaching but to follow his pattern of life and service. He makes the same appeal in 11:1 and 1 Thess. 1:6. Of course Paul had already made it quite plain that he had no desire to create a 'following' for himself, but at the same time he was not afraid to appeal to them to recognise the integrity and grace of his own life of discipleship and service. He was a man with nothing to hide. Read his words in 1 Thess. 2: 3-12. Example is powerful! Paul goes on in v.17 to point out that he was saying the same to the Corinthians as he had said to all the other churches and we see that already there was a pattern of belief and behaviour throughout the scattered congregations. This led on to his next challenge (18), pointing out that some (and he no doubt knew who they were), were arrogant in that they were taking their own line, 'doing their own thing', feeling very sure that Paul would not dare come to Corinth in person to rebuke them. Paul reassured them that he would come, in God's good time. He did not give them the satisfaction of feeling they were so important that he would drop everything to attend to them. He let them wait. But he assured them that he would indeed come, and when he did, he would not be too bothered about their fine-sounding, spiritual words. He would ask what they had accomplished, what impact they had made on Corinth, and what spiritual fruit they had to show for their lives. It is easy to criticise ministers. But what have the critics done by way of lasting service?

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#### **5:1-2**

Paul has asked the Corinthians if they wanted him to come with a rod of rebuke or in a spirit of meekness. It was up to them. They knew their own attitudes and actions and they would already be reacting to the content and tone of Paul's letter, as it was read to the gathered congregation. He must have shocked them by revealing just how much he knew about what was going on in their congregation. They may well have felt angry that someone had 'told', and this is still a strange reaction among some Christians, even when there is serious moral wrong-doing. Why should we ever feel that we have to 'cover up' the fact that sin, like an evil cancer, is operating within the body of the church? Sin ravages and devastates not only those who perpetrate it but all those who are in contact with it. There is much talk these days about pollution, and how action must be taken to limit its effects. We must be equally serious about sin in our own lives and within the work. Sin is never static; it spreads. Read Jas. 1:13-15; Eph. 5:3-6. This theme is dealt with by Paul later in this chapter. Two things shocked Paul: there was immorality in the church that shocked even the pagans in Corinth (and they were a grim lot) and no one in the church seemed to be unduly concerned. There had to be discipline of a radical kind.

Of course, there are various ways in which wrong-doing should be dealt with. Jesus spoke of one way in Matt. 18:15-18. If it can be dealt with privately, repentance shown and reconciliation effected, let it be so. But impenitence leads to discipline. Paul gives another example in Gal. 6:1-3, where there is no doubt about the guilt of the wrongdoer, but it is clear that there was genuine sorrow and repentance. The sinning Christian feels the pain of being 'dislocated' from the body of believers and the 'restoring' is in terms of a dislocated joint being put back into working order. Discipline is not a denial of forgiveness. A casual attitude to sin and wrong-doing is serious.

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### 5:1-2

Corinthian society and life were radically, carelessly and blatantly immoral, just like the society we now live in. But even they had certain taboos of behaviour, things that ought not to be done, and the behaviour of a certain Christian was public knowledge and it was a scandal, the kind of thing the newspapers simply grab for headlines. Remember, of course, that the believers in Corinth had been saved in Christ out of dark backgrounds and from lives that may have been sunk in all manner of sin. Paul was mindful of this, as 1 Cor. 6:9-11 makes plain. Had this man not really broken from his past life and his former associates? Had his moral fibre been weakened and undermined so that he was dangerously vulnerable in this area of life? That must be allowed for in pastoral counselling. All sorts of influences have made people what they are, and it is easy to criticise and condemn when we have been mercifully protected from all manner of temptations and pressures by our background and family atmosphere. But in this case the sinning man seems to have been quite unconcerned and deliberate in his actions. It may have been that he felt he was so 'spiritual' that the sins of the flesh were not important. Perhaps his attitude, and the attitude of those who condoned his life-style, was that since salvation was all of grace, not dependent on 'works', then he could live as he pleased. Perhaps in a distorted way he thought that his gross sinning would highlight the glory of God's grace. Corinth was not the only place where this denial of the Gospel was to be seen, as Paul's words in Rom. 6:1-4 makes plain. Note in today's verses that the first rebuke was not to the sinning man but to the Christians who did not think it mattered. They do not seem to have thought that the man's way of life contradicted his profession of conversion. Perhaps the man was gifted, generous, attractive, popular, and a good preacher. Perhaps the congregation was afraid he might resign and withdraw his support if rebuked. Perhaps some were afraid, if rebuked, the man would make public their own wrong-doing. If we are to guard and serve the Gospel we need to be men and women with nothing to hide. Walk in the light, out in the open with God (1 John 5-7).

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### 5:3-5

As we consider these solemn words, look ahead to 2 Cor. 2:4-8; 7:8-11 to see the good and healing result of Paul's discipline. Do not think for a moment that Paul found it easy to speak and act in this way. Do not think this stern discipline is a contradiction of love or a denial of the glorious forgiveness in Christ that is at the heart of the Gospel. Paul would have known Jesus' words to the sinning woman in John 8:10-11 and the words to the man in John 5:14. He would also have known Isa. 55:6-7. If a sinner's attitude is one of rebellion and pride, determined to hold on to his sins to excuse or to justify them, then he makes it plain his thoughts are contrary to God. For their own sake, for the sake of the safety of the church and in the interest of the witness of the Gospel, sin must be dealt with. As the minister, shepherd or guardian of the flock (Acts 20:28), even though absent from them, Paul declares what should have been done, what he had now done, and what he believed God would confirm. Keep in mind the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 and be quite clear that, although it was Peter who challenged these professing Christians about their wrong-doing, it was God who acted in judgment to cut out from the body of the church the cancer of hypocrisy and disobedience. We must be quite clear that we are not dealing here with earnest believers who may be struggling and battling with besetting sins, distressed by their failures. To such, the message of the Gospel is one of forgiveness, help, hope and restoration. God is not in the business of crushing (Isa. 42:3). He saves. We are dealing here with brash impenitence and the pride that resents caution and correction. Paul insists that, with the authority of the Lord Jesus, action had to be taken. Indeed, Paul had already taken that action and his words indicate that if the Corinthians did not concur they would be out of step with God and would be seen to be taking the side of the sinner. In the life and work of the church we are involved with God, and we must never forget this.

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### 5:3-5

We must be clear about these serious verses, not least that we might hold back from any presumptuous action whereby we quickly take the place of judge. It is easy to condemn the obvious sin, forgetting just how often the person may have battled and resisted. We need to remember Jesus' words in Matt. 7:1-5. But the words, 'Judge not,' can be sentimental in face of a situation like that in Corinth. The meaning of the sentence 'to deliver to Satan' (cf. 1 Tim. 1:18-20) seems to be to put the person outside the church; to remove him from the position, privileges and safety of the life of the fellowship. This seems to be confirmed in v.2, 7, 13. To be 'outside' the church is to be in the territory of Satan (Eph. 2:12; Col. 1:13; 1 John 5:19) and, since this man had chosen deliberately to go in the way of sin and Satan, then he must be confirmed in his choice. We read in Acts 13:9-12 of a wicked man being judged and dealt with for his wickedness, but can a true believer be handed over to Satan? We could ask, 'Can a true believer behave as this man in Corinth behaved?' We need to ponder Jesus' words to Peter in Lk. 22:31-32, a reminder of the reality and enmity of Satan, and a reminder also that Satan operates only within restrictions in order to serve the purpose of God. We know the shattering experience Peter went through in his denial and shame and how this produced a new humility and reality in him. This is the objective of Paul's stern discipline in Corinth. The phrase 'the destruction of the flesh' is difficult. To go into the power of Satan would seem to increase the evil desires, but, if the man was a Christian, then a realisation of where his sin had led him might well shatter his spiritual pride and carelessness. He might well realise, like the Prodigal, that he had lost everything he once valued and would want to return to God. A radical view of the discipline is to refer it to physical illness and death in the interest of the soul being saved. Paul certainly expected to see the man delivered from his sin and taking his place with the saints on the day of the Lord. If we take from these studies the fact that sin in a believer's life is serious, then we have learned an important lesson.

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### 5:6-8

Paul's care for the church and his distress at the situation are very clear. He was deeply upset by the attitudes of the Christians. He said in v.2 that they were arrogant when they should have been mourning. The man's behaviour should have hurt them like a bereavement in the family. Now he says they were boasting, not just acquiescing or turning a blind eye, but feeling proud of their broad-minded attitude. Paul reminded them that sin, moral and spiritual wrong, operates like leaven, not only in the individual but in the life of the fellowship. It spreads. It ferments. It poisons. It is like a root of bitterness (Heb. 12:15). This does not refer only to gross sin. A spirit of discontent, criticism, gossip, casualness or worldliness spreads and infects many. We do well to ask ourselves what kind of influence we have in the life of the congregation. The call in v.7 to cleanse or purge out the old leaven is addressed to all the believers in respect of their own life-styles, and is not just a reference to the one evil man. There may be things, attitudes, activities and people belonging to our old way of life before we became Christians that need to be put away lest they poison the life that is now ours in Christ. The reference to 'fresh dough' being 'unleavened' seems to have the same meaning as Paul's affirmation in 2 Cor. 5:17: that, in Christ, we are new creatures. We are not our old selves just cleaned up a bit, nor is the church just society with the dirty bits washed away and given a veneer of religion. We are a new creation, totally new and fresh, and we must not introduce 'old leaven' into what God has made new. Paul did not challenge the Corinthians to be 'unleavened'. He told them they were unleavened. This is what it means to be a Christian. The old has passed away and the new has come. And with the new, there is newness of life. We must not allow anything to spoil it. Think how radical we can be if we think dry rot is going to spoil our homes, or weeds spoil our gardens, or evil influences spoil our relationships. Our relationship with God is the most important thing of all.

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### 5:6-8

Paul brings the whole issue into glorious focus when he says that Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed for us. For all taught in the Old Testament, the Passover is a reminder of the costly sacrifice by which God delivered His people from their bondage in Egypt and set them on their way to the Promised Land with all its fulness of life and service. In preparation for being the liberated people of God, all the 'leaven' had to be searched out and disposed of (Exod. 12:1-4,14-20). Now that Christ, the true Passover Lamb, has been

sacrificed it is more than time for all the leaven and malice to have been put away. After all, Jesus Christ came into the world to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself (Heb. 9:26). It is therefore a total contradiction of His Person and His work to introduce sin into the situation or to hold on to sin in our lives which grieves Him and cuts across His gracious purposes for our blessing. There can be no celebration, no real sense of joy and gladness when sin is given a free lodging place in our lives or in our fellowships. Read Ps. 32:1-4 and sense the increasing heaviness of heart and life in the man of God who had sinned and had covered up his sin, refusing to confess it or to repent of it. What relief it was when at length he came back to God! Read Ps. 51:1-19, especially v.8-13, where the man of God sees how he might have lost his place in the service of God as well as having lost his joy and gladness because of his sinning. There is a very real sense in which, by focusing on Christ, Paul is using his solemn words of warning and rebuke to point to the glorious truth of the Gospel that tells us all that even though our sins are red and ugly there is forgiveness with God (Isa. 1:18-20). But there must be a turning away from our sins. We cannot have Jesus and our sins. Paul must have wondered what the reaction would be on the part of the sinning man and those who took his side.

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### 5:9-13

Paul's reference to the content of a previous letter (which we do not have) makes it plain that this was not the first time he had tried to correct wrong attitudes to moral issues. Remember what we have earlier said about the social background these Corinthian believers had grown up in. Just as it is increasingly in our own day, society in general saw no wrong in sexual indulgence outside marriage, or in unfaithfulness to marriage vows, or in distorted and perverted manifestations of sexuality. The church at Corinth needed, as we do now, to be taught clearly and unmistakably about moral standards. We need the Ten Commandments. We need the clear statements of Rom. 1:26-27. We need the plain truth of Lev. 18:1-6, 19-30. We need the realism of 1 Thess. 4:1-8. In today's verses the word 'associate' means to 'get mixed up with', entangled and involved, and Paul may be continuing his warning in the previous verses to the effect that the 'leaven' of attitudes and conversation can infect and influence us, drawing us into behaviour that we would not otherwise countenance. He states this clearly in 1 Cor. 15:33. But it seems the Corinthians had reacted to Paul's counsel in such a radical way that they would have nothing to do with, no contact or communication with, no association even on a friendly level with people who were not Christians. How then were 'these needy people to be brought under Christian influence, to hear about and to see the power of Jesus Christ to save and to give life and hope? It is sad indeed when Christians keep themselves to themselves, having no non-Christian friends. That is to have the light of life but to hide it under a 'bushel' of self-centred Christian enjoyment (Matt. 5:14-16). Of course some Christians are so constantly in non-Christian company and activity that they deprive themselves of the fresh, sanctifying air of spiritual ministry and service and fellowship. We need to be reminded of the pattern of Jesus who was indeed the friend of sinners (Matt. 11:19) and yet he was separate from sinners and never involved in their sinning (Heb. 7:26). As far as Jesus was concerned God came first in everything, and God's service was His delight.

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### 5:9-13

Paul is not suggesting that Christians should withdraw from all worldly contact into something of a formal, or informal, monastic life. Nor is he suggesting Christians should separate themselves from everyone who is not considered 'sound' in doctrine. But he is saying very plainly that we should make it perfectly clear that we do not agree with nor will we go along with Christians whose manner of life is a contradiction of the Gospel. The list of 'sins' in v.11 is by no means a total list. There is no mention of gossip, although slander is included. Suspect business practice is indicated by the reference to robbers. The reference to not eating with such persons indicates that there must be no close fellowship with those who flout the general standards of Christian behaviour. The application of this is not easy and could lead to the spiritual hypocrisy of the man described by Jesus in Lk. 18:9-14. It can also lead to quite arbitrary standards of 'worldliness' in which the 'sins' that do not appeal to us are the ones condemned. Jesus ate with publicans and sinners (Lk. 15:1,2) and was criticised for it and had His spirituality questioned. Perhaps one guide for us is simply that if this 'separation' is costly for us and grieves us deeply so that more and more we go to God in prayer, then the withdrawing from our brother or sister is both right and necessary. It is easy to pass judgment on those who are outside the church but that is not really our business. If the church cannot handle its own people and its own affairs rightly and wisely, so that the

outsiders can see the reality of their faith and commitment, then the church has no right to pronounce on other areas. This is something that needs to be remembered by so-called church leaders who seem to revel in telling politicians what to do. A church that cannot fund its own work, that is constantly retrenching its overseas work, that cannot hold its own official members, and that seems to accept casual commitment from its members, is a church that should turn its attention to its own low standards.

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### **6:1-6**

Moral wrong in the church was being condoned but personal claims of Christian against Christian, possibly relating to property and finance, were being taken to court. There is no suggestion that the courts were corrupt and unjust, nor does Paul say that it is always wrong for Christians to use the law courts. Paul himself, when he judged it necessary, appealed to Caesar (Acts 16: 3:5-39; 25:6-12). Here Paul challenges the Christians who were squabbling among themselves, going to a pagan court where the gross moral wrongs of the church were public knowledge. Paul is not suggesting that wrong should be ignored simply because it is among Christian believers. What he does is to remind them of their dignity as men and women of God. He may be thinking of Jesus' words in Matt. 19:28; Lk. 22:28-30, and suggesting to these proud Christians that they were not likely to be able to rise to that glorious calling if they showed themselves to be incapable of handling small, material matters. There is real rebuke in Paul's words. He is suggesting that behind their spiritual bravado there was no real maturity, wisdom, balance or discernment. After all, real spirituality operates in the context of the ordinary, down-to-earth issues of daily life. Paul asks if there was no-one at all in the congregation who could have dealt with these quarrels in a balanced way without having to go to pagan unbelievers whom they really despised. Of course, then as now, if the differences involved money or personal behaviour or tensions because of a parent's will, people may be reluctant to be open. Do Christians not trust each other? Have Christians betrayed trust by passing on tender personal information given to them in confidence? Do Christians know whom to go to with their hurts and grievances, assured that they will get gracious, balanced counsel? Do Christians prefer to go to people who, they are sure, will agree with them? That is scarcely a desire for justice.

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### **6:7-8**

Paul is thoroughgoing and honest in his pastoral counselling, just as in his preaching and teaching. He tells them that their attitude of insisting in pursuing their 'rights' was a spiritual defeat. They might get the verdict in court but what would the issue be in terms of relationships within the congregation? His question in v.7b cuts right across the natural tendencies of human nature, but none of us can escape the fact that in all matters of behaviour our Saviour is our example, and He was willing to suffer the loss of all His rights and privileges (Phil. 2:5-8; 1 Pet. 2:18-24). Jesus' own words in Matt. 5:38-42, referring to matters of personal wrongs but not to social wrongs, are also devastating. There is no suggestion in Paul's words that we should be foolish, gullible and unthinking, giving in to everyone who seeks to make use of us. We have to be wise as well as harmless (Matt. 10:16). When we come to v.8 it seems that Paul was charging the Christians with wrong dealings with each other. They were unwilling to suffer wrongs against themselves and were apparently quick to seek full redress and apology. But at the same time their own words and actions were far from Christian. This kind of attitude and action was simply not appropriate in the lives of those who had themselves been forgiven so much. Those who have known much of God's gracious and tender forbearance and forgiveness; those who have known how God has taken into consideration their temperament, background and temptations; those who have been taken back by God again and again after many grievous sins and failures, should be the first to make allowances for others and to bear with them. Read Eph. 4:1-3, 25-5:2. When people hurt us and wrong us, our first response should be to consider why they have said and done these things, why they have such a bitter spirit, and to consider that they may be hurting deeply inside in ways they do not fully understand. If we pause to consider that they may be greatly in need of help, that will in measure at least keep us from reacting against them. And, after all, reacting to what people say and do is not acting in faith. Whatever is not done in faith is suspect (Rom. 14:23).

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**6:9-11**

We have commented on these verses in several earlier notes but consider them now in their context. Paul seems to be dealing with 'rights' (v.1-8), 'debts' (v.9-11) and 'liberties' (v.12-20). Remember that these Christians thought themselves very spiritual in both teaching and experience. But Paul challenges their ignorance and their spiritual standing. He has charged them with wrongdoing and now says that wrongdoers have no place in God's kingdom. Paul's words here are in total agreement with those of James 1:22-27; 2:14-26. A profession of faith that is not confirmed by a life of faith and obedience is very suspect. As Paul has already said (4:20), true spiritual experience is not a matter of mere spiritual language. In v.9-10 Paul states clear ethical consequences in a day of confusion. Think of the easy catch-phrases people use: 'Charity not chastity,' or 'Compassion not discipline,' or 'Forgiveness not judgment'. Read Eph. 5:3-6 and Gal. 5: 19-21 and note in the second passage that the reference is to 'those who do such things'. It does not speak of those who struggle and wrestle with temptation in these areas of life. There are many who know they have been totally forgiven and washed clean, and who know there is now no condemnation because they are in Christ, who still have to battle fiercely with old temptations. We must say a word to such in this note. The hymn-writers express it so well:

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'Thy kind but searching glance can scan  
The very wounds that shame would hide.'

'And they who fain would serve Thee best  
Are conscious most of wrong within.

'There is no place where earth's sorrows  
Are more felt than up in heaven:  
There is no place where earth's failings  
Have such kindly judgment given.'

'To those who fall how kind Thou art,  
How good to those who seek!'

Let not any penitent soul be crushed by Paul's words. He glories in the Gospel of salvation and knows there is a God who forgives and forgets (Jer. 31:33-34).

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**6:9-11**

The hymn, 'To God be the glory' makes the wonderful statement that 'the vilest offender who truly believes, that moment from Jesus a pardon receives' and this is the theme of v.11. It gives a comprehensive description of salvation in Jesus Christ, and each element of it is stated in the past tense. There is no doubt or uncertainty. This is not a long drawn out process by which the sinner slowly reaches the position of being saved. Paul reminds his readers of what they had been and what they might have become and continued to be, and then he adds with repeated emphasis, but they were washed, sanctified and justified. It was not something they did for themselves. It was done for them by God through Christ by the power of the Spirit. The thought of having been washed clean from all our sins is a wonderful one and makes us think of Zech. 13:1, which tells us of the fountain of cleansing opened for sinners' at the Cross and reminds us of the simple exhortation to Namaan the leper, 'Wash and be clean' (2 Kings 5:13). All the emphasis in salvation here is on God's activity. Sin has been dealt with and put away once for all. The believing sinner has been sanctified or set apart from God in a personal, precious and holy sense. Of course, such believers are called to be holy in person and life (1 Thess. 4:3; 5:23; 2 Thess. 2:13). The believing sinner has also been justified, that is accepted and declared to be in the right with God, and since it is God who makes the declaration neither men nor devils can change it. This is something to rest in and to rejoice in (Rom. 5:1-11). But at the same time it is something that calls and challenges every believer to respond with a commitment of life that will become more and more fashioned in the likeness of Jesus Christ (Rom. 12:1-21). You cannot imagine Jesus going to court to get a secular verdict in His favour because someone had dealt wrongly and unworthily with Him. 'Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus' (Phil. 2:5 AV).



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## 6:12-20

Paul's theology of salvation leads him right on to matters of practical Christian living: matters of Christian liberty and matters of sexual morality, in the discussion of which he again expounds and applies theology. Read the passage carefully and see how closely related theology and practice are. Up to a point the Corinthians had grasped the theology of life and liberty in Christ (1:30; 3:22-23; Gal. 5:1). In Christ we have been set free from sin's guilt and power (Rom. 6:7, 14). In Christ we are set free from the tyranny of human standards, expectations and prohibitions: we live unto the Lord. It is right therefore to say that all things are lawful. Christian life is not following a set of rules but living in Christ. Salvation is all of grace. But the Christian believer must be ready and willing to forego things that are permissible in themselves because they are not helpful either to himself in furthering his Christian service or to others who need, desire and deserve help. Paul develops this theme fully in chapter 8. Here he goes on to affirm that he was not prepared to let his life be brought under the power of or be influenced by anything that could possibly hinder his usefulness to Jesus. He was recognising that his life as a Christian would always be narrower and more restricted than was really necessary because there is a higher objective than just his own fulfilment and pleasure. Think how social convention, business practice and expectation, sport, music, hobbies and even friendships and family can become the dominant and controlling elements in life. We must also add ambition, the desire to excel, and the popularity that comes with this, so that we will be on guard lest anything edges Jesus out of His rightful place as the Lord of our lives, time and energy. As Paul will say at the end of this passage, we are not our own. We have no rights to any part of our life. We belong to God and our chief objective must be to glorify God in every area of life. Of course, it is in this way that we begin to enjoy God. He is not a spoilsport. Read Psalm 16:11. Why spoil that?

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## 6:12-20

When we justify our behaviour by saying there is no harm in it, do we mean no harm to us, to others, or to the work of the church? We should rather ask if it is helpful, and if not, we should not want it and should be glad to give it up. When he introduces the question of being enslaved, Paul moves into the realm of sexual behaviour. The reference to food and the stomach is a quotation, possibly a well known proverb in Corinth. People probably said, 'Eating is natural for satisfaction and refreshment,' and went on to say, 'So is sex.' This Paul rejects in strong terms. Food and the stomach will both be done away with, but the body has a destiny of glory (Phil. 3:21), and is all bound up with personality, as will become apparent in the great resurrection chapter (1 Cor. 15). No matter the hungers; appetites, inclinations and powerful urges that our bodies can feel, the body is not meant for immorality (13b). There is no need to yield to the powerful impulses of the body; to resist them will do no harm, as some foolish psychiatrists and secular moralists suggest. In fact, when a relationship outside marriage becomes a physical one, the whole relationship is instantly reduced to a merely physical one, with little or no possibility of the two persons getting to know each other in any full development of personality. The body, and Paul uses a word that means the whole personality, is for the Lord and the Lord for the body, so that there can be the full range of satisfying fellowship between man and God, as God destined it to be right from the Garden of Eden. The Lord is necessary if our bodies, our personalities, are to function rightly. This gives the lie to those who say that being a Christian inhibits and frustrates life. The opposite is the truth. The mention of the resurrection in v.14 is a clear indication that Paul thinks of the resurrection of the body and not just a 'soulish' or 'spiritual' resurrection. In Heaven, we will not be less human than we are now!

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## 6:12-20

In this fascinating and practical passage we must still deal with v.15ff. Paul says we are united to Christ in terms of our 'bodies' or whole personalities and he goes on to emphasise the spiritual, emotional and physical complications of sin in the realm of sex. Paul does not say that this kind of sin is the worst kind but he does say, in radical language, that there is an involvement of a very deep, far-reaching and complicated nature in sexual sin. There is no easy 'escape' or extracting of yourself from this kind of thing. Paul is very blunt. He says we who have believed unto salvation are united to the Lord, inseparable from Him (17) and our bodies are members of Christ (15). In this area of sin we are taking away the 'members' of Christ from their proper use and

making them serve a function that is quite abhorrent. When Paul says, 'Never' (15), he is repudiating the whole idea of getting involved in this way. He says, 'God forbid,' or 'Perish the thought,' We must not limit the context to that of prostitution for money. The sex act is for marriage and, outwith marriage, sexual laxity is a very serious business. In v.18 the word 'shun' calls for a settled and deliberate attitude. Some versions say, 'Flee,' and that means keeping out of situations which you know will lead to temptation. It is a lie of the Devil that sexual desires are so basic to personality that to deny them is to harm and twist that personality. The Bible says the very opposite. Sexual sin is an enemy of and contradiction of all that is meant by human personality. Paul brings his counsel about behaviour to its full emphasis when he says that our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. This gives a great dignity to the whole of life and every activity. Wherever we go, we take the Holy Spirit with us; whatever we do, we involve Jesus. The 'temple' of our body must be kept holy for its rightful occupant. We must never forget we are not our own. We have been bought with a great price, and when we go the way of wrong behaviour we are deliberately turning our backs on the Cross where the price was paid.

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### **7:1-7**

When Paul called the Corinthians to glorify God in their bodies, in all the practical business of life and relationships, he was fully aware of the lax and distorted standards of behaviour in the city. He was also aware of the confused thinking of many of the Christians and of their distorted ideas of spirituality. Keep in mind that many of these converts had been involved in very indulgent lives and that sensuality had been part of their 'religion'. Some were now insisting that remaining unmarried was the only way of 'real' spiritual service. Some were denying or suppressing or ignoring human feelings and longings, while others were encouraging indulgence with no restrictions. A spirituality that denies human feelings is every bit as wrong as a humanism that idolises human hungers and ignores God's standards. The Corinthians had asked Paul's advice about sexual behaviour and relationships, and some people today need to be talking to trusted, spiritual counsellors about these very things. It is not a forbidden subject and the fact that you have struggles in that area of life does not in any sense devalue you as a Christian. It is in this sense that Paul is giving advice. He is not against marriage. If he was, he would be against God who invented it for wise and good and gracious purposes (Gen. 2:18-25). He says it is well or good for a man not to marry. He does not say it is better; nor that it is necessary; nor that it is unhealthy or unnatural to remain single. Then in v.2 he is not saying that marriage is only a safety measure against wrong behaviour. Marriage is very much more than that, else it could never have been used as an illustration in Eph. 5:25. Paul is not here expounding the doctrine of marriage but giving pastoral counsel to Christians living in a situation and atmosphere that sorely needed the witness of holy lives, faithful relationships, and secure homes.

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### **7:1-7**

Some commentators suggest that Paul is not simply saying that marriage is permissible but pointing out that some ought to be getting married. There are relationships of a close nature which can put undue and unfair strain on the two people by kindling deep feelings which are then constantly denied fulfilment. There are of course those who long to be married but it never happens, and others marry the wrong person because they are more concerned with 'being married' than with being a true partner and sharer of life in God's good will. For some, the fulfilment of marriage spells the end of true spiritual service, and Paul speaks of this later. In v.3-5 Paul addresses some who were making marriage too 'holy' for physical expression and were seeking to maintain a 'platonic' relationship within marriage. There is nothing one-sided in what Paul says and he makes it clear that the two parties have in a very full sense to be 'help-meets' to each other, recognising and being sensitive to each other's needs and longings. The word 'give' (3) could read 'fulfil' or 'render', indicating obligation, if not duty. Of course this principle of 'help' applies to the whole of the relationship and not just to the conjugal issue. Paul's wise words in v.5 make it plain that human fulfilment, even in a God-given marriage, does not necessarily take first place. There is a time to set aside true feelings and expression of love in the interest of specific spiritual service. But it must be only for a season, because Satan is always ready to take advantage of any feelings of tension or strain within a marriage. The 'refusing' spoken of may be applied more widely than just the physical side of marriage, because husband and wife can be so busy with their chosen work, pastimes, helping of other people and with Christian activity (which may not be Christian service) that they neglect each other in a basic

way that is simply not Christian. If God has given two people to each other the relationship must be honoured with care and love. And the man, as the head of the relationship, has the greater responsibility.

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### **7:8-9**

Paul places the whole matter of life and relationships in the context of fruitful Christian service. In the previous two verses (6,7). Paul is not denying the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in what he is teaching but simply pointing out that he is counselling about marriage and celibacy, not commanding one way of life or the other. In v.7 he seems to state that celibacy is the state in which a person is most available for God and for service, especially in a time of trial and persecution. Some suggest Paul wished all were able to choose celibacy as he had done, recognising that by the gift of God he was able to live in this way. There are some who suggest that Paul (as a member of the Sanhedrin) must have been married and was now a widower. We must recognise that marriage is a gift from God, given to some and withheld from others in God's good and perfect will. Whatever the 'gift' or calling there is given also the grace to handle it and Paul insists that no-one should try to force themselves into a pattern of life for which they are not 'gifted'. Jesus' words in Matt. 19:3-12 are searching, challenging and comforting, especially in the context of people using each other for their own gratification. In today's verses (8,9) Paul is urging both caution and acceptance in the matter of life's relationships, and at the same time recognising that for some aloneness is a burden and trial more than they can bear. Of course, marriage is not necessarily the answer to the longings and battles of human feelings. And sometimes human fulfilment can be bought at too high a price. Some marriages are far from helpful in Christian service, and some marriages have been the greatest help to two people enabling them to rise to their full potential in spiritual service. Christian marriage is far more than just two Christians getting married. The heart of the matter is the will and the gift of God.

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### **7:10-11**

Keep in mind that Paul is answering specific questions asked by the Corinthian Christians and that sets his answer in the context of the social and moral situation. But this does not qualify or reduce the radical nature of his answer. He is clear that he speaks with the mind and authority of the Lord, no doubt having in mind the words of Jesus in Matt. 19:4-6, which describe marriage in the highest terms in relation to God's creation ordinance (Gen. 2:18-25). We must always start our discussion on the highest ground, the biblical ground, rather than at the level of saying 'the law of the land allows'. Paul was aware, of course, that Jesus followed His radical words by referring to the hardness of fallen humanity as the reason why the Law of Moses allowed divorce, and referring also to the 'excepting' clause (which is not mentioned in the corresponding passages in Mk. 10:10-12; Lk. 16:18). Keep in mind that Paul has been teaching that marriage, celibacy, physical relations and abstinence are all valid options for Christians. But now he seems to say that separation and divorce (the terms mean the same here) and re-marriage are not options. This could cause great distress to many, and we must insist at once that we must not make marriage breakdown the only human failure for which there is not forgiveness and a new start. God does heal hurts; God understands and sympathises with those who have suffered more than most people know because of marriage breakdown. In His grace, God does give a new start, but it is a gift of grace, not a human right, nor something that can be taken easily. This is something that needs to be emphasised in a day when marriage and its vows have been devalued to the point of thinking of marriage almost as a temporary contract of convenience. If two people are made one flesh until death parts them, then what God has joined cannot lightly be put asunder.

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### **7:10-11**

Paul's words, which carry the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ, make plain that what are now called 'trial marriages', co-habiting outwith marriage, and marriages of convenience are a denial and contradiction of all that is meant by marriage as God ordained. We still declare in a marriage service that 'society can be strong, healthy and happy only where the marriage bond is held in highest honour' and reference is also made to the rights of children to be brought up in the context of safe and secure love. When individuals and society choose to live in direct contradiction of God's law and pattern, then complications are inevitable, not least in undermining the

whole structure of society for succeeding generations. This helps us to see the need for the strong words spoken about the permanence of marriage. Decision to marry must never be rushed or casual and there must be a recognition that marriage brings personal restrictions and responsibilities as well as pleasure and fulfilment. As we view the devaluation of marriage in our own day we need to do three things. We need to show to the younger generation the integrity and high value of true Christian marriage and home life, and how these become richer and fuller with the passing of years. We need to teach the rising generation so thoroughly in the things of God that they will come to marriage decisions from a stable base of spiritual and moral understanding and commitment. And we must pray for all developing relationships, for young married couples, especially when children come, and when the hope for children fades. It is easy to criticise people whose marriages break down but we seldom know what lies behind the public situation. We need to remember that we serve Him who wept over the city of Jerusalem in its brokenness, grieving that they would not come to Him who had the loving and powerful answer to their needs (Lk. 19:41).

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### **7:12-16**

When the Gospel is preached in a secular, pagan society and people believe and find salvation and life in Jesus Christ, all sorts of complicated situations emerge. One partner in the marriage is converted and wants to live a new kind of life but the other partner wants to go on living as before. No doubt Paul had preached about Jesus' words regarding taking up the cross, forsaking all to follow Him, and not loving anyone more than Him (Lk. 14:25-27). It seems that in Corinth some were abandoning their marriage partners because they were not believers and Paul now deals with this issue. Of course, his words in v.10-11 had already stated the permanence of the marriage bond. Paul does not suggest that what he is saying is merely human advice (12a). He speaks by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit even though there are no specific words of Jesus to quote. The practical advice, or the principle of action, is stated in v.12-13 and the spiritual basis is stated in v.13. This is all very positive and full of encouragement to believe that when God in His grace invades the family unit there is hope for all the others in the family. That should make us pray, and should make us wise and gracious in all we do and say, so that no barriers of resentment or suspicion are put in the way of members of the family coming to faith. New converts must always remember that what has suddenly become clear to them is still a bit of a mystery to the unbeliever who simply cannot understand the change in his or her partner, even though the change is for the better. Preaching at the unconverted partner is seldom effective and there are wise words about this in 1 Pet. 3:1-2. It may well have been in Corinth that new converts were afraid that their spirituality might be soiled or compromised by remaining with a non-Christian marriage partner. But if our spirituality is as vulnerable as that, there is something wrong with it.

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### **7:12-16**

Without reading into v.14 spiritual issues that are not there, we must allow ourselves to be thrilled and encouraged by its truth. When one person in the family becomes a Christian that person is 'in Christ' and Christ is in that person by the Holy Spirit. That means the people in that home are nearer to and more in contact with Christ than ever before. There is a living, constant human witness in the home. The light shines (Matt. 5: 14-16; Eph. 5:8) just by being there. There is no need to wave it around. Flashing lights are interesting but a steady light is far more use. Paul's affirmation in v.14 is staggering in its terms. He does not say that the unbelieving partner is converted, saved, made a Christian, by virtue of the other person's faith, because that would deny the central fact of the Gospel that a person is justified, set right with God, only by personal faith. But when a person believes the Gospel and is saved, that person is set apart for God; that is the meaning of consecrated or sanctified in this context. The believer is brought near, into the circle of God's family (Eph. 2:12,13,19), and, since the partners in marriage are 'joined' together, the unbelieving one is drawn into the sphere of God's grace. That does not mean he or she automatically becomes a Christian, but a new situation prevails, a new atmosphere pervades, for life is now lived with, among and in contact with the people of God. And that is true even if the unbeliever does not as yet come to church. Words such as 'atmosphere' and 'influence' are helpful. A flower can fill a room with its scent though not in an obvious way. It may take time before it is noticed, before its influence becomes effective. The believer carries the 'sweet savour' of Jesus wherever he or she goes. Never forget the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit.

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## 7:12-16

We must still consider Paul's words about the children, especially in the situation where one parent only is a believer. Paul does not mean that the child of a believer is 'holy' in the sense that it is automatically a 'Christian', a true believer in the sense of being regenerate and justified. (Although who can tell when the secret work of regeneration takes place. Someone can be regenerate by the Holy Spirit a long time before conscious faith and understanding dawn.) But the child, though born a sinner and needing to be born again, is born into the context of the faith of the believing parent and will grow up surrounded by all the privileges and blessings of God's covenant of grace. Being brought up in a Christian home is a blessing beyond calculation even though the child and the adolescent may not recognise it to be so. The children of believing parents are 'insiders' not 'outsiders' and by faith the believing parents look for the work of grace to begin and believe that in due time the child will freely and gladly confess Christ. The parents pray in faith, not fear, and by prayer, precept and example bring up the child in the ways of Christ and His church. We believe that the promise of God's grace is to us who believe, and to our children, and just as children were included in the Old Testament Covenant so they are brought within the sphere of the New Covenant. The blessings and benefits of the New cannot be less than the Old. Jewish children were circumcised because they were Jews, born of Jewish parents, not to make them Jews. Of course, not all who bear the mark of the covenant (whether circumcision or baptism) are in fact true spiritual children of God. That is made plain in Rom. 2:28-29; 9:6-7a; and in John 8:24,39,44, where Jesus is speaking to men who were circumcised and who assumed they were right with God. Be quite clear: the sacraments do not make us Christians, they are a means of grace to those who are Christians. Believers baptise their children because they are covenant children, and parents 'stand in' for their children until they come to faith themselves.

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## 7:12-16

In his pastoral, spiritual counselling Paul faces up to the various possibilities regarding marriage breakdown. The unbeliever's determination to depart seems here to refer to a basic disagreement with and refusal of the message of the Christian faith. This wilful departure is regarded as a radical ending of the marriage in the same way as adultery ends the union, and it seems that the Christian is free to marry again. Of course the Christian must be sure that the departure of the marriage partner has not been brought about by the neglect of marriage and the home because of the Christian's excessive involvement in Christian activity. Paul seems to indicate here that separation and ending of the marriage is more desirable than maintaining a 'union' that is one in name only and which is marked by private and public conflict and disunity. The hideous conflict of some marriages is capable of inflicting life-long damage, especially to children, and the departure of the cause of the dis-peace is not to be hindered or regretted, and indeed may be a welcome answer to prayer. God desires peace, and the line to be followed is the one that will lead to peace. That will call at times for the soft answer that turns away wrath (Prov. 15:1). Paul's final word (16) is a caution regarding precipitate action. There is so much we do not know and cannot foretell. At times we must hold on in hope that the partner will come to faith. At all times we must guard against outbursts of disorder because heated emotions, words and actions are seldom constructive. What are we to do? We must walk closely with God and look to Him for assurance and guidance. We must also make sure we are a real part of a fellowship of God's people so that we will have the help and support they can give and we need.

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## 7:17-24

Paul has counselled to strive for peace (Rom. 12:18) not upheaval and now he seeks to inculcate a spirit of quiet acceptance and submission because we believe that all our times are in fact in God's good hand and under His control. We must not think that God's first knowledge of us and dealings with us began when we consciously responded in faith to the Gospel. When we were converted God was not surprised to find us in a certain family or work situation and we must begin to live and to handle our Christian lives right where we are. In v.15 Paul has spoken about freedom to act and to change a situation, but that liberty must always be yielded to God's will for our lives. If God has assigned to us a certain situation, we must accept it gladly and live with it contentedly until such time as God makes it totally clear that He is directing us into new ways. This does not mean an

attitude of no change in personal or church life but it does forbid impetuous changes inspired by emotions rather than considered decisions. Too many changes are made and justified by the words, 'I felt sure the Lord was leading me.' But was the move discussed with anyone whose spiritual discernment was mature? It is easy to make Scripture verses a form of guidance that suits our inclination and some of the Corinthians may well have been taking such exhortations as 'Sell all you have and follow,' or 'If any man hate not father or mother he cannot be my disciple,' or 'For freedom Christ has set us free' (Gal. 5:1) in a far too radical and impulsive way. It is easy to imagine the social chaos this would lead to and how a great wave of resentment would arise against Christians and the Gospel. This kind of thing still happens when young Christians berate their parents and tell them they are not Christians, or when over-eager young ministers begin their ministries by criticising and changing all that has been done before. It is easy to create chaos. Any fool can do that. But to show the transforming grace of Jesus Christ calls for wisdom, care and consideration. We have to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves (Matt. 10:16) and that does not come easily to any of us.

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### **7:17-24**

Verses 17 and 20 insist on there being no precipitate changes but this cannot apply to wrong relationships. In 5:1-2 Paul made it plain that certain behaviour had to stop at once, and even when relationships may not have degenerated morally, if there are involvements and attachments that are not in the will of God, they must not be allowed to go on. Even if the relationship is one given by God we should, especially if we are young in years and in Christian experience, be wise and humble enough to consider and even to ask advice on how the relationship is being handled. In the matter of holding back from precipitate actions Paul applies his words to the issue of circumcision, the religious rite on which great emphasis was being placed in much the same way as some over emphasise the rite of baptism. Paul speaks of those who were not only criticising but even excommunicating each other on the issue of circumcision, its significance and importance. Those from a Jewish background regarded the uncircumcised as outside the covenant of God and beyond the blessing of God. Circumcision meant everything to them in their spiritual lives just as baptism or speaking in tongues seems to be everything to many people now. On the other hand, those converted from a Gentile background had been brought up to regard circumcision as something to be despised, the mark of a religion of narrowness and harshness. But whenever ritual or sacraments or traditions become the focal points of religion, even evangelical religion, the focus of life has moved away from God and from the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Inevitably spiritual pride results, because we begin to regard as spiritually suspect, inferior and not quite sound those who do not do things exactly as we do. Paul insists that what matters is obedience to God in the area of spiritual and moral commandments. Of course, people claim that what they do and don't do, the formulae they subscribe to, and the patterns they insist on, are in obedience to God. It is virtually impossible to reason with someone who claims to be led by the Spirit of God. They simply cannot see any other position but their own.

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### **7:17-24**

There is wonderful balance, great sanity and searching truth in v. 20-24. Paul does not attack the institution of slavery, insisting that our position in society is not the basic issue. We are to be the Lord's servants wherever we are placed, but if lawful opportunity comes to allow us to change our position for the better we should use it, provided we recognise that in our new position we must still be servants of Christ. We should, of course, remember that the new and better position may prove to be far more costly in terms of remaining faithful to Christ. Many a person who has 'got on' in the world has discovered they have far less time and inclination to pray, to worship and to give service to Christ and to the church. Whatever our station in life and whatever our gifts and capacities, we are the Lord's free men and women, free to make ourselves His slaves and glad servants. We do not live to please men and we must refuse to be brought under the control of their ideas, activities and objectives. We are to be Christ-centred, and Christ-controlled, and this is exactly how Paul lived his life as Phil. 3:7-11 makes plain. The final appeal in v.24 is to keep society stable. It is easy to attack situations and practices but far more difficult to replace them with something better. It is easy to criticise and to point out where things are wrong and it is all too easy to jump into action without having thought through the implications. This kind of precipitate action can open the door to a variety of Satanic influences and we tend to forget that the enemy is always waiting for opportunity to introduce confusion into the work of God and into our own lives. It is God's

work that the Devil seeks to war against. If he can do so by using Christians to create disturbance, suspicion and resentment in society he will do so. That is why Paul counsels the impetuous to make sure they stay with God.

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### 7:25-31

Keep in mind that Paul is answering questions regarding living as Christians in a godless society. His urgent counsel is to stay with God (24), waiting on God and looking to God, so that faith, not emotion, will control actions. Paul was aware that the words and actions of Christians can be misunderstood and regarded as reactionary and revolutionary in a political sense and this is always dangerous. We have learned in recent world events that revolution and liberation happening quickly can create waves of problems as well as opportunities for the Gospel, and there is no doubt that Paul is urging the Christians to do all they can to keep society stable. He is taking a serious view of the political situation and speaks of the impending distress (26) or the present crisis (NIV). It seems he had been asked if it was right or wise to marry, and no doubt to bring children into the world, since coming days would in all probability bring greater pressures. Paul had no specific words of Jesus to quote but he gave his opinion or judgment (NIV) as one trusted by God to minister to His people. Within ten years of this letter being written persecution was great against Christians and many were martyred. But Paul was not forbidding marriage nor was he saying it is better to stay unmarried. In 1 Tim. 4:1-3 he makes plain those who forbid marriage have departed from the faith. The commentaries insist that it is unmarried girls who are spoken of in v.25-26, and very possibly their marriages were arranged by parents. The advice, then, is addressed to parents, urging them to be wise before committing their daughters to marriage because it might involve them in distress. Think of wartime marriages and the long separation that in some cases proved too much of a strain or left a young girl with children to bring up on her own. Of course, some wartime marriages were a wonderful help, encouragement and blessing and kept hope alive for the future. There is also in Paul's mind the thought that a single person can accept privation and suffering for the Gospel's sake but a married person involves the family. We must go back to v.24: stay with God in the area of relationships. That is the safe place.

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### 7:25-31

Note carefully how balanced is Paul's advice in v.27-28. Perhaps he was addressing people whose attitude was that marriage was the essential and ultimate objective in life. He would never devalue marriage. After all, it was God who invented it and instituted it as a blessing and help to enable men and women to be all they should be and to fulfil their destiny in the will of God. The reference to worldly troubles, 'troubles in this life' (NIV) is not meant to portray marriage as an endless struggle, although some married couples, even Christians, seem to make it so! But marriage and family life do bring responsibilities and restrictions that have to be coped with while the atmosphere of this wicked world presses in on us. In marriage, when there are children, there is a discipline necessary to accept that parents must take it in turns to get to services and prayer meetings, and perhaps even more discipline to guard both personal times of devotion and family worship which nourishes and leads the children in the way of the Lord. Of course there is also the joy of mutual help and encouragement, and the thrill of seeing children perhaps in their early years coming to faith in Christ and giving themselves gladly in Christian service. This, of course, is what we pray for right from the time of their conception, and we pray in faith not fear. In v.29 we are reminded that we all too easily allow our thinking about life to assume that we have long years of fulfilment, service and pleasure before us, but that may well not be so. We need to be reminded that time is short (Ps. 39:4-5) and that in fact we have no assurance even about tomorrow (Jas. 4:13-15). This is not morbid. It is realistic, not least in terms of what we are told in the Gospels about the nearness of the coming again of the Lord Jesus Christ. In such an hour as we think not, when all is apparently going on as normal, the Lord will come (Matt. 24:44, 50). Of course, as Christian believers, we look for a new and better world (2 Pet. 3:13), one with foundations, permanence and fulfilment (Heb. 11:10): a world and a way of life described in Rev. 21:4 in glorious negatives.

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### 7:25-31

We must not read v.29-31 as if Paul were urging husbands to ignore and neglect their wives, nor as if Christians should suppress and deny natural and necessary mourning. Granted Christians do not mourn as, in the same

manner as, those who have no hope (1 Thess. 4:13) but bereavement should bring grief, and the expression of that grief at the time is part of the healing process. Paul is not urging Christians to be unnaturally brave, nor is he forbidding natural rejoicing when the heart is glad. And he is certainly not suggesting that we should neglect our rightful daily work, and in Thessalonica in particular there were those doing just that, trying to be very spiritual and living only to wait for the coming of the Lord. Paul's words to them were blunt indeed (2 Thess. 3:10-12). The message is simply the need to cultivate a right spirit of detachment from the world and all its affairs so that, while accepting and enjoying all the good things God has given us in rich measure (1 Tim. 6:17), we will never be ensnared by them. We have said on some occasions that two Christians can marry in the Lord and find such sweet fulfilment that it spells the end of their real spiritual service. We can be wrapped up in ourselves, our relationships, our families, our careers or our hobbies in such a way that Jesus is simply edged out into a very secondary place in our lives. Think of Jesus' words to the effect that a man's life does not consist of the things he possesses (Lk. 12:15), and think of the words of Luther's great hymn, 'A safe stronghold':

'And though they take our life,  
Goods, honour, children, wife,  
Yet is their profit small;  
These things shall vanish all:  
The city of God remaineth.'

Another old hymn speaks wisely when it says,

'Tell me the old, old story  
When you have cause to fear  
That this world's empty glory  
Is costing me too dear.'

When all this world has passed away, what will we have left? We had better read 1 Cor. 3:10-15. Paul is realistic.

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### 7:32-35

If we read 1 Tim. 4:4 and remember Jesus' words about the lilies and sparrows and His obvious delight in nature (Matt. 6:25-30; 10:29), we will have no desire to devalue any of God's good gifts, including the wonderful range of right relationships which God is pleased to give to us. This passage, which on the face of it is full of sweeping generalities which we might want to challenge or deny, is best understood if we link Paul's stated intentions in v.27a and 35b. He wants the believers to be free from anxieties, as far as that can ever be in view of Jesus' words in John 16:33 and Paul's own words in Acts 14:22. But at the same time he wants their undivided devotion to the Lord, and sometimes it is the demands, anxieties and responsibilities of life that draw us closer to God and make us far more realistic about our commitment. (Ps. 119:67,71). Marriage can distract from spiritual service but it can also have the opposite effect. Being unmarried can leave a person free to be totally available at the call of God to service, but it can also make a person wistfully envious of others' happiness and even bitter with God, who is regarded as the one who has denied the human fulfilment the heart craved for. The crux of the matter is who we want to please: ourselves, a partner, a friend or the Lord. Think of it this way: in your congregation if some need is pointed out in terms of service and you have the skill, gift or capacity to serve in that area, do you respond and meet the need, or do you choose rather to go with friends? If your church has a prayer-meeting and friends ask you to go to some other meeting or join them in some pleasurable outing, what decision do you make? Do you decide on the level of what you like best, or what gives you most pleasure, or do you make it plain to the Lord that He has your undivided devotion and that He and His service come first?

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### 7:36-38

Paul has gone into great detail about personal relationships, because it is an important area of Christian life and service. It is also a dangerous area, because the Devil is constantly seeking through our relationships to tempt us to sin and to distract us from service. Read these verses in various translations, including 3 B Phillips', because some things are not quite clear. In v.36 some suggest it is the father of the girl who is referred to who is refusing to arrange or give permission for a marriage. But it seems more likely that the reference is to the man and the



girl he loves or is engaged to. The phrase 'not behaving properly' could refer to his not making provision and arrangement for the marriage. It could refer to the man prolonging the engagement unduly and so putting strain on the girl, not least in relation to her family and friends. It could refer to the man 'leading the girl on' enjoying all the pleasure of an affectionate and romantic relationship with no real intention of marriage. To trifle with or manipulate a girl's feelings and so make her vulnerable is not honourable and is quite inexcusable. Improper behaviour can refer to a variety of physical intimacy, the kind of thing neither the man nor the woman wants to be known publicly, the kind of thing that both stirs and then denies feelings and can do more harm to the girl than to the man. If a man acts in a way that causes the girl to have regrets and to feel ashamed, then the sooner that relationship is ended the better. A relationship that is given by God is not difficult to keep right. By God's grace there will be no shadows and both parties can without a blush ask the Lord to bless their relationship and to keep them company wherever they go. There is a suggestion in Paul's words that he is referring to some who were trying to have a totally 'spiritual' relationship, but if that denies the expression of human love in its true aspects finding its fulfilment in marriage, then it is courting disaster. In v.36 'passions' may simply refer to emotional strain and Paul says it is time either to get married or to bring the relationship to an end.

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### 7:32-35

In all human relationships, from friendship through to romance and marriage, two things are important. Care, affection and love must be expressed in a way that is appropriate, at a time and in a place that are appropriate, and care must be taken so that neither friend nor lover will put the other person under strain, either by what is said and done or by what is not said or done. When we open our hearts to affection and love we are all vulnerable and capable of being hurt and no Christian should want to hurt another. Love can be blind, but it need not be so, and love should notice the need of the loved one, no matter how much he or she tries to hide it. Love can be selfish and can manipulate the loved one to the point of being a tyrant, but then it is not true love but self-love. It would be good for many people to read 'The Four Loves' by C S Lewis. In today's passage there are difficulties in understanding v.37, which in RSV seems to make the decisive factor whether or not the man has his strong emotions under control so that he does not feel he needs to get married. But this totally ignores the girl and her feelings. We do not need to understand the word 'betrothed' in the sense of being engaged to be married in our culture. The man should have been clearer about his intentions long before that stage. It seems best to think of a romantic relationship and involvement which the man knows is not going to lead to marriage, and Paul says quite plainly that the relationship should stop there and then. Whatever the difficulties in the details of this passage, whether it refers to a man and the girl he loves, or to the father of the girl who is not sure whether to give the girl permission to marry or to withhold permission, the main lesson is quite clear. It has to do with behaving properly and honourably. In our generation, as in Corinth long ago, there is in society such a debasing of sexual relationships and such a using of people for immediate and temporary gratification that it is vital that Christians should show by example what love really means.

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### 7:39-40

The chapter ends with another affirmation that marriage is for life, ordained by God for 'the lifelong companionship, help and comfort which husband and wife ought to have of each other.' That question had been raised by the Corinthians and is now answered. Another question concerned widows and Paul makes plain that a widow is free to marry again, but adds the comment that she will be happier if she remains a widow. He gives no clear reason for saying this but thinks he is speaking the mind of the Spirit on this subject. No mention is made of how young the widow is, nor if there are children to be provided for and guided, nor any indication of how or when the husband died. We must allow here the same principle as is spoken of in v.7. For some, being bereft of a marriage partner may lead to a significant life of spiritual service, especially in the matter of prayer. Think of Anna in Lk. 2:36-38. In 1 Tim. 5:3-16 Paul speaks further words about the particular calling of and dangers to young widows and actually urges them to marry. Now, it is a principle of interpretation that we should never understand any part of Scripture in a way that would contradict another part. We must think of Paul's words to the Corinthians here in terms of the particular time and circumstances. But there is one vital statement which is a principle for all time in the matter of Christians marrying. The words 'only in the Lord' make it clear that for a believer to marry an unbeliever is unthinkable. Paul deals with this more fully in 2 Cor.

6:14-7:1. The gulf between a Christian and a non-Christian is so basic that marriage is a recipe for disaster. How can two people possibly live together in harmony and partnership if they are divided in the basic and most important element of life? But there are those who are, to say the least, casual about their Christian commitment and have no real desire to put the Lord first, and such an one is not likely to make a good partner in marriage to a believer who is earnestly seeking to honour God in the whole of life. The principle 'only in the Lord' should be clear in everyone's thinking before a serious relationship begins.

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### **8:1-3**

Keep in mind that we are dealing with Christians living in a pagan society in which there were superstition, religions and idolatry, all of which were expressed in various rituals, some sophisticated and some totally carnal and debased. Food, no doubt animal meat and various other edibles, was offered in sacrifices, and some part of the food may then have been used for a communal or family meal. Animal sacrifices were made and then the carcass may have been sold in the butchers' shops. Some Christians felt that to buy and eat such 'contaminated' meat was wrong and would compromise their spiritual standing. Others mocked such scruples and made a show of their liberation from such 'narrowness'. Paul was consulted. The question concerned what 'real' Christians could do or not do; what to get involved in or keep radically clear of? To apply the issue to our own day we need to remember that an older generation of evangelical Christians had clear, and indeed rigid, ideas of what was 'worldly' and therefore not right for Christians to do: drinking alcohol was one such issue. Nowadays there is what seems to be an almost careless attitude regarding worldly pursuits, fashions, habits and activities and it can be difficult to see any difference between the life-style of Christians and non-Christians. We must be clear that the issue in this chapter does not concern standards of moral behaviour. The Ten Commandments, including the one about the seventh day, the Sabbath or Sunday, still stand as a guide to how we should live to please God (1 Thess. 4:1-8). Keeping the Commandments is not the way of salvation. We live to please God. But Jesus said that one proof that we love Him is that we will keep His commandments (John 14:15). We should read Romans 14 along with this chapter, taking it in sections over the next few days: e.g. 14:1-9; 10-18; 19-23. We will begin to see that the standard for Christian behaviour is very high and calls for a real denial of 'self.'

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### **8:1-3**

When there is a difference of opinion, those who feel they 'know' tend to criticise and to devalue others. 'But the man who is proud of his knowledge should compare himself with his betters, not his inferiors!' (W Still). It is easy to be proud of what we know, or think we know of spiritual things, but we know only in part (1 Cor. 13:8-13), and if Paul said that was how it was with him, who are we to boast about our knowledge and regard ourselves as better than others? Paul spoke of himself as the least of the apostles and the chief of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15; 1 Cor. 15:9), and protested that he did not speak as one who had attained or reached completeness (Phil. 3:12). Of course we do learn more and more, or at least we should, although it is not always the case (Heb. 5:12-14). As we learn, our knowledge can be used to be a help, a ministry, and an encouragement to others. But that is to be a servant rather than an object of admiration. Knowledge does not necessarily result in care. A person can be a theological encyclopaedia and yet show very little of the humanity of Jesus. Paul's searching test is this: does your knowledge puff you up or does it build up others? A good illustration is to refer to a head of steam which can blow a whistle or drive a train. In Corinth there was a lot of spiritual 'whistle-blowing'. You can imagine those who thought themselves knowledgeable saying about others, 'Surely they can see the point. Can they not think through their faith instead of being inhibited by scruples? Don't they know that Christ is everything and we are set at liberty in Him?' Their doctrine was right but their hearts were loveless. Perhaps as they listened to sermons, even Paul's sermons, their attitude was the same as that of some people today. They checked up to see if the preacher was sound! If ever we reach the stage of thinking we know it all we cease to be of use to God, and it will become increasingly obvious that we really do not know God very well at all (3). It is significant that it is in the great statement on justification by faith that Paul speaks of the love of God poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (Rom. 5:1-5). You cannot imagine the Holy Spirit inspiring a man to boast about his knowledge!

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## 8:4-6

Having made the point that love works to build up, to encourage and to help rather than to condemn and demolish, Paul now begins to apply the principle to attitudes and actions in an age powerfully influenced by idolatry. In that situation there was a great deal of superstition which would pressurise even Christians into doing things either to avoid bad luck or to avoid criticism by neighbours. Customs and habits become ingrained. Of course, those 'strong' in faith would show little patience with what they regarded as 'weakness'. Paul starts with facts and declares that an idol has no real existence; it is made by people out of a variety of materials and, however much adorned and made beautiful or grotesque, it cannot see, hear or act. The words of Isaiah 44:12-20 express it well, as do the words of Jeremiah 10:1-5. Paul went on to affirm that there is one God, and one Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus (1 Tim. 2:5). Pagans tend to think of a variety of gods associated with certain places and having different and competing powers. But this is not so, and even when we recognise that there is a Devil and that behind many things there is evil power operating, we must not think of the Devil as being in any sense equal with God. The Devil is a fallen creature, significantly limited and restricted in what he may do (Job 1:12; 2:6). The Christian affirms that there is one God, but so do Jews and Muslims. But the Christian goes on to affirm 'God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord.' All things had their origin in the Father but they came through the Son, who is Himself the perfect image and representation of God. Read and ponder John 1:1-4; Col. 1:15-20; Heb. 1:1-3 and then think of how Jesus affirmed that He and He alone was the way to the Father (John 14:6-11). The preaching of the apostolic church declared the same uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the way of salvation (Acts 4:12). These are matters we need to be totally clear about, especially when there is so much talk of 'inter-faith' services. To have Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists all 'saying prayers' in one service is confusion.

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## 8:7-13

Paul, the theological preacher, was also a wise and careful pastor and he recognised that not all new converts are totally clear and assured about their faith and not all have shaken off the habits and influences that were part of their lives since childhood. Some, aware that the food had been offered to idols, shrank back from taking it, feeling that would be terribly wrong. To force such a person to eat it, or to encourage him to eat it, or even to do nothing to ease him out of the situation without offending the host would be to sin against a Christian brother. The spiritually strong knows that eating or not eating is not a major spiritual issue by which we stand or fall in relation to God. But if the 'strong' brother recognises this, why should he want to exercise his full rights and liberty and why does the 'strong' add to the weaker Christian's distress by deriding him? In v.9 Paul gives a warning to all of us regarding our behaviour. Things we do, because we know they are not a contradiction of our Christian faith and commitment, may, if some weak Christian sees us doing them, hinder that person. The young or weak Christian may be confused, may be led to believe that behaviour does not matter or, even worse, may be led to do the things he sees the stronger Christian doing and thus be led into serious temptation. It is easy to say of another Christian that if they had listened to and believed the teaching they had received they ought to be stronger. But that is not much of a help to a person struggling with temptation and afraid of being a failure and of proving to be unworthy of the Lord. To be prepared to forfeit one's own privileges and blessings in order to minister to the spiritual good of another is what Christian living is all about. That was the pattern of Jesus' life (Phil. 2:5-8) and He is our example (1 Pet. 2:21).

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## 8:7-13

A missionary illustrated this passage with a story from his service in a Muslim land. After Ramadan there was the Feast of Sheep and a woman said about the sacrifice of a sheep, would not do it for myself, it is for the children. If there was no sheep, others would mock and persecute them.' Later two families with no knowledge or even contact with Christian things brought the missionary a gift of meat and he accepted it for what it was, a token of friendship. But, from a woman working in his house, well taught about Jesus and the Gospel, he would not accept such a gift of meat lest she thought the missionaries agreed with the religious aspect of the gift. The issue was explained to her. The guiding factor for the missionary was the spiritual good of the other person. The missionary was 'strong' enough in faith to have accepted the meat which he may have needed. He

had the 'right' to exercise his strong faith, but he yielded his right. This is the challenge Paul presses home in v.11-13. It is not enough to say, 'It's his own affair. It is up to him.' Paul says it is up to the Christian who considers he is strong and well established in his faith to become the servant of the weaker Christian instead of hurting and confusing him by criticism of his lack of spirituality. Note the words used in v.12 - 'sinning' and 'wounding', and do not fail to see that Paul says it is Christ who is sinned against and wounded. That is a strange and contradictory result of a claim to be strong in faith and spiritual in attitude. The final verse is magnificent in its extravagant commitment. We have already referred to Romans 14 and when that chapter is studied carefully it is evident that those who choose to be weak must not be allowed to blackmail or manipulate the fellowship and individuals in it. Some choose to be weak and problematic in order to get attention and to get their own way. But we must not yield to blackmail by tears, anger or silence, but because Christ has died for the weak and complicated Christian, then the least we can do is to yield our rights in order to minister to the one who is weak, in order to lead him out of his weakness into the strength of the Lord.

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### 9:1-7

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Paul is very wise and he does not apply the question of yielding of rights only to the fairly simple business of food. Paul may have been a vegetarian, and denying himself meat would not have been a difficult thing. It is a constant snare to prohibit as 'unspiritual' things that have no real attraction to us. But ask someone to give up golf, tennis, football, concerts, expensive clothes, in order to be a spiritual servant to others and you are in the realm of real sacrifice. But Paul speaks here of giving up his rightful wages and support as a minister of the gospel. We must examine how he speaks of this. He is not setting a standard for others which he refuses for himself. First he asserts his freedom in Christ, his strength in Christ, his calling as a true apostle, because he fulfilled the necessary qualification of having seen Christ on the road to Damascus. He went on to affirm the validity of his ministry, the proof and vindication being the conversion of the Corinthians. Even if others did not recognise him as a 'real' minister, the fruit of his ministry in Corinth testified that he was indeed a man used by God. But there were those who challenged Paul's apostleship, and consequently challenged his right to be supported and maintained in his ministry and his missionary labours. The 'Maintenance of the Ministry' (as we speak of it in our own denomination) is not a voluntary option but a spiritual duty. There are suggestions in some of the epistles that people said Paul 'was in it for the money'. In v.3 Paul makes plain he is answering those who 'examined' him, or sat in judgment on him, questioning his right to be a minister. He links himself with the other apostles and with men like Barnabas, who was a missionary but not an apostle in the strict sense. What we are reading here gives an insight into the condition of the early Christian church. It was not a perfect church either in doctrine or practice but it was still a church.

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### 9:1-7

Paul's was a 'tentmaker' ministry. He had learned a trade, as most Jewish scribes and Rabbis did, so that their teaching would not call for payment. In his ministry Paul worked at his trade to support himself, as he made plain in his words to the elders at Ephesus (Acts 20:33-35). But here he states and defends his right to his food and drink at the church's expense. In v.5 he is not defending the right of apostles to marry, because no one would question that, nor is he indicating that he himself is married. But he is insisting that the apostles' wives and families had also the right to be maintained by the churches. No doubt those congregations better able to do so would help to meet the financial responsibilities of poorer congregations, and that is the pattern maintained by our own Church of Scotland. This is what the maintenance of the ministry should be like in the home country as well as on the mission-field. Paul deals with this in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 (without actually mentioning money) and refers to it in Philippians 4:13-16, pointing out that the principle did not always work out well. We do not know why Peter is named specifically. We should note the reference to the brothers of the Lord, which indicates that Mary and Joseph had other children after Jesus was born. We must also note in v.6 the obvious prejudice there was against Paul and we must marvel that Christians should be so cruel to a man who had done so much and suffered so much for Christ and the Gospel. Of course, people can be cruel, and can take greedily all that is offered to them in spiritual ministry and never express gratitude and never give of their substance in any sacrificial measure to ensure the continuance of the ministry of God's Word. That this is a totally unreasonable and indefensible attitude is pressed home in the threefold illustration in v.7. There is such a

thing as a debt of gratitude, a duty to provide and a legitimate expectation.

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### 9:8-14

Paul makes plain that he is not arguing for ministerial support simply on a human basis. He insists that a spiritual principle is involved. He quotes from Deut. 25:4, a verse set in the context of people dealing rightly with each other. Paul does not suggest that God is indifferent to how we treat animals, but he is insisting that if God does provide food for the ox as it is treading the grain, then God is concerned to provide for the 'human oxen' who 'work the mill' so that the 'corn' of God's Word can become the bread of God for God's people. Paul is quite clear: the Christian worker, be he the one who ploughs and prepares the ground (hard work indeed), or the one who sows the good seed (which has to be done in faith and hope), or the one who reaps the harvest (which is exciting and in which the ploughman and sower tend to be forgotten), is entitled to right and worthy reward from his labours. There is a tremendous challenge in v.11 and it could well be a rebuke to many who, though richly blessed through the ministry of the Word, never respond in any practical way. Some, for example, receive all their spiritual food from a congregation and yet give all their financial support to other causes and other places. This is not pleasing to God. Some are richly and constantly blessed in the ministry of the Word but never in any way express their gratitude. They may say they give thanks to God and that they pray for the church and even for the minister but, as Paul makes plain to the Corinthians, and by the Holy Spirit to every congregation and individual believer, there is practical gratitude that must be expressed. Indeed, lack of such gratitude may lie at the heart of the spiritual dullness of some Christians. Of course, although Paul expounded the principle and applied it particularly to the Corinthians who owed him a tremendous spiritual debt, he retained and preserved his own personal liberty and dignity by making clear that he had never claimed his rights in this matter. He yielded his rights rather than risk the possibility of causing their resentment and so hindering the Gospel. In v.13-14 he says the whole issue is a command from God.

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### 9:15-18

If yesterday's passage was read before going to church, many a Treasurer may have found a significant increase in the church collection, and many a minister may have been astonished by the number of usually silent people who thanked him for his ministry. Some may even have asked the minister how he was feeling and have shown interest in him as a person, not just as a minister. Paul was not appealing to the Corinthians, nor was he begging them to be nice to him. If the expression of love and gratitude is not spontaneous it has little value. Nor was Paul expressing a wrong spirit of independence, which is essentially pride. After all, we are to follow the example of Jesus, and He allowed others to minister to Him (Lk. 8:1-3). In Phil. 4:10-19 Paul expresses gratitude for the way in which the Philippians ministered to him (although there does seem to be a slight note of embarrassment in his words). Perhaps Paul found that it is easier to give help than to receive it. And yet, in 2 Cor. 8:1-7 he recognises the spiritual value of material help. Perhaps many of us create a problem for others because we cover up our need and give the impression of a self-sufficient independence that we do not really have. We must understand Paul's words here in their true context, which was the situation, atmosphere and attitude of the church in Corinth. He was guarding against any possibility of Christians patronising him by providing for him and so putting him under the kind of obligation that would allow them to influence or restrict his faithful ministry. How we need to guard our integrity and liberty! It is not easy to preach the whole counsel of God and to hold back nothing that is profitable (Acts 20: 20,27) when you know that people who have been kind to you will be hurt by the challenge of the Word. If someone gives an expensive gift, and the 'message' to be preached from the next passage of Scripture has direct application to some wrong in that person's life, it takes true and costly dedication on the preacher's part to be faithful to God's Word, knowing that there may well be resentment. Paul was so aware of the danger that we must consider his words again.

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### 9:15-18

When Paul says he would rather die than be deprived of his ground for boasting he was clearly moved by very deep feeling. He was not boasting in the sense of saying he was a marvellous apostle but rather making plain that what mattered to him more than anything was to be found as a faithful minister of God. The fact that he



point. When dealing with the weak, those hemmed in and inhibited by scruples, superstitions, psychological inhibitions and the like, Paul had regard for their limitations and fears and made plain that he did not in any sense devalue them. His concern was to win them for Christ and to that end he started where they were: sometimes in total ignorance, sometimes wrongly taught, sometimes full of prejudices; and he sought to teach them the truth as it is in Christ. There were times, especially with religious folk, that he would speak in clear, categorical terms when it was clear that they understood and were determined to refuse Christ (Acts 13:44-46). But he was also prepared to be patient, teaching the same lessons over and over again (Phil. 3:1; Isa. 28:13a). This is far more effective than a bombardment of theological language to people who do not know the meaning of the words.

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### **9:24-27**

Having spoken of living his life for the sake of the Gospel, Paul now expresses the nature of his resolution. Like an athlete, the objective in view conditions not only the race when it is actually being run but the whole manner of his life. There is determination as well as dedication. The illustration from the races assumes that some do drop out, some do fall behind, some do attempt what is actually beyond their capacity, and, of course, some are so out of condition, so unprepared, that it would have been best for them not to appear in the public arena. This illustration would have had real impact on the Corinthians, because in their city 'the Isthmian Games, second only to the Olympic Games, were held every three years.' (Morris) No doubt, at times, some athletes would try to compete when in fact they were 'past it' and some, for various reasons, would be disqualified. Paul was determined to be his best right to the end and he says that in ordering his life and activities he was not shadow-boxing or pretending to be in earnest. He was serious about his Christian life and service and was full of purpose. When he says he pommelled his body to keep it in subjection he was not referring simply to bodily exercise. He is speaking of how he 'gave a good thump' to all that is meant by 'the flesh', all that belongs to the 'old nature' that would compete against the new life of Christ within him. He viewed with great seriousness the possibility of being 'disqualified'. In the AV the word 'castaway' is too strong and suggests the possibility of losing one's salvation. That is not in Paul's mind. But he was thinking of the possibility of being laid aside as of no further use in the service of the Gospel. That is where spiritual carelessness leads. That is what happens when a man or woman of God allows a carnal, fleshly spirit to develop in life. Think of the story of the self-will and self-indulgence and spiritual presumption in the life of Samson. There came a time when he wanted to go out and serve God as he had done before but he did not know that God had departed from him (Judges 16:20). Nothing could be sadder than that.

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### **10:1-5**

Spiritual complacency is a terrible thing and Paul seems to have been aware that the Corinthians would not be disposed to think that such backsliding and spiritual failure as he had been speaking of could possibly happen to them. They were now given lessons from history and told not to assume they were spiritual. It is not enough to have made a decision and a profession of faith, to have had some spiritual experience, to have begun well or even to be part of a recognised spiritual work and people. Note in the passage the contrast between 'all' and 'nevertheless'. Paul seems to assume that the Christians in Corinth would know well the Old Testament stories of the Exodus and the journeys of the children of Israel. That assumption cannot be made now, because many church people, including evangelicals, seem to be very hazy about the content of the Old Testament, and indeed of the New Testament. We must be quite clear that, in these Old Testament stories being referred to, we are shown the principles of God's dealings with His people. Note very carefully how Paul speaks of the Israelites in their individual experience and their experience as an identifiable company of God's people, and apply the message to both personal and congregational life. The story is found in Exod. 13:21-22; 14:19-22, 30-31; 16:4,13-19; 17:1-7. The people had the experience of being guided by the cloud that signified God's presence; of passing through the Red Sea; of being 'baptised' into Moses in the sense of being identified with him and united to him in his obedient service to God; of being sustained by heavenly food (fed day by day, as many are in their congregations and in notes such as these); and of being 'watered' in sustenance and refreshment as they journeyed. When Paul speaks of a Rock that followed them, he may have been thinking of a Jewish legend about such a moving rock but he makes plain that all the blessings they had experienced came from Christ. It is

clear that in speaking of Christ in these Old Testament situations Paul is indicating the 'pre-existence' of Christ, Christ before Bethlehem (John 1:1-3), and uniting Him with God, (Ps. 18:1-3; Deut. 32:3-4,15), who is spoken of as the Rock.

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### 10:1-5

The message is very searching. The people individually and 'congregationally' shared all these spiritual experiences, blessings and service but with most of them it was a surface and superficial experience. Most of them seem to have been carried along 'with the crowd' in a work of God that was popular, exciting and in many ways successful. But God was not pleased with them and they fell in the wilderness journeys. Now, it would be easy to apply these verses to nominal believers and refer to the 'mixed multitude' in Exod. 12:38. It is a fact of experience that people are attracted to a living spiritual church and enjoy sharing in its life without ever coming to faith. But the warning here is to proud Christians who were very sure of their spirituality but who were unteachable and who had little to show of spiritual grace in their lives. Paul has already charged them with being careless about moral standards, argumentative and critical, and motivated by a party spirit. There is no doubt that Paul is speaking of the constant complaining, discontent, and criticism of Moses, their lack of any willingness for costly commitment to service that marked the people of Israel as they journeyed to the Promised Land. Some details of these things are dealt with in the next verses but what we have to do is to search our own hearts to remind ourselves of how easy it is to forget the wealth of goodness and mercy which God has showered on us, the constancy of His love and blessing, the life and liberty He has given and the glorious hope to which He has called us. Why is it that we so quickly become discontented and critical when life becomes hard and demanding? Why do we take all the blessings from a man's ministry with seldom a word of thanks or gratitude and then jump to criticise whenever we feel he has said or done something we do not like? Why do we so easily forget the debt of gratitude we owe to so many? Why do we feel so reluctant to go forward with God and at the same time consider ourselves to be spiritual? Read Numbers 14:1-5, 8-10, 20-23,30. If you have time read the whole of that chapter and note in v.39-45 the spiritual presumption. When they realised they were losing something they suddenly decided to be good, but neither God nor Moses was taken in by that superficial attitude.

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### 10:6-11

Paul begins to warn the Corinthians about certain attitudes and activities that are a danger to Christian life. The reference in v.7 is to the story in Exod. 32:1-10, 15-24. Aaron, Moses' right hand man, either through fear of the people or a desire to be popular by showing he was not 'hard-line' as Moses was, consented to the scheme for making a golden calf, an idol to worship. The people were tired of Moses' ministry, tired of waiting on God, tired of the life of sanctification, and they wanted the life of the congregation to be made more lively and interesting in terms of 'fun and games', music and dancing. The results were disastrous because in no time God was forgotten. This illustration had real point in Corinth because eating, drinking and dancing were elements of many of the pagan festivals in which these Christians were joining, and these occasions were not as innocent or neutral as many imagined. Indeed, in many idolatrous activities, where the God of our Lord Jesus Christ is not welcome, the atmosphere and the 'spirit' is such that the basest of human inclinations and appetites are stirred and set loose. This means, amongst other things, that our social life has to be carefully and wisely monitored, especially in terms of its effect on our Christian lives and service. We must remember that there is a Devil who can very swiftly turn something that began in innocence into a serious spiritual danger. In the story of the Golden Calf it is amazing just how swiftly the whole situation deteriorated and it may have been that many were caught unawares. No doubt there were leaders in the whole situation. There usually are those with a cavalier attitude who say 'we need a change'. But it is a terrible thing to lead any of God's people into spiritual danger. Jesus took a serious attitude to this (Lk. 17:1-2).

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### 10:6-11

In v.8 we have a stern warning about the dangers of sexual sin and the consequences that follow. The reference is to the story in Num. 25:1-3, and in v.6 of that chapter we are told of the deliberate and defiant act of one of



the Israelites at the very time when God had signified His displeasure and when His judgment had moved the people to tears. The Sunday before this note was written we read in the story of Jacob, Gen. 49:3-4, and learned that all the potential and possibility of Reuben's life was forfeited because of one deliberate and defiant act of sexual sin. We spoke also of how King David, absent from his rightful place of spiritual duty, fell in a moment of sexual temptation (2 Sam. 11:1-5). How we need to guard that area of life, especially since we live in a society whose atmosphere is increasingly permeated with and indulgent towards this particular kind of sin. Remember that Paul was warning Christians in Corinth who were sure of their standing and proud of their spiritual gifts. The danger, as we pointed out yesterday, lay in their getting involved in the 'celebrations' of worldly and idolatrous people. Bad company does indeed ruin good morals (1 Cor. 15:33), especially if the badness is refined, and even more so if it is religious. Some people seem to try to see just how far they can go in living dangerously and this seems to be the emphasis in v.9, where Paul speaks of putting God to the test. It is what used to be referred to as 'tempting providence', trying to see how far disobedience and wrongdoing can go before God reacts. The reference seems to be to Num. 21:4-10 when the people spoke against God in such a contemptuous and critical and complaining way. And, when you look back to Num. 14:22, and listen to God's testimony that they had put Him to the test again and again, ten times, you begin to see just how justified His anger was towards a people for whom He had done so much. Since ingratitude and complaining can become fixed conditions we do well to heed God's warnings.

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### 10:6-11

The story of the Israelites in many parts of the Old Testament narrative is marked by their spirit of grumbling and murmuring. Cruden's Concordance lists some thirty-eight references to murmuring, quite a few of them in the New Testament, and some of them in the story of our Lord's ministry. If we refer to Num. 14:2 and 27, we see that the murmuring against Moses their leader, teacher, shepherd and pastor, was in fact murmuring against God. No doubt, then as now, the people would protest, if challenged, that they were not against God. But they were, and still to this day a spirit of complaint and criticism usually indicates spiritual ill-health or disaffection. At times, the reason for complaining is in fact the physical ill-health or the emotional strain experienced by the person and this has to be recognised and dealt with with great care and gentleness. Of course such people, when they are well and free from strain, are usually some of the most grateful people in a congregation. The complainers are usually those who never express gratitude and their attitude seems to be that it is only right that they should be ministered to, appreciated and encouraged. That is exactly how it was with the Israelites under Moses' ministry and leadership. When all was going their way and God was asking little of them, then they •were 'spiritual'. But when obedience and faithfulness led them into demanding circumstances, their reaction against Moses was astonishingly quick and bitter. Murmuring is both infectious and contagious (Num. 14:36; 16:1-3, 11, 41, 49), as the story in Numbers makes plain. When a spirit of murmuring emerges it is a danger to the life and work of the whole people of God, and such is God's love for His people, and the value He puts on them and on their work, that He is not prepared to stand back and let this evil spirit do harm. It is an evil spirit, and it is not for nothing that the New Testament speaks of the tongue as being set on fire by Hell (Jas. 3:1-10). In v.11 Paul says simply that we must learn well from these illustrations because we live and work at the time when history is coming to its final climax.

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### 10:12-13

Paul now comes to the practical application of what he has been saying and it is clear he is both challenging spiritual pride and warning against it. It is all too easy to be self-confident in our own spiritual capacity, to be so sure that we are sound doctrinally, comprehensive in our understanding and clear in our convictions, that we find it virtually impossible to consider that we might be wrong in some of our attitudes and actions, or at least somewhat unbalanced. When Paul was writing to the Philippians he described himself as someone who had not yet attained, but who was pressing on in Christ (Phil. 3:12-14). In v.13 Paul seems to go on to deal with the actual situation in Corinth and he speaks of temptation or testing. It seems that the Christians who were so self-confident in and proud of their spirituality, to the extent that they were resentful of Paul's ministry, were also making excuses for some of the obvious moral and practical lapses of behaviour they had been challenged about. They seem to have been excusing some of their worldliness, indulgence and compromise by pointing out

the particular pressures and temptations of Corinth. They may have been excusing their lack of interest in and support for the wider work of the church by affirming the needs and demands of Corinth. They may also have been boasting of how well they had coped with the challenge of Christian witness in a grim place as their city was. Now, the most effective way of demolishing spiritual pride, whatever its source, is to say quite simply that all Christians go through and cope with the same kinds of pressures of temptation and testing. The actual circumstances and nature of the battles may vary according to place, personality and age, but essentially the battle is the same for all. Of course there is great comfort in this, because when we are battling and struggling with temptation, the Devil accuses us and we begin to feel sure that no other Christian could possibly feel and react as we do, and we conclude that we are failures. If you are proud, be humbled by this verse. If you are battling be comforted and encouraged.

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### **10:12-13**

Whether Paul is speaking of temptation to sin or of the 'testings' that come in the various circumstances of life, there are two things to keep clearly in mind. God is faithful and, having pledged Himself in saving love, He is with His people to save, preserve and deliver them. We must never forget that God is for us, not against us (Rom. 8:31). Not even our foolishness and perversity can make Him move from His faithfulness to us (2 Tim. 2:13). Because God is like this, and because He is fully aware of and understanding of our humanity (Ps. 103:14), He will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we are able to bear. Strength for every situation is promised (Deut. 33:25). Part of the 'strength' given, in order to be victorious, is the capacity to recognise and to make use of the way of escape. There are times when it is right to stand our ground, protected with the armour of God that is in Christ, and to resist the Devil until he flees (Eph. 6:10ff; 1 Pet. 5:9; Jas. 4:7). But at other times the thing to do is to clear out of the area of temptation, and that can mean parting company with people or ending all participation in some activity. The way of escape may also be in terms of taking one's place in glad commitment in the spiritual service of the congregation to which we belong. It may at times be a case of confiding in some friend or partner to let them know just how severe the temptation is so that they can either keep us away from the temptation or remove the cause of the temptation from us. Of course, we have to be in earnest about ourselves and our Christian life and service. If not, we will go on being careless and that is the way of danger. The God who watches over us in faithfulness, and who tempers the ferocity of the winds of temptation, is concerned to help us to endure, to stand, to triumph and through the refining fires to grow in grace and to mature in spiritual character. Read Rom. 5:1-5; Jas. 1:2-4; 2 Pet. 3:3-8.

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### **10:14-22**

Paul is always practical. His theology is never merely theoretical, but always earthed in the realities of daily living. The exhortation in v.14 follows directly from the teaching in v.1-13, but if we are to get the full thrust of his appeal we must at once link with v.22. Paul is aware that his strong exhortation to a disciplined and self-denying life would not be readily received by these Christians who were far too sure of their spiritual maturity and liberty. They were careless and even indifferent to the dangers of some of the things they were getting involved in in the social and religious life of Corinth. If they did not recognise their spiritual danger, then they needed Paul's instruction. If they did recognise the danger, then they were being foolish, presumptuous and arrogant. In being heedless of God's counsel they were in fact defying God's will and taking the attitude that they knew better than God. To be told such truths in such a blunt way must have shaken them. But spiritual pride needs to be shaken. Sometimes we need to be told that we are denying and neglecting our basic Christian duties. In 8:9 the emphasis was in respect of our responsibility for the spiritual safety of others. Here the responsibility is in respect of our own spiritual safety and usefulness. The constant danger in a context of true ministry and fellowship is that we become careless and either unconsciously or deliberately slip into an attitude and way of life that gradually stifles our spiritual life. In Corinth some of the believers were getting involved with unbelievers in their various celebrations, banquets, associations, societies and 'religious' services and Paul was determined to warn them that they were being drawn into areas that are spiritually dangerous. They were forgetting that there is a Devil who is always active, in the most plausible of ways, to undermine and to seduce God's people away from true worship and to lead them captive (2 Cor. 11:14). The Devil is good at his job, and so dulls our sensitivities that we are not aware of what is happening. Most backsliders are shocked when they

are told they are backsliding and begin to realise just how far they have slipped.

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### **10:14-22**

The Corinthians would have protested that they did not worship idols and would have affirmed that although they attended certain ceremonies in pagan temples they remained detached. Paul insists that association means involvement, and that influence operates to a greater extent than we realise at the time. He called the Corinthians to think clearly about what they were doing when they sat at the Lord's Table, and it is interesting that he speaks of the cup before speaking of the bread. In these days the celebration of the Last Supper or Communion was usually preceded by a family meal and a meal was also usually part of idolatrous worship in some pagan shrine. 'The cup of blessing was the name given to the third cup in the Passover feast. This may well have been the cup with which our Lord instituted the sacrament of Holy Communion.' (Morris) The reference to blessing the cup does not mean the cup becomes something new or different or holy. There is no magic in the sacrament! But Paul makes clear that the Lord is present in the sacrament just as He is present in the preaching of the Word, to be received by faith. In the preaching of the Gospel and in the observance of the Last Supper we are not detached; we are not watching a performance; we are not spectators. We are involved. There is participation. We are drawn into fellowship or communion with each other and with Christ in His saving death. The work of salvation is not 'done' in the sacrament, it is simply and gloriously portrayed and, as we take the bread and the cup into our own hands, we are portraying our acceptance of Christ. In passing the bread and wine to those sitting next to us we are portraying the spiritual fact that we are united together in what we are doing, and we are brought under the influence of all that is being portrayed. By being present at the celebration we are involved. In v.17 Paul states that the same principle of involvement operated in Jewish ritual. Those who received and ate the food of the sacrifice entered into partnership or fellowship with all the altar stood for. Our study thus far should give us a new sense of wonder and thanksgiving as we come to the Lord's Table. But there is a searching application to come.

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### **10:14-22**

Paul is warning Christians about what they get involved in. Just as God is present and active when we break the bread and drink the wine at the Lord's Table, so the Devil is present and active in the ceremonies of idolatry, and these ceremonies have a variety of form. Worldly minded people on various occasions tell people to 'enter into the spirit' of the occasion, but when they do they get worked on and they are not the same afterwards. There may not be any particular 'sense' of evil, but the power operates. Things we read, things we watch, music we listen to and the physical movements often associated with music all have 'power' and the motivation of our lives can be 'taken over' without their necessarily being any of the extravagant appearances that are usually linked with the idea of being 'possessed'. Many people who would not claim at all to be religious let alone spiritual say they can be moved deeply by the 'atmosphere' of an ancient cathedral, and they speak truly. In the same way the places, practices, sounds and atmosphere of evil exercise their influence. In v.19 Paul is clearly saying that the meat offered to idols is not invested with 'power' nor is the idol or luck charm a thing of power for good or evil. But he does go on to say that the Devil uses our human susceptibility to confuse and to ensnare. The words in v.20-21 are devastatingly plain. If we want to be partners with Jesus we must be very careful who else and what else we get partnered with. This raises not only the need to keep clear of all that comes under the general term of the 'occult' or 'magic', but also raises the generally lax attitude now prevalent among evangelical Christians regarding 'worldliness'. Granted an older generation was too rigid in its ideas of what was permissible or not permissible for Christians but the pendulum has swung too far the other way. What difference is there now between Christian wedding receptions and non-Christian ones; or between a Christian family gathering after a baptism and a worldly celebration of a sentimental 'christening'? We do well to read 1 John 2:15-17; 5:19. Be careful where you go, who you go with, and what you get involved in.

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### **10:23**

This one verse is quite enough for today if we consider well the terms, 'lawful', 'helpful' and 'build up'. Paul has already spoken of this in 6:12 and it is obviously an important matter. Twice in this one verse he declares that

all things are lawful, but he cannot possibly mean that it is permissible to do the things forbidden in the Ten Commandments. Jesus made it quite plain that those who truly loved Him would in fact keep His commandments (John 14:15). There were those in Paul's day who forbade Christians to marry (1 Tim. 4:1-5), and there are those today who regard any laughter or innocent banter in the context of Christian things to be inappropriate. This is false spirituality and we must affirm that all things are lawful. God has indeed given us all things in rich measure to enjoy (1 Tim. 6:17) and in His grace He enlarges our lives, liberates our personalities, and satisfies us with a whole variety of good things (Ps. 103:5; 107:9; 145:15-16). In Christ God opens up for us a whole new world of joy and fulfilment and gives the capacity to appreciate it all. But because the love of Christ constrains us and holds us in from selfish expression, our lives will always be narrower than they strictly need to be. All things are lawful but they may not be helpful to ourselves or to others. There are things that are not condemned or forbidden but they do nothing positive to help us or others to follow Jesus and serve Him. It is not enough to say that they do not hinder. Do they help? All things are lawful but do they serve positively in the business of building up ourselves and others in our faith? Such a positive attitude to Christian growth, maturity and understanding is a command, as Jude 20 makes plain. If the practical principle in this verse applies radically to our personal lives and attitudes, it also applies to the ordering of the life of a congregation. How much do we allow, encourage, and even demand to have in our congregational life that is neither helpful or edifying in the business of building Christ's church? These things may be enjoyable, but we must be careful lest we become lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God (2 Tim. 3:4).

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### **10:24-11:1**

There is great balance in Paul's practical teaching regarding living the Christian life in the context of pagan society but, human nature being what it is, foolish and perverse, it is always possible to interpret and apply this teaching in an extreme way. It is clear in v.24 that the Christian must have a care for the wellbeing of others (Phil. 2:1-5a). This is the mind of Christ. But it is possible to be so interested in others that you can end up interfering rather than helping (2 Thess. 3:11; 1 Tim. 5:13). Some are so busy helping others (C S Lewis speaks of the hunted look of those being helped) and putting others right, that they fail to see their own needs and neglect the needs of their families. In v.25 we are told not to press our scruples to the point of cross-examining the butcher as to which market he bought the meat from. Everything has come from the Lord (Ps. 24:1), even though we may not know exactly the route it has travelled. To understand Paul's point in the matter of invitations to meals in another's home we need to link v.26 with 29b. We do not ask our host where he bought the food he serves nor if he earned the money to buy it honestly. Good manners and gracious behaviour are required of Christians. Good timing is also required, and many a meal has been spoiled by guests arriving late? Verses 28-29a are best understood by an illustration. If fresh salmon is on the menu of a Highland hotel you do not summon the manager to ask if it has been poached or honestly bought. But if someone comes to your door giving you a gift of a salmon, making it plain he has been fishing illegally, you refuse to accept it; you refuse graciously but firmly, telling him it is because a Christian has to have no dealings with dishonesty. This refusal is out of consideration for the dishonest fisherman, because he is living his life in contradiction of the commandment, 'You shall not steal,' and a life lived contrary to God will lead a man further and further into wrong. Paul was aware (30) that there were those who criticised him, but no doubt he remembered that Jesus was criticised for eating with sinners (Matt. 9:10, 11; 11:18, 19).

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### **10:24-11:1**

We referred yesterday to Jesus keeping company with sinners and doing so openly in spite of criticism and misunderstanding. But we must also remember how careful Jesus was at times to avoid any misunderstanding. His conversation with the woman of Samaria was out in the open in full daylight. There is a principle of behaviour here that Paul now deals with. In every area of life and activity we must do all in a way that will glorify God. Our lives are to shine, to ring true, to carry the hall-mark of Christian genuineness, so that God will be honoured and glorified (Matt. 5:16; Phil. 2: 14-16). Our positive desire and motivation must be to please God by the way we live. But we must also take care not to behave in a way that would offend, puzzle or cause to stumble people whose understanding of Christ and of Christian things is limited. People have their traditions, their ideas of what dress and behaviour are appropriate for various occasions, and they may have treasured

memories of church life which may only now be beginning to be enlightened by the preaching of the Gospel. We must not be indifferent to such things nor must we trample over people's feelings. Think how newly converted youngsters can go home and denounce church-going parents as 'not Christians' and then wonder why they cannot win their parents for Jesus. On another level, offence and suspicion can be created by young fellows and girls being in each others' flats and in each others' bedrooms at very late hours. Worldly people will draw their own conclusions and be unimpressed by Christian behaviour. The issue is not whether or not the Christians were misbehaving. It is witness that is at stake. Paul could again be misunderstood in v.33 and be criticised for being a 'men-pleaser' (Ephes. 6:6; Col. 3:22). Nothing could be further from the truth. This is the man who counted all loss for Christ's sake (Phil. 3:7-8). His one desire was to commend His Saviour to all by the way he lived. He longed for their salvation. But he did not wish to focus on himself even when he called the Christians to live as he lived. He followed Christ and patterned his life on Him. He calls us all to do the same.

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## 11:2-6

We now enter an area of great controversy which has caused tension and division among those who claim to stand by the teaching of Scripture. The issue had been raised by the Corinthians who were concerned to know exactly what was the position of women in the life and worship of the church. The question raised was not whether women were entitled to function as elders and ministers, nor whether women were entitled to pray aloud in the gatherings of the congregation. The question was whether or not a woman should have her head covered or veiled in church. The problem is that it is very unclear what the 'covering' for the head is to be. The footnote in NIV suggests that the 'covering' refers to the hair and the length of hair in the case of both men and women. That will please women who object to wearing hats in church and will please those who do not like to see men with long hair. It is of course interesting to consider why people do things or refuse to do them. Many women who seemingly 'on principle' do not now wear hats to church insist on wearing them for weddings and royal garden parties. Conforming to 'fashion' has a powerful effect on men and women alike, and it is conformity rather than liberation that decides many issues. Before we get into the difficult details we must recognise that men can exercise their 'headship' in a way that is indeed chauvinist and devoid of grace, and women can wear a 'hat' of submission and still be the dictatorial head of the house. An important thing to note is the reference in v.2 to traditions or accepted standards operating in the churches at that time. But that does not mean Paul's teaching and standards are 'time-bounded', applying only to the particular situation of that age. We may not say that because we think differently about things now the principles do not apply. When we come to v.23-26 we accept Paul's words as having permanent validity and we may not accept some of this chapter and reject the rest.

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## 11:2-6

In v.2, 16 and in 2 Thess. 2:15 Paul, speaking by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, makes clear there are standards to be observed in the life and worship of the church. In Corinth it seems there were 'liberated' women who tended to do their own thing and, in the matter of wearing the customary veil, were flouting accepted convention. A woman without a veil in Corinth was a 'loose' woman and an unveiled woman taking an active part in worship would have discredited the moral integrity of the Gospel. The issue, then, is that of seemliness and modesty in dress and behaviour, especially in the life of the congregation, so that Christian witness will not be misunderstood. No doubt there was a wave of feminism in Corinth; no doubt fashions and attitudes were changing; no doubt equality of the sexes was an issue: and these are all fashionable issues in our day. But worldly fashion must not determine the life of the church. Society is moving further and further from God, and there is ample evidence of that. Why then should the church fashion itself on society? Paul is insisting that God has ordained a pattern and an order for the lives of men and women. Within that order there is a principle of submission or subordination which does not in any way devalue either party. We will see this in v.11, where partnership and inter-dependence is emphasised. In v.2 Paul affirms that every man is in submission to Christ: it is not an equal partnership: man's authority is limited and he is called to obedience in the will of God. This is life and liberty and fulfilment, not denial. In the same way, says Paul, the woman is under the headship of the man, but the pattern of that 'headship' is made plain in Eph. 5:21-27. There is no sense in which Paul says the man has the right to 'lord it' over the woman. His headship must conform to the pattern of Christ whose love

was sacrificial and emphasised the value, dignity and service of the loved one. There is no suggestion that the woman is in any way inferior. Paul adds the statement that Christ, the eternal Son, equal in power and glory with the Father was in glad submission to the Father, not claiming His rights (Phil. 2:5-8), delighting to do the Father's will, and saying that He, the Son, could do nothing of Himself (John 5:19). Submission to God's order is fulfilment and dignity, not denial and certainly not humiliation.

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### **11:7-12**

Perhaps we should be reading v.1-16 each day lest by concentrating on a few verses at a time we lose the main impact of Paul's teaching. We must look for the underlying spiritual principles being taught and must not concentrate on the outward matters of hats and hair. We are in the realm of deep theology, recognising that God's order and design are primary and we find our 'glory' in being and doing what God has ordained for us. All God's ordinances are full of grace and for our blessing, and even His restrictions, as in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:15-17) are for life and blessing. It was the Devil who told lies and suggested that breaking out of God's pattern was the way of fulfilment. Part of God's pattern was the making of distinctions. When God said, 'Let us make man', 'God created man in His own image, male and female He created them' (Gen. 1:26-27). Both were created in God's image but man was created first. This is simply a historical sequence and casts no shadow on the value or status of woman. Indeed, in Gen. 2:18-23 it is stated that in all He had created God found nothing to take the place of partnership with man. He then created woman to be helper or helpmeet, to stand beside and to stand over against man to complement and to complete him in terms of his calling, to inspire and enable man to be and to become all God had planned for him. If we turn to 1 Tim. 2:13-14 we are told of another historical sequence. The woman sinned first, and yet it says in Rom. 5:12 that it was by man that sin came into the world. There is no separation of the man from the woman and no suggestion of superiority or inferiority. The affirmation in v.11-12 is totally clear, but so is the order in v.8-9. It is made clear in Gal. 3:26-28 that in the matter of salvation there are no distinctions, all stand on the same level, saved by the same undeserved grace. In standing there is no difference between man and woman, but in function there is a difference. We speak of this tomorrow.

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### **11:13-16**

There was a time in godless communist China when man and woman had all to dress in the same drab uniform. It was an attempt to obliterate the distinctions of God's order of creation. From a different philosophical standpoint there is in our land an attempt to confuse or deny the God-created differences between the sexes and in sexual relationships. People want their way not God's way and they ignore and deny God's revelation of Himself and His order as we have it in Scripture. Dress and behaviour both express something about our personalities and both influence our attitudes, especially to spiritual issues. Paul's words in v.13-15 could be argued about in terms of changing fashions down the ages but in Corinth, the most licentious city in the ancient world, the principle certainly applied. Modesty and seemliness were vital and lack of these graces gave a very clear message to society. In v.15 the woman's covering is her hair and in v.10 the 'veil' translates the word 'authority'. It may refer to the fact that in eastern society a veiled woman automatically received both protection and honour and yet at the same time she acknowledged her submission. In v.16 Paul indicates he is not prepared to go into a contentious argument about this issue. He has stated the case. We have no doubt found it all difficult so let us sum up the whole subject in this way. Man's glory is that he represents God as head over all. It is not his own glory and he cannot rise to his true glory apart from woman (7, 11, 12). Woman's glory is that she stands in relation to man, to God and to Christ as no one else does in the whole order of creation. No one but woman can show or represent that uniqueness which is the bride of Christ. Man is the head and should take the lead and carry the heavier load in relationships and spiritual service (not least in the prayer meeting). The woman is in rightful and honourable submission. But man and woman are heirs together of the grace of life (1 Pet. 3:7). Let the man in Christ develop his manhood and let the woman in Christ be truly and fully woman. In that way, a congregation of believers will be an attraction and an inspiration in a world that is disordered and confused.

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## 11:17-22

The tone of Paul's words changes significantly and seems to suggest he is moving on to deal with a far more significant aspect of the life of the congregation in Corinth. When he began to deal with the previous theme he commended the Christians for holding to accepted traditions and practices (2) and then went on to deal with what appeared to be a confusion of attitude which needed instruction. Now, he is dealing with wrong behaviour in connection with the observance of the Lord's Supper. His opening words in v.17 must have jolted these Christians, because Paul says it would have been better if the congregation had not met for worship. Their attitude and behaviour meant they were worse off after the service than before it. Someone had told him about the divisions and disagreements among the Christians and, while he did not necessarily believe all he had been told, he seems to have had enough knowledge to recognise there was a serious situation. The fact of dissensions and their being reported to him was spoken of at the beginning of the letter (1:10-13), and the fact that this indicated a spiritual shallowness and immaturity was stated in 3:1-4. Now it becomes clear that the attitudes and behaviour of some of the Christians when they came to church were making the situation worse, setting people against each other, and this was a total denial of fellowship and communion which are or should be the marks of the Lord's Supper. In v.19 the word 'factions' could read 'differences' or 'sects' (groups or cliques - always a danger whether formed because of social background, complaints or special doctrines) or 'heresies'. In Gal. 5:20 it is translated 'dissensions' and is found in the list of the works of the flesh: Paul is therefore rebuking the carnal or fleshly behaviour of people who regarded themselves as very spiritual, and more spiritual than others. But note the significant comment he makes in v.19. Paul recognises that there always are and always will be flaws and wrongs in the life of the church. There is no perfect congregation. But this does not mean we are to be forever looking for and pointing out faults, other people's faults, of course. That attitude, Paul says, reveals the critic and disturber of the peace of the church to be the one out of step, and the church must recognise it to be so.

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## 11:17-22

When a church is real, with the Word of God preached in its fulness with the attendant presence and unction of the good and gracious Spirit of God, such is the light of God's presence that those who are disaffected, critical, worldly-minded and, above all, self-centred are shown up for what they are, just as if they stood in the beam of a searchlight. In Corinth this was certainly the case in the context of the Agape or Love Feast that was, or was supposed to be, a family meal which then led on to the Lord's Supper. In the Lord's Supper there is or should be a coming together in a particular spirit of fellowship and unity, recognising that we are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28). What happened in Corinth was that for the family meal each person or family brought their own food and drink for their own use, effectively making sure that no fellowship, or communion, or common-ness was possible. You can find the same thing, for example, at a Sunday School Trip when some, rather than line up and share the common 'purvey' provided, bring their own and keep themselves to themselves. In Corinth, no doubt, the rich families had their hampers of food and drink while the poor families had their meagre supplies. The distinctions and divisions were manifest and perhaps insult was added to injury by the rich, having eaten their fill, offering the leftovers to the poor. Paul makes plain that some drank so well that they were in fact drunk. Picture the company then gathering at the Lord's Table, no doubt with the rich taking the prominent seats and the poor being made to feel they were 'second-rate' members of God's family. Read v.22 carefully. It needs no exposition! By attitudes and actions we can despise the church of God and humiliate those who feel their ordinariness. Such behaviour is a denial of grace and calls in question the reality of our faith. Why do we indulge ourselves? Why do we seek place? Why do we favour some over others? Are there cliques in our congregations that make others feel left out? Do we make it obvious that they are left out? Read James 2: 1-6a, 8-9, 14-17.

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## 11:17-22

There is one further lesson in these verses regarding our church life, our prayer life and our life of relaxation. When Paul rebukes the Christians for their behaviour he says they should have dined at home not in the church, and, in fact, it was not long before this 'love feast' disappeared from the life of the early church and that for good

reasons (2 Pet. 2:13; Jude 12). What we have to recognise is that there are activities which may be quite appropriate, provided there is no excess, in our homes and in places of secular activity, which are not appropriate and may in fact be dangerous within the buildings and life of the church. We agree without reservation that there is a tremendous and necessary place for social fellowship and recreation, and those whose lives have no such 'secular' activity and who go to religious gatherings night after night are in danger of becoming less than human. But if secular activity is linked to and made to appear to be indivisible from the spiritual life of the church then, human nature being what it is, and there being a Devil who is ever eager to confuse and distract, there is real danger. Think how in our own land to a great extent the life and activity of churches has gravitated from the sanctuary to the church hall. No one should doubt the spiritual validity of activities that are basically evangelistic and reach out to the un-churched, young and old. But when church hall activities are really for entertainment and for interesting pastimes and activities for Christians then something is far wrong. Sad to say, the intrusion of the 'entertainment factor' into services of worship also operates against the life of the church. It is so easy to introduce elements which may not be bad in themselves in order to please people, or to attract them to church. But all too soon, encouraged by the constant desire for change and novelty, the secondary edges out what is primary, and in the life of the church there is less and less of the ministry and teaching of the Word of God and less and less time for prayer in the lives of many. Regarding prayer two things need to be said. We need to time-table our lives so that as far as possible nothing will keep us from the church Prayer Meeting, to share in the privilege and burden of prayer. And, we must recognise that some prayers should be prayed at home so that the rightful responsibilities of the church can be prayed for at the Prayer Meeting.

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### **11:23-26**

As we come to these familiar words we are aware we are dealing with holy things. Keep in mind that this letter to the Corinthians was written before any of the four Gospels so we do not need to be distracted by differences in the wording in the various accounts. Paul affirms that he received from the Lord, not from men, what he now states regarding what Jesus said and did in the upper room on the night he was betrayed, or was in the process of being betrayed and aware of what was happening. In fact Judas was told exactly when he had to do what he had sold himself to do (John 13:27). We should keep in mind that 'betrayed' could be read as 'delivered up', remembering that it was God the Father who delivered up His Son to death and laid on Him the iniquity of us all (Acts 2:23; Rom. 5:8; 8:32; Isa. 53:4-6). Just exactly how Paul received this message from the Lord we cannot say, but he does claim in several places to have been given such direct revelation (Gal. 1:11-17; 2 Cor. 12:7; Acts 27: 21-26). Of course, this special revelation was in accord with the existing oral traditions regarding the life and ministry of Jesus. Paul's message from God was to the effect that this should be done for all time at the command of Jesus, for a memorial of Him, and to proclaim to all who gather at the Lord's Table the absolute centrality of His death on the Cross for the salvation of sinners. The picture is glorious in its simplicity and the church must not complicate it by formality of procedure nor confused language that can be misunderstood by ordinary believers. Paul does not state exactly how these actions are to be carried out and this allows for the various traditions in the church. The vital thing is that although the Sacrament is a visible presentation of the Gospel it must never become a performance. Nothing about a communion service should draw attention away from Jesus Christ and Him crucified and, if the focus is on minister or elders or the way they dress or process, then a screen has been erected between Jesus and the people He seeks to bless.

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### **11:23-26**

We said yesterday that the Lord's Supper must not become a performance because that would make the congregation an audience, watching something being done for them instead of a fellowship of believing people participating by faith in what has been done once for all in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The communion service is an act of remembrance as Jesus' words make clear, but it is not merely remembrance. When the Word is preached Christ is presented to us as Saviour and Lord and He is present to be received by faith. In the same way when the dying redeeming love of God in Jesus Christ is displayed, presented, offered, and in our pattern of service, brought to us where we sit, the Saviour is present to be received by faith. There is nothing automatic, mechanical or magical about the Sacrament. The bread and wine remain bread and wine.



There is no sacrifice re-enacted. The work of atonement was done once for all on the Cross (Heb. 7:27; 9:24-26). The sacrament is the 'action sermon' as a former generation described it. It declares that this is what Christ has done for our salvation. Our taking the bread and wine symbolises our accepting and taking Christ as Saviour, and feeding upon Him as the very bread of life (John 6:47-51). The picture in these verses is vivid. The Lord Jesus sits in the glory of His Person as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, presiding at the Table. He took the bread and gave thanks. Both Matt. 26:26 and Mark 14:22 say that Jesus blessed the bread but that does not mean He 'did' anything to the bread to make it 'become' His body because, after all, He had not yet been crucified. Jesus may well have used the prayer, 'Blessed art Thou, O Lord,' the Jewish form of thanksgiving. Paul does not use the phrase 'broken for you' and seems to assume it will be understood in the light of the known details of the crucifixion. What is quite clear is the emphasis: 'For you'. All that Jesus did He did for us. This is what is proclaimed in the Lord's Supper. This is the message of the Cross. We do well to sing the hymn, 'Man of Sorrows': 'In my place condemned He stood, sealed my pardon with His blood.' We must go on remembering this. It is the heart of the Gospel.

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### **11:23-26**

Be clear that there is nothing present in the Sacrament that is not present in the preaching of the Word, and neither 'works' automatically to bring salvation. We can hear the Gospel and we can take the bread and wine but unless we receive Christ by faith we are not saved. When Jesus spoke of the cup (not the wine or blood), He referred to the New Covenant and the disciples would almost certainly have thought of God's promise in Jer. 31:31-34 which spoke not only of forgiveness but of a new heart and a new life. 'A heart in every thought renewed, and full of love divine; perfect and right and pure and good, a copy Lord of Thine.' (Wesley) What is promised by God is given to us by God in Jesus Christ and it becomes ours in practical application by the power of the indwelling Spirit. In the sacrament there is remembrance, focusing our thoughts and hearts on what Christ has done for us. There is also declaration, presentation and participation. We have peace through the blood of the Cross (Col. 1:20); we are brought near by the blood of the Cross into fellowship with God and with each other (Eph. 2:13; 1 John 1:7); we are given spiritual food and drink so that the life of Jesus within us by the Holy Spirit is nourished and sustained. In Word and Sacrament we are presented with Jesus who is the bread of life (John 6:35, 48). We do not just look at and admire the bread and wine; we take and eat, and we are reminded that Christ, in His fullness and victory, is our life. Think of Paul's words in Gal. 2:20, so clear in their affirmation, and so beautifully and practically expressed in the words of the hymn, 'Think what Spirit dwells within you.' (Lyte) When we come to the Lord's Table we come to meet with Jesus and with those who are the friends of Jesus. Five times in the passage (17-34) there is reference to coming together, indicating that an essential part of the service is fellowship and sharing. In our tradition we receive the bread and the cup from the person sitting next us and we pass it on to the next person. We are all one in Christ Jesus, and we are all on the same level. No one means more to Jesus than the other person, and we are under orders to love one another (John 13: 34-35; 15:12).

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### **11:27-32**

At the Lord's Table we look back and remember the price paid for our salvation (1 Pet. 1: 18-21). We look up with thanksgiving, as Jesus did in the upper room. We look forward to the coming again in glory of our Lord Jesus Christ and in this glorious hope we live our Christian lives. We look around us and are glad to see those who are our partners in the fellowship and service of the Gospel. We look out into the world with evangelistic zeal because we show forth the fact that there is a Saviour for sinners. But we must also look within, because we are commanded to examine ourselves lest we come to the Table in a way that is unworthy, and thus bring judgment upon ourselves. There are those who, because of their interest in and advocacy of children coming to the Lord's Table, say that the issue of what is unworthy and profaning is related to the communal meal prior to the celebration of the Lord's Supper. No doubt Paul would agree that graceless, anti-social behaviour, including over-indulgence and snobbery, indicates an attitude that is not right in coming to the Lord's Table. But we must accept that such behaviour profanes, does despite to the body and blood of the Lord Jesus. In Heb. 10:29 AV the word speaks of those who have trodden underfoot the Son of God and counted the blood of the covenant an unholy thing. This is why there must be self-examination before we take the bread and wine of the Supper.

Now, having linked together the body and blood of the Lord (27), when Paul refers to discerning the 'body' (29) it is most unlikely that he is referring simply to the failure of social graces and behaviour at the family meal which preceded the Lord's Supper. If we are commanded to examine ourselves there must be some real degree of understanding of what we are doing, what is expected of us as committed disciples, and some real awareness that we are dealing with holy things pertaining to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We must be honest enough with ourselves to ask if there are any real evidences in our lives of saving faith and of commitment to discipleship. To make the 'examination' simply a question of 'Do you love Jesus?' is to reduce Paul's words to minimum significance. The risen Christ did not accept Peter's first and earnest confession, 'You know that I love you.' (John 21:15-17)

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### **11:27-32**

The failure to discern the body indicates a failure to recognise that we are dealing with God and that we are indeed on holy ground. When we come to the Table there must be an accepting of spiritual attitudes, values and priorities. If our lives are not being lived (by God's grace) in obedience to Jesus then, according to Jesus' own words in John 14:15, this is evidence that we do not love Him. It is easy to profess faith and then to mix into our lives (which do not belong to us at all) things that have no right to be there. Keep in mind, of course, that all of us are unworthy, all the time, and it is only in Christ that we are accepted and justified (Rom. 5:1-2). The words of the godly minister of a past day spoken to a woman weeping as she let the cup go past her, are valid and necessary: 'Take it, woman, it's for sinners.' But to take the cup when we know we are not right with God, not right with others, not right in ourselves, making light of sin, our own sin and that of others, and living in spiritual carelessness or even in known disobedience, is something that has solemn consequences. Great care must be taken in dealing with v.30. We must never jump to the conclusion that all sickness and death are the direct result of specific sin and wrongdoing but we must recognise that 'spiritual ills may have physical results' (Morris). We live in a fallen world into which sin and death have intruded (Rom. 5:12; 1 Cor. 15:21) bringing confusion and disorder to human experience and a host of things for which no explanation can be given. In John 9:1-3 Jesus made plain that slick 'spiritual' answers to sickness and soreness are invalid and inaccurate. But, just as smoking and drinking can harm the lungs and liver, so carelessness and presumption in our dealing with God and with holy things can have long term physical as well as spiritual consequences. When will we learn that sin is not something to be trifled with?

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### **11:27-32**

Keep in mind that the context of these solemn words is the Lord's Table. When we take the bread and wine we are declaring by our actions that we are both taking Christ and yielding ourselves in obedience to Christ. If, in fact, we are not doing this, we are playing a part, putting on a show, acting as hypocrites, and doing so in the presence of God who sets infinite value on the Son whom He loves. Similarly, refusing to come to the Lord's Table is a grievous act because it is a demonstration of a refusal to come to Christ. If we say we are unworthy we are simply saying we need to come to Christ. If we refuse to come to Christ we are left to live as victims to the world, the flesh and the Devil, and that will have consequences. In the same way if we come casually to the Lord's Table, knowing that our lives are not yielded to Christ then we are dealing dishonestly and therefore contemptuously with the Son of God and that will have consequences, in our lives and in our Christian service. Paul says that if we take ourselves to task God will not have to do it. But, rather than allow us to waste and perhaps destroy our lives and personalities, God, because He loves us and seeks our best blessing in this world and the next, is prepared to judge us, to take us to task, and to chasten us. We need to read Heb. 12:5-11. God's love is realistic and we need to be reminded of it in our own generation in which rebuke, chastisement and discipline in all the different age-groups seem to be regarded as offensive and against human dignity and liberty. Paul is quite clear in v.32 that the world is heading for judgment and condemnation. Romans 1:18 makes that plain, as does John 3:16-19. If we want to see what it means and where it leads to be left to the devices and inclinations of fallen human nature read Eph. 2:1-3. If we want to see what it means to be 'worldly' and to go the way of the world read 1 John 2:15-17; 5:19. The issues are great and so are the consequences. That is why Paul calls for realism and honesty in our dealings with God and with all that belongs to God.

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### 11:33-34

Paul now returns to the immediate social pattern of the lives of the Corinthians, because it was there that the spiritual problems began. He does not forbid the 'social' gathering to share a meal together but he urges that even in that there should be simplicity rather than extravagance. There was a suggestion in v.21 that people were striving to 'out-do' each other in the lavishness of what was provided for the meal, and that is scarcely a Christian attitude. What do hungry people in deprived nations think when they see so much 'left-overs' being put into rubbish bins by people in 'Christian' nations? Our whole way of life must be Christian. Paul puts it in radical terms in Rom. 13:11-14. To the Corinthians he says simply, 'wait for one another,' that is, have real thought and consideration for others' needs and feelings. Jesus would never act in a way that would make someone feel devalued. True quality is never ostentatious: it does not need to show off or to prove itself. When we come together in God's House we all come on the same level, because God is no respecter of persons (Acts 10:34). If we forget this, we come under God's criticism. There is no place in God's House for social, financial or intellectual snobbery. We are all there by God's grace and His grace alone. But we must not ignore the very practical advice given by Paul in v.34a, even though it is set in parenthesis. There are good and necessary things in life that should be attended to at home and not brought into the buildings and life of the church. There are natural hungers, physical and aesthetic, which need expression and satisfaction, but when these things are introduced to the life of the congregation they very soon compete with spiritual priorities and become a distraction from spiritual service. The important thing becomes 'enjoyment', and our own carnal satisfaction becomes more important than spiritual effectiveness. There are always people who say we need this, that and the other thing in church services and life, more variety, more opportunity to exercise gifts. The truth is that many churches are full of activities that are for pleasure not for sacrificial service. Paul ends the chapter by saying that there were many things to be set right in Corinth. That must have been a blow to their spiritual pride.

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### 12:1-3

We now resume our studies in 1st Corinthians. There is much controversy, and indeed confusion, regarding what is generally referred to as 'the gifts of the Spirit' and in these notes we desire to be helpful, not dogmatic. We must recognise that a great deal of this whole epistle has to do with correcting faults in the church at Corinth. Paul has dealt with wrong attitudes which led to divisions within the congregation (1:10-12); wrong attitudes of spiritual pride (3:1-4); over-confidence regarding their own spirituality (4:6-8); wrong moral behaviour and casual attitudes towards it (5:1-2,6); self-interest leading to court cases against each other (6:1,7-8); an arrogance regarding Christian liberty and rights (8:1-2,13); a careless attitude regarding involvement in worldly activities (10:12,14,23); and, in chapter 11, disorders in relation to the Lord's Table had to be dealt with. Now, in coming to this chapter we must recognise that Paul, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, was still dealing with imbalance in the understanding of these Christians. It is clear that there was an individualism within the church that was far from Christian. Everyone was his own final authority. If a person had some kind of ecstatic experience and claimed it to be given by the Holy Spirit, then no-one was allowed to question it. The person would regard himself or herself as having a 'gift' of the Spirit. That this could lead to spiritual pride and to spiritual competitiveness to see who was 'most gifted' is obvious. The Corinthians had already competed as to who was the most 'sound' in terms of doctrine (1:12-13). We must note from the start that Paul sets this whole subject in the context of the church being the body of Christ (12). In that body the individual members are interdependent parts, with gifts and functions given to each. The more gifted, and the less gifted are equally necessary. The emphasis is not so much on the gifts of the Spirit as on the Lordship of Christ. There is no place for pride. Whatever gifts we have, or think we have, are given to us (4:6-7)

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### 12:1-3

The subject is spiritual gifts, although the word 'gifts' is not actually in the original Greek. We could read 'spiritual things' or 'spiritual men' or even 'spiritualities'. The Corinthians had raised the subject and it seems clear that some were regarding the possession of extraordinary 'gifts of the Spirit' as a sure sign that they were 'superior' to those who did not have such 'spectacular' gifts. Keep in mind that while the Holy Spirit is given to all believers (Rom. 5:5; 8:9,14), it is recorded that from the Day of Pentecost there were those in the church

who, by the influence of the Holy Spirit did unusual things such as speaking in a 'tongue' they did not understand. Such remarkable experiences can seem very attractive, especially to some personalities, and it is all too easy for them to be regarded as the things to be desired, the things that show that a person is really spiritual. Paul says he does not want the Corinthians to be uninformed or ignorant, and he reminds them that in their unconverted days they had had experiences in which they were deeply moved to the point of ecstatic experience, or trance, or being 'taken over' by the 'spirit', an evil spirit, associated with the idol being worshipped. He says to the Corinthians that there are powers which can move you deeply but they may not be the powers you think they are. The simple fact that a person is moved to 'miraculous' speech does not in itself prove that the experience is from God. Paul is insisting that these Christians should think clearly. If someone claims to be inspired by the Holy Spirit, we must not take the attitude, 'Who are we to judge?' We are commanded in 1 John 4:1 to test the spirits. After all in Matt. 16:16-17, 21-23 we find Peter, a man with a significant spiritual future, speaking in the one situation but inspired by two very different 'spirits'. In Matt. 7:21-23 we are told of people who claimed that their varied and amazing words and actions were inspired by God, but Jesus disowned them. That there was at least one example of 'speaking in tongues' in a way that was blasphemous is suggested in v.3.

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### 12:1-3

We stay with these verses so that as far as possible we will get our' thinking straight (v.1). We are not saying that there is no such thing as speaking in tongues, nor that all such speaking in tongues is the work of the alien spirit, Satan. But we are saying, as Paul emphasises, that all that appears to be spiritual is not necessarily from the good Spirit of God. 1 Tim. 4:1 speaks of some departing from the faith because of the influence of deceiving spirits and Rev. 16:12-14 tells of foul and demonic spirits. Perhaps the immediate test of any 'spirit' is the place it gives to Jesus. If a claimed manifestation of the Holy Spirit draws attention to the person who has this 'gift' rather than directing attention to Jesus then that 'spirit' is suspect. In v.3 we suggested yesterday that the words 'Jesus is accursed' were spoken in tongues but that may not be the case. It may have been that in exaggerated spirituality someone was taking up as a slogan the words from Deut. 21:22-23 quoted by Paul in Gal. 3:13. There is no doubt that when people get excited or ecstatic there is always the danger of excess. Excitement is not the same as divine inspiration. To say that Jesus is accursed is to say He is rejected by God. But God has given Jesus the name, Lord (Phil. 2:8-11). Anyone can say the words, 'Jesus is Lord,' but unless that statement is followed by the obedience of faith it comes from a false spirit. Jesus challenged some people about calling Him Lord when they had no intention of doing what He commanded them (Lk. 6:46). It is the work of the Holy Spirit to open eyes to see that Jesus is in fact both Saviour and Lord, and to convict and convert, bringing the sinner to saving faith. God has spoken fully and finally in His Son Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1,2), and it is the specific work of the Holy Spirit to point to Jesus and to lead into the truth as it is in Jesus (John 14:26; 16:13). In practice that means the Spirit will always lead us to the Scriptures and that calls into question those who say, 'We don't need the Bible, we have the Spirit.' That comes very near to preaching another Gospel (Gal. 1:6-9).

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### 12:4-7

The various gifts of the Spirit belong together and the various forms of service inspired and enabled by the Spirit belong together. Each individual gift is given in order to make the receiver of that gift a servant to work for the common good of the company of believers. There is no suggestion that a gift of the Spirit puts a person into a special class nor any suggestion that one gift is more important than another. The whole range of gifts comes from God the Father, who inspires them all and who gives these gifts in order to equip individuals for the specific service appointed for them. All the different forms of service are under the Lordship of Jesus and come from the one indivisible Holy Spirit, who is a Person, not a mere power or influence which can be divided. No believer can have more of or less of the Holy Spirit than another. The Spirit in His fullness dwells in every believer. Granted the Spirit may have more sway over some believers, may receive more co-operation, more willingness to be taught. But we must not assume that mere demonstrativeness is the scale of measurement. When we find in these verses the clear indication of the involvement of the three Persons of the Trinity, we must also see that the presence and activity of the Spirit and the authentic exercise of the gifts of the Spirit will

always lead to and serve the unity of the life of the church. In Corinth there was so much conflict and division, some of it in the name of the Holy Spirit, that we must conclude that an alien spirit was operating. Paul is insisting that whether we speak of gifts, service or working, all is of God and therefore comparing and devaluing are out of order. Whether we speak of Spirit-inspired gifts of an extraordinary kind or natural gifts of intellect, skill or personality, if the focus is on the gifts rather than on Christ and His service, then the life of the church and the believer are both out of sorts.

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## 12:8-11

Before considering the list of gifts of the Spirit given here, we must go back to v.7 with the emphasis that each believer is given some gift or manifestation of the Spirit. Every believer is therefore charismatic, having a gift of some kind. The gift is given, that is, it is not the believer's own production, and it is given for the common good. Each is given something for the good of all. The emphasis is, not on our spirituality nor even our privilege but on our responsibility. People are gifted, not to be recognised and praised but to make them good servants of others. No-one was more gifted than the man Christ Jesus, for He was full of the Spirit. But He said He had not come to be ministered to but to minister and to give up His life with all its privileges and honours for the sake of others (Matt. 20:25-28; Phil. 2:5-8). In today's verses Paul gives a list of the gifts of the Spirit but there is no suggestion that this is a complete and final list, nor that the gifts are listed in an order of increasing or decreasing importance. If we consider v.11, we see that the giving of the gifts rests exclusively with God in His wisdom and for His clear purposes. This shows how wrong it is to insist for ourselves or for others that specific gifts have to be sought after or that the possession of certain gifts is essential if we are to claim to be real, Spirit-filled believers. The gifts of the Spirit are given in order that we might serve, not that we might make use of the life of the church in order to express our gifts. It is so easy to fall into the snare of drawing attention to ourselves. We will go on to consider the various gifts of the Spirit mentioned here but must note that there is no mention here of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-25) and the one Spirit is the source of both gifts and fruit. Another list of the gifts of the Spirit is given in Rom. 12:6-8, a very practical list including encouraging, serving, and giving away money with generosity. Not many go 'over the top' about that last named gift! Perhaps it is regarded as not very 'spiritual'. Another list is in Eph. 4:7-13, set in the context of service and growing mature in Christ.

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## 12:8-11

The list of the gifts of the spirit makes plain that no one person has everything and that if the work of the Spirit is to be carried out in the life of the church then there must be a recognition of interdependence. If we claim to have a 'gift' we are acknowledging that we are limited and stand in need of the ministry of other people's 'gifts' in order to function effectively. To one person (though not necessarily only one person in the fellowship) there is given, by the Spirit, the word or message or utterance of wisdom. Paul has already spoken of wisdom in 2:6-10, contrasting the wisdom of God with the wisdom of the world. In 1:30 it is made plain that wisdom and Christ are inseparable, and that seems to mean that the utterance of wisdom is not some esoteric thing but rather an exposition of the truth about Christ. And, of course, the truth is complete in Christ. That means that the gift of 'wisdom' is not to be understood in terms of 'bringing forth' new truth about Christ and the Gospel, but rather in terms of being gifted to teach, to expose, to lay bare and to instruct. It has to do with stimulating the use of the mind on grasping and understanding the faith. Wisdom has to do with grasping the grandeur of God's plan of salvation and passing it on to others. A Christian with this 'gift' will not boast about his insight nor about his spirituality but will be one who takes the time and effort to teach others, line upon line, precept upon precept. The gift or utterance of knowledge seems very closely linked with that of wisdom, and it is difficult to distinguish them. Knowledge is often linked with secrets or mysteries, but we must remember that in Scripture 'mysteries' refer to things revealed by God so that people may know them. Knowledge must not be thought of as truth available only to those who have been initiated (by some 'experience') to know things that only a few are allowed to know. Commentaries suggest that wisdom and knowledge have to do with instruction in the faith and 'the cure of souls' in pastoral situations but it is not clear which gift operates in which area. Both call for disciplined thinking and both should make the gifted person a true servant of others.

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## 12:8-11

Keep in mind that 'some Corinthians were inclined to give pride of place to "speaking with tongues", unintelligible speech uttered in ecstasy and giving no scope for reflection. The words of wisdom and knowledge are calmer, more sober and less spectacular .... but they are more useful and necessary to the community; they must be given place of honour.' (Deluz) Paul's comment in 14:9,19 is significant in its emphasis on the fact that understanding is vitally important. Anything we 'experience' must be evaluated in terms of what is true. In today's passage Paul goes on to speak of faith as one of the gifts of the Spirit, given for the common good (v.7). This cannot refer to saving faith by which alone we come to salvation, although that faith is the gift of God, as Eph. 2:8 makes plain. Scripture and church history testify to the fact that it pleases God to give to the church men and women whose faith is of the kind that 'moves mountains' and such people are great rocks, guides, shelters and encouragements to the fellowship of God's people, especially in times of trial. Here again we see how the gifts of the Spirit are given to enable Christians to become and to serve as servants of others. The person of mighty faith may be admired and commended by others but will never boast of that faith, perhaps being too aware of the costly process by which that faith has been matured and refined. There is a suggestion in Rom. 12:3 that the gift of faith is not necessarily of uniform measurement in those who have it and that is why we must be careful not to try to copy other people, no matter how much we may be impressed by them. We do not deny the exhortation in Heb. 13:7 nor that in Paul's words in Phil. 3:17, and 1 Cor. 11:1. There is so much to learn from men and women who have proved God over many years of life and service. But it is so easy in an attempt to show off our spirituality to go beyond what is faith and to act in presumption. If we feel we have the gift of faith Paul suggests we should keep quiet about it (Rom. 14:22). Faith makes its own unselfconscious impact.

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## 12:8-11

'Healing is plural in the Greek, which perhaps means there were "healings" for various kinds of sickness and disease.' (Morris) We must not think of this gift as being all-embracing nor even necessarily leading us into the realm of the miraculous. God works in a variety of ways. We can speak of gifted doctors and surgeons, meaning they are significantly capable in their chosen field. Some may be gifted in diagnosis but not necessarily in prescribing or carrying out the correct medical action. Some are gifted in healing the mind and emotions. Some of those who suffer find true healing simply by sitting under the consistent ministry of God's Word without there being any specific human intervention. It does not follow that the preacher has the gift of healing. It is an accepted fact that there are non-Christian 'spirit-healers' and others who have worked cures, and we must not automatically regard miraculous healings, that is healing for which no clear medical explanation can be given, as being Christian and God-glorifying miracles. Jesus' words in Matt. 7:21-23 are very plain. It seems from Acts 19:11-12 that Paul was used in healing some and yet one of his own colleagues was left out of missionary service because of sickness (2 Tim. 4:20). That God can and does heal is without doubt, and He may choose to act sovereignly or through some human instrument. There are many instances of miraculous healing recorded in the Scriptures, Old and New Testaments alike, and, though circumstances, people and methods vary, the work is done by the one and only Spirit of God. While the miracles of healing are astonishing, it is seldom in Scripture that they are accompanied by the brash emotionalism and sensationalism so often seen in highly advertised meetings for healing. Indeed Jesus at times commanded the person healed to tell no-one (Matt. 8:1-4). What we must also remember is that healing is temporary and in due time death claims everyone. The healing of the soul in terms of salvation is much more important, and who dares say that this 'healing' should be excluded from the area of the gifts of the Spirit?

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## 12:8-11

With so many extravagant and highly emotional things now associated with the term 'evangelical' it is important to study this passage in detail. What are we to understand by the term 'the working of miracles'? We can grasp the miracle of Jesus stilling the storm in Galilee by His word of power (Mk. 4:35-41), because we know He is the One by whom all things were made and hold together (John 1:3; Heb. 1:2; Col. 1:15-17). We can grasp such stories as Moses with the rod of God in his hand dividing the sea (Exod. 14:15, 16, 21), and the oil and meal

that did not go done during famine (1 Kings 17:8-16). We read of Peter and John and the healing of the lame man in Acts 3:1-10 and we read of many other miracles, recognising that always the power, the initiative and the directive are with God. Now, in our day, does the gift of working miracles come into some different category so that the person who has the gift can make all the decisions as to how and when and where the miracle is to be performed? That cannot be, because it would displace God from His sovereign position. We read of Paul speaking words of rebuke and judgment, followed by the miracle of a man losing his sight (Acts 13:8-12). That was in the context of a man's using of magic against the Gospel and Paul must have been very sure that he was being commanded by God before he uttered such stern words leading to supernatural action. Of course, the power (and the word used in our passage for 'miracles' is 'powers') belonged to God not to Paul. 'Having power' is something that appeals greatly to human nature and there are many different powers in the world. Those who are greedy for power may find themselves in very difficult and dangerous situations, as Acts 19:11-16 makes plain. Why would someone ask God to give the gift of working miracles? What use would be made of it? Who would that person be wanting to impress? If the gift is given by God the power still belongs to God and must be stewarded to please God and for the common good of the fellowship (v.7).

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### 12:8-11

The prophets in the Old Testament spoke to the people and the nations the word given them by God. It was not their own 'word' nor their own assessment politically, economically, morally or religiously. It was given them by God. The intelligence, personality and capacity of the prophet was, of course, used, but the content and inspiration of the message came directly from God. They told forth the Word of God, making it plain it came from God. We speak nowadays of someone being a 'prophetic voice' or of a sermon being a 'prophetic word' for the contemporary situation, and if the preaching is a true presentation of Scripture then we are dealing with prophecy. But some say this gift of prophecy is something more, an actual fresh word of truth from God. But if such a 'prophecy' runs counter to Scripture it cannot be from God, and if it simply says in another verbal form what Scripture already says it does not seem to warrant any special importance. In the Scriptures there was often an element of prediction in prophecy and this, of course, can be tested. If the prophesied event does not come to pass the prophet did not speak from God. Paul makes plain in 14:3 that prophecy is for upbuilding, encouragement and consolation. And that is what the preaching of the Word is for. But preaching the Word without the gracious life-giving unction of the Holy Spirit has a deadening effect. How sure we must be before we speak to the church and claim to be the Spirit-inspired messenger of God. Why do many who claim this gift seek to exercise it only in congregations rather than in confrontation with the godless masses of society? Some would use the church as a platform for displaying their gifts. 'This gift (prophecy) more than any other, is in danger of abuse. How many Christians mistake their own wishes for the will of God and ascribe to the Holy Spirit an inspiration which really comes from Satan or from their own natural dislikes.' (Deluz) We need the next 'gift' spoken of.

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### 12:8-11

It is significant and very important that Paul includes the gift of discernment, the capacity to distinguish between spirits. This recognises the fact of experience that there will be those who claim to speak and act by the Spirit of God who are not genuinely inspired by the Spirit of God but by some other and alien spirit. Unless there is someone, or more likely several persons, with this God-given capacity to distinguish what is from God and what is not from God, it would be all too possible for the wrong kind of people to gain power and to rule and guide the church in ways that are wrong. People who are persuaded or beguiled into believing that they have a God-given 'gift' are very difficult to handle. They tend to assume an attitude of infallibility. But the Word of God is making plain here that 'gifts' are not infallible and it is necessary to examine or test the 'spirits' (1 John 4:1). If we consider the whole passage in Eph. 4:11-16 we see that God's gifts are for the building up of the church in truth and stability, so that it is able to stand firm against all the enticements of subtle distractions away from Christ, and to become more and more a fellowship of people bound together in common love and loyalty. Now, it is a sad fact of experience that often those who radically emphasise the gifts of the Spirit have the effect of disturbing and dividing the church and setting Christians over against each other in terms of those who have 'gifts' and those who do not have them. This cannot be of God; and that needs to be said. Those who have or

claim to have the gifts of the Spirit all too easily fall into the snare of pronouncing that others are guilty of resisting the Spirit. The gift of discernment is greatly needed in the realm of pastoral counselling, not least to reassure tormented believers that if they have Jesus they have the Holy Spirit, and thus they have all that is needed for salvation and life. Read Col. 1:19 and 2:10. All the fulness of God is in Jesus Christ, and, says Paul to these new believers, you are filled full with the fullness of God in Him. Of course it takes a life-time, perhaps even an eternity, to discover in practice all we have in Christ.

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### **12:8-11**

The subject of 'speaking in tongues' and interpretation of these ecstatic utterances is dealt with fully in chapter 14. That this issue caused considerable confusion in the church at Corinth is clear in that Paul takes three full chapters (12-14) in order to bring some control and correction into the life, worship and service of the congregation. There seems to have been such an emphasis on this particular, extraordinary 'gift' that it had become virtually the 'test' as to whether a person was a 'real' Christian or not. There has come to be a similar obsession or preoccupation with speaking in tongues in much of the modern charismatic movement, so that converts to Christ are urged (and at times 'enabled') to speak in tongues as soon as possible, as if this validated their conversion and spirituality. When those of a charismatic persuasion set out to infiltrate other congregations with the specific intention of propagating this gift, there is good cause to question what 'spirit' is influencing them. The fact that Paul has referred to varieties of gifts and service (4) indicates that no gift is to be regarded as essential. The giving or withholding is for God to decide and He is always free to act or not to act in any way He chooses. It is generally accepted that the 'tongues' Paul speaks of here are different from what is spoken of in Acts 2:2-12 where people from different places heard the apostles speaking in their own languages. That was miracle! Here it seems to be speaking in some ecstatic language which is made understandable to others (and indeed to the person speaking) by someone with the gift of interpretation. That there can also be this kind of 'strange speaking' in pagan experience is fact and we must acknowledge that wrong things as well as right things have been spoken 'in tongues'.

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### **12:8-11**

We hesitate to spend more time on this issue of 'tongues', which has been given such importance recently even though Paul places it at the end of this list, which itself is not a total list of the gifts of the Spirit. It has to be recognised that among worthy and godly scholars and expositors there is a division of opinion about the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit. Some say they belonged to apostolic times and were afterwards withdrawn, while others say they remain a part of the rightful experience of the church in all ages. Both views must be respected, but care must be taken when some say that the possession and exercise of these gifts of the Spirit are of the essence of the life of the church and are therefore the authentication of genuine spirituality. There is not biblical warrant to say that 'speaking in tongues' is the confirmation of being filled with or baptised in the Holy Spirit. Being in the Spirit, indwelt by the Spirit, and having the Spirit, is spoken of in Rom. 8:9-11 where the terms are interchangeable and the Holy Spirit being a Person and not just power or influence, He is indivisible. Either He is there or He is not there. Some say that having spoken in tongues has brought them a new freshness and vitality of Christian life and we may not deny their experience, even though we may wonder if it was as much psychological as spiritual. Some have found 'tongues' a temporary experience which gave them a boost or confirmation spiritually at a certain stage in Christian life. Some have had the 'experience' and have become virtually unteachable, reckoning that they graduated to a superior form of Christian experience, forgetting that miracles are often a concession to spiritual weakness rather than a demonstration of strength. Some have found liberty, vitality, worship and fellowship in their lives without having experienced any of the 'extraordinary' manifestations of the Holy Spirit. All must see to it that Christian life is focused on the truth as it is in Jesus Christ and not focused in our own experiences, especially when the experience has been 'miraculous'. Miracles can become addictive, and people can find themselves dependent on them.

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### **12:8-11**

Paul speaks of various kinds of tongues and makes plain that without someone gifted to interpret these tongues



they cannot have any value. Truth uttered in an ecstatic way is truth hidden, unless someone reveals it, and when there is so much truth stated plainly in Scripture and calling for study, it raises the question as to what exactly is the value of speaking in an unknown tongue. Paul's comment in 14:19 (to which we shall come in due course) is significant for assessing value, importance and priority. In today's passage we are told that all these gifts, whatever their exact nature and use, and other gifts mentioned elsewhere in the epistles, have their source in the one Spirit and serve the one objective. °The gifts are not to be set over against one another, with the possessors appearing as rivals. Every man severally (each one individually - RSV) is a reminder that God deals with us as individuals. He does not deal out His gifts indiscriminately, but meets the needs and the capacities of each man.' (Leon Morris) Note very carefully the words, 'as He wills'. We may not and must not require God to act in a specific way with every person in every circumstance. There is a sovereign freedom in the working of the Holy Spirit, as Jesus made plain to Nicodemus in John 3:6-8 and that working is always beyond the capacity of mere mortals to see, let alone tabulate and evaluate. What we must never do is to restrict or limit the working of the Holy Spirit to the realm of what are called the gifts of the Spirit. Whether a church or an individual has one gift or another is largely irrelevant. God fulfils Himself in many ways but where the Holy Spirit is present and active there will be unity among believers; a focus on the centrality and sufficiency of Jesus Christ; a liberty of human spirit in praise, prayer, worship, and service; and a hunger for God's Word. There will also be in the church a spirit of value and respect for one another, and this is the theme Paul now expounds.

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### 12:12-13

Whatever our background, Jew or Greek; whatever our social standing, slave or free; whatever our intellect and human capacity or lack of them; whatever our particular gifts human, or spiritual, in Christ we are made one body, one living, integrated spiritual organism. Just as the human body is made up of a whole variety of members, each having its own specific function, and all working together to enable the body to function as a unity, so it is with the church. In Christ believers are brought together and made one, even though each retains his and her own special character. Right through to the end of the chapter the theme is diversity in unity. Christ is the head of the body, which is His church (Eph. 1:22-23; 5:23; Col. 1:18). When Paul speaks of baptism he is not thinking of the act or the method of water baptism but of the faith expressed and symbolised in the public ceremony. It is by the Word preached that faith comes, and Paul speaks of being washed clean by the water of the Word (Eph. 5:26). It is the work of the Spirit to regenerate, to bring to life, the soul that is dead in sin (Eph. 2:1-5). It is the work of the Spirit to draw men and women to Christ and in doing so He draws them to one another and makes them one body in Christ. It is by one Spirit or in one Spirit that we are in Christ. But the Spirit is not thought of as external. Paul speaks of our having been made to drink of the Spirit and we are to think of the Holy Spirit's life-giving and life-cleansing power within us. 'Think what Spirit dwells within you' (Lyte). Think of the good, gracious, healthy, powerful Spirit of God at work in the deepest recesses of our personalities, cleansing, nurturing, educating our Christian lives and developing our Christian character whether we are aware of it or not. By the indwelling Holy Spirit Jesus Christ becomes to us the very water of life (John 4:14; 7:37-39). 'The verb "to drink" is sometimes used of irrigating, whence comes the thought of abundant supply.' (Leon Morris) The possibilities are limitless but the 'flow' of supply is from God and therefore there is no place for pride.

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### 12:14-26

After such a detailed study of earlier verses it is good to read a whole passage that scarcely needs exposition. 'Diversity is not an accidental attribute of the body. It is of its very essence. No one member is to be equated with the body. It takes many members to make up one body.' (Leon Morris) This is the obvious case with the human body and it is the same with the church, which is the body of Christ whereby His will and work are done in the world. A foot should not try to be an arm, nor should the foot feel inferior to an arm. If every member of the body was the same, the result would be grotesque and so it is in the life and work of the church. It would be ridiculous to insist that an eye could smell just as a nose can smell, and in the same way it is ridiculous to insist that every Christian should have certain specified gifts or capacities. To think of an arm or a leg opting out of the body because it had not been appreciated causes us to laugh and the reaction should be the same (but sadly) when a Christian who has some 'gift of the Spirit) leaves a congregation because his or her 'gift' is not

appreciated nor allowed to be exercised 'out front'. The truth is that however gifted we may be or may think ourselves to be, the truth is that on our own we are quite useless. We need each other and it is as harmoniously working parts (and only parts) of the body that we can be and can become our true selves. It is the body and its functioning in the service of God, to do His will and to be the means of His blessing others, that matters, not the gifts, prominence and recognition of individual member's. For someone to withhold his or her contribution to the working of the body because of lack of recognition or appreciation is to make the body less effective in its functioning. Of course, that appeals to some people, because it gives them a sense of power. It also exposes their spiritual pride; and perhaps their pride is not spiritual at all!

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## 12:14-26

Jealousy is a terrible thing. It causes people to be resentful against God although they usually focus the blame on other people. Some would like to be prominent and to have the function that others have. Some may be resentful that God made them women and not men and that Scripture seems to bar them from certain forms of service they would like to engage in. Some men want to be ministers and because that door is closed to them they decline to serve in the church in a lay capacity, failing to see that no minister can go on in ministry without the support and encouragement of those in the congregation. What all have to accept and to rejoice in is the statement in v.18. It is God who gives us our personalities, our capacities and our places in His service. That is why it is so important to be in God's will, because it is only there that we can function effectively. To be otherwise is to be spiritually speaking 'a spanner in the works'. The wonderful hymn by A L Waring, 'Father, I know that all my life is portioned out for me,' has in its last two lines the words: 'Content to fill a little space, if Thou be glorified.' But we must not devalue those who are, or seem to be, those who fill a little space. In many areas of life, not least in warfare, the 'back room boys' are vital, though never seen and seldom recognised publicly. Paul recognises this in v.22, and we must emphasise the word 'indispensable'. Many a preacher, famous for his preaching, will discover in Heaven that the real source of his fruitfulness was the faithful, prevailing prayers of some believer who always thought of himself or herself as not much use. In v.23-24 Paul seems to refer to how we should regard and treat those members of the body considered to be less honourable, recognising they need our help more than others. The message is clear. We must not devalue anyone nor must we cause them any embarrassment or feelings of shame. In speaking of the body it is important to note the word 'modesty' and to remember that in an increasingly salacious society modesty of dress, behaviour and speech should be manifest in those who claim to be Christ's representatives.

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## 12:14-26

The last three verses of our passage make it plain that it is not accidental that a congregation is made up of a great variety of people and personalities. There are no white collar and blue collar strata, nor are there west-end, east-end distinctions, nor higher and lower educational distinctions. It took the same atoning death of the Son of God to redeem each one, and that signifies the value of each one. In Christ we belong together in order to share with one another all the different experiences of joy, sorrow, suffering or honour. If each member of the fellowship is in fact living and walking in loving obedience to Christ, then there will be no dissension, none of the tensions that create an atmosphere and cause people to 'take sides' in disputes and differences. If we are not caring for each other, then there is something wrong in the ordering of the life of the spiritual body which is the church. We protest at times and excuse ourselves by saying that certain people are exasperating, hard to love and slow to learn. But would not God say these very things about us? And He has cared for us, showing us immense long-suffering, constant forgiveness and repeated restorations to fellowship and service. Why then should we be hard on people, we who have been forgiven so much? Jesus' story in Matt. 18:21-35 is very much to the point. Note that it is care for one another that is the sign of healthy spirituality. We should not always be at the receiving end of care and kindness, and it may well be that some have lost the freshness of their Christian lives because they have never really expressed care or appreciation, never done a really generous act of kindness and never been honest enough to admit to others that they have a struggle with health, life, work or just the ordinary things of everyday life. Some in the fellowship can be discouraged and made to feel inferior because we have given the impression that we always cope and are always victorious. We need to ask such people to pray for us.

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### **12:27-31**

Paul summarises what he has been saying and applies the message to the congregation of believers in Corinth. Individually they are living parts of the body of Christ and it is through that body that Christ is presented to the city and is active in the city. They are not there to express themselves or to draw attention to themselves. Anything that distracts from Christ is suspect and, however spiritual it seems or claims to be, it is working against God's purpose. It is made plain that the church is not our church but God's church (Acts 20:28), and the ordering of it is totally in God's hand. It is God who appoints the members to their specific functions, giving them the gifts and capacities to carry out their work, which is essentially that of being servants of the Gospel. The list of God's appointments, which need not indicate a strict order of importance, includes two which have not yet been mentioned: Helps and Administrators. The gift of being a help speaks of general usefulness to others, a gift not likely to draw much attention to the worker, who may not even receive thanks. The word administrators indicates those whose function is like the pilot of a ship, to steer the vessel safely through dangerous shoals, keeping it clear of rocks, making sure it is ready and available for its next voyage. Such persons are of great value, keeping the congregation on the right lines in practical matters. All do not have the same gift. All do not have or need to have the illustrious and exciting gifts. There is always the dangerous temptation to desire the gifts that give prominence and attention but which demand less in terms of sacrificial service. It must also be recognised that what we think are spiritual gifts may simply be what appeals to us and it may be good for us all, from time to time, to do something very ordinary.

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### **13:1-13**

Paul has not finished dealing with the vexed question of the gifts of the Spirit, a matter that was disturbing the life of the church in Corinth and causing a lot of competition, controversy and criticism. The gift that seemed to be lacking among these Christians was love. This whole chapter, which we need to read right through again and again, reading if possible J B Phillips' translation, tells us of the love that should be manifest and operative in the life of every Christian. Go back to the list of gifts and appointments in 12:27-30, and keep in mind that some in Corinth might have felt they possessed none of these 'special' gifts. That did not make them inferior or unnecessary, because in Christ our natural gifts and capacities are en-graced and are therefore 'spiritual'. When Paul urges us all to desire the higher or better gifts we must not assume that he necessarily means one or some of those mentioned in his list. After all the list in v.29 is different from the list in v.28, and different again from the list in v.8-9. What Paul does now is to speak of that God-given grace without which none of the gifts people have, or think they have, have any value at all. He speaks of love, and at once we are led into the 'higher' realm of the fruit of the Spirit, the Christ-like characteristics that the Spirit produces in the lives of believers. Read carefully what Paul says in Gal. 5:19-26, where the works or activities of the 'flesh' are set in contrast to the fruit of the Spirit, and keep in mind what we have been learning about the unsavoury aspects of the life of some of the Christians in Corinth. Things like strife, jealousy, anger, party-spirit and indulgence do not seem to harmonise with preoccupation with the gifts of the Spirit. Note also in Galatians that it is the fruit (singular) of the Spirit that is spoken of. All nine graces go together and should at least begin to show in our lives, because the love of God has in fact been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (Rom. 5:5). Paul may well have had in mind the words of Jesus in John 15:9-19. To live in love for one another is not an option. It is an order.

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### **13:1-3**

We must be clear what we mean when we speak of love, and our understanding would be deepened if we read, for example, 'The Four Loves' by C S Lewis. In Corinth, as in much of society now, the usual word for love was 'Eros', from which our word 'erotic' comes. It signified sensual love, love that can so easily become debased so that 'I love you' really means 'I love me, and want you.' Christians had to find a new word for love; not the Greek word 'philia', which is really just friendly affability of temperament which draws us to people like ourselves, but the word 'agape' which speaks of love which asks nothing for itself but gives itself for the good of the loved one. It is love as it is seen in Jesus that Paul speaks of. 'Let this mind be in you which was also in

Christ Jesus' (Phil. 2:5 AV): the love which inspired and enabled Jesus to yield all His rights and privileges and to die for our salvation. This love is not blind or sentimental. It is totally realistic. It faces the facts and knows the worst, but it still loves because it values the one loved. Love may have a very stern face at times. Love may chastise (Heb. 12:5-11). A prodigal's father may let his son go to the far country (Lk. 15:11-13 ff). Love may cause the loved one to weep if that is the only way to bring back hope (Hos. 2:15 Achor = trouble or weeping). Love that is a reflection and expression of the love of God in Jesus Christ is sacrificial and redemptive, and it is also very human, tender and understanding. It is love for God and for people that gives the theology of the Gospel warmth and sweet attractiveness. What Paul is now saying, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (the same Holy Spirit the Corinthians claimed was giving them exciting and impressive gifts), is that without love all the other gifts total up to nothing. Since this is so, we must consider this chapter well.

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### 13:1-3

Paul deals with speech, whether natural human eloquence or the vexed, much discussed and overvalued 'speaking in tongues' which some may have referred to as 'angel tongues'. Neither form of speech, whatever the subject, has any value without love. Indeed, such utterances are nothing but a discordant noise, like children banging a toy drum or rattling a spoon in an empty tin. There are those who like the sound of their own voices, who sound a trumpet to draw attention to what they consider to be their spirituality (Matt. 6:2,5,7). Paul has already indicated that some of the Christians in Corinth, far from being spiritual, were in fact all talk and no action (1 Cor. 4:19). There are always those who like to think they are a 'big noise' in the church, and that is usually all they are! It is love that counts, love that warms and ministers grace to others (Eph. 4:29-5:2). Paul deals next with gifts and talents, whether natural capacities or Spirit-inspired ones. He seems to suggest that it is possible to have a variety of spiritual gifts, including prophecy, understanding, knowledge and great faith which accomplishes great things, even moving mountains and yet all that, without love, counts for nothing. Without love the heart is not involved and 'faith' is reduced to superficial and outward forms of religion (Gal. 5:6). Having spoken of speech and talents, Paul goes on to speak of service and sacrifice and he does so in radical terms. Some give away all they have. They make big gestures of sacrificial giving of money, time and energy, but without love it is no gain. Think how the few coins given by a widow out of love to God were valued by Jesus far more highly than the lavish gifts given with publicity by the rich (Mk. 12:41-44). Paul even says that people may go to the ultimate of sacrifice and be burned at the stake for their religion or for some other ideal, but if the motivation is not love, love in response to God's love, and that love shown to the needy and unworthy as God's love has been shown, then it is all for nothing. Some people, even religious people and truly Christian people, will do almost anything to make a name for themselves. But love is the one thing needful. Nothing can make up for its lack. Read the story of the rather self-confident, well-taught religious lawyer in Lk. 10:25-37. A famous German theologian once said, 'It's caring that counts.' Paul would agree.

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### 13:4-7

Love needs to be expressed; otherwise it will die; and sometimes it needs to be expressed in a spontaneous, generous, sacrificial way. Read the story of the woman with the box of ointment in Matt. 26:6-13, and note how unfeeling the disciples were towards Jesus even though their claim was concern for the poor. Some people are locked up in themselves and have never really done a single act of extravagant generosity in their lives. Love affects and is expressed in every aspect and attitude of life and activity. J B Phillips translates these verses: 'This love of which I speak is slow to lose patience - it looks for a way of being constructive. It is not possessive: it is neither anxious to impress nor does it cherish inflated ideas of its own importance. Love has good manners and does not pursue selfish advantage. It is not touchy. It does not compile statistics of evil or gloat over the wickedness of other people. On the contrary, it is glad with all good men when truth prevails. Love knows no limit to its endurance, no end to its trust, no fading of its hope: it can outlast anything. It is, in fact, the one thing that still stands when all else has fallen.' Now, if possible, read the passage in RSV and NIV. In v.6-7 Moffat's translation reads, 'Love is never glad when others go wrong, love is gladdened by goodness, always slow to expose, always eager to believe the best, always hopeful, always patient.' What a challenge there is in these verses and how we need, quite deliberately, to cultivate the grace of love in our personal attitudes and action. It is no use waiting for appropriate feelings that will make it easy to show this kind of love. If we take ourselves to

task, curb our mean-mindedness, remember just how much patience and forbearance God has shown to us, and begin to act towards others as love should act, then the feelings will begin to take care of themselves. We may be surprised at just how nice many people are and may be surprised to discover we are not as flawless as we thought. People will then begin to find us easier to love.

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### **13:4-7**

We do well to consider some of the expressions used in the AV translation, such as 'Love (charity) suffers long and is kind'. Long-suffering is the opposite of being short-tempered, and is prepared to put up with a great deal from other people, whether in their criticism or neglect. All the translations speak of love as being kind, and that refers to gentleness of attitude and action, especially when correction or rebuke is needed. In v.5 the AV reads, 'Love does not behave itself unseemly, seeks not her own, is not easily provoked.' Selfishness and exasperation we recognise at once as having no place in a Christian life but what about unseemly behaviour? That includes manner of dress, not least when involved in the service of God's House. It involves personal behaviour and manner of speech; it applies to relationships, especially when romance is involved; and it applies to places we go to, things we get involved in and the noise we generate. It applies to fellows and girls being in each other's flats late at night, because that could give the appearance of evil, even if nothing wrong is being done. But our witness to Christ and the Gospel is involved and if we are walking in love we will not want to cast any shadow on the good name of Christ and His church, nor will we want to put any cause of stumbling in the way of people who sorely need to be shown the way, the truth and the life. In v.7 RSV uses the words: bears, believes, hopes, endures; NIV uses the words: protects, trusts, hopes, perseveres. No matter how often love is let down and disappointed, it goes on loving. No matter the number of failures, love does not think of giving up but recognises that the need for help is as great as ever. And love does all this because it sees value in other people and sees what people might yet become. There is indeed redeeming and restoring power in love, and its touch is gentle as well as firm and sure.

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### **13:8-13**

This passage is full of detail and the key to it is the first statement, to the effect that love never ends. The contrast is then developed between the permanence of love and the temporary or passing nature of other spiritual gifts. Paul seems to be saying that, at certain times or phases of personal experience or church history, supernatural gifts of the Spirit may appear and serve a purpose but that these gifts pass away. On the other hand, love is the permanent mark of true spirituality and nothing can substitute for it. Only three of the vast variety of spiritual gifts are mentioned and these may have been the 'favourites' in Corinth. The gifts are recognised as being imperfect and limited and are replaced by the coming of what is perfect. This 'change-over' is regarded by some as the end of the apostolic era, when Scripture was completed and, the church having the full and final Word from God (Heb. 1:1-3), further prophecy and the revelation of 'new' knowledge were no longer needed. Others say the reference is to the end of history when Christ comes again, or when some of the gifts of the Spirit give way to others or when the gifts of the Spirit change their form and expression. We must be careful not to tie down the Holy Spirit to only certain forms of activity. This is the danger when undue emphasis is placed on certain of the 'impressive' or unusual spiritual gifts. In our recent study in Rev. 3:1-6 on Sunday we considered the seven-fold perfection and activity of the Person of the Holy Spirit and looked at a number of references indicating the vast variety of the Spirit's working right from Gen. 1:1-3, where He brooded over creation and brought forth order and light. Think of the Spirit of wisdom, counsel, might and reverence that equips the Servant of the Lord (Isa. 11:1-2). Think of the Spirit of supplication and compassion in Zech. 12:10. How much value is set today on a burden to pray? Are people not keen on this 'gift' of the Spirit because it belongs to the secret place and involves hard work over a long spell? Think of the Spirit of holiness (Rom. 1:4) and the Spirit of self-control (2 Tim. 1:7). Above all, Paul would have us focus on the Spirit of love.

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### **13:8-13**

In v.9-10 we are cautioned about being preoccupied with the here and now of Christian experience, which is limited and temporary. Think of our general reluctance with regard to living for the world to come, forgetting

that we are being prepared and equipped for service in the future, both in this world and the next. A spirit of 'other-worldliness' can be escapist but lack of that dimension and awareness can lead to life that is quite materialistic. The 'down-drag' of fallen human nature influenced by the spirit of a fallen world always has the tendency to make us concentrate on laying up treasure on earth, which, of course, we cannot take with us when we depart this temporary world (Matt. 6:19-21; Lk 12:13-21). But there is a more serious danger highlighted in these verses. It is very easy, especially in the area of unusual or miraculous experiences in our dealings with God and with spiritual gifts, to become totally fixated on some experience we may have had, whether a one-off experience or a continuing one. But we must never think that what we have experienced is the sum total of possible spiritual experience, either for ourselves or for others. All we experience or know is partial and limited. There is always more to discover of the length, breadth, depth and height of God and His love, and the 'fulness' of that knowledge always will be beyond us (Eph. 3:14-21). We must never think we have arrived spiritually. It is just not true! When Paul speaks of growing up from childhood to adulthood he will have had in mind what was said earlier in this epistle about the Corinthians being spiritually immature (3:1-4). This apparently was still their condition in spite of their boastful and competitive preoccupation with spiritual gifts. Paul was having to take them to the first principles, the ABC of spiritual life (Heb. 5:11-6:1a), and he says quite clearly that it is time to put away childish things, attitudes and activities.

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### 13:8-13

Paul is insisting that there are certain things we should grow out of as our Christian lives develop from infancy through childhood to mature adulthood. Ways of speaking about Jesus, ways of thinking about Christian truth, and ways of reasoning and studying God's Word which are appropriate for a child are not appropriate for adults, and should in fact change and develop if our spiritual experience is authentic. This is an important issue in terms of worship, the kind of hymns and songs we sing, and the kind of sermons we preach and listen to. Essentially a child wants to be pleased, diverted, entertained and parents must use various ploys to achieve this end. But in our dealings with God, our worship, our public prayers, our presentation of the Gospel, if we reduce both form and content to the level of a children's class, we will never really learn or grow in grace. We will learn little of the grandeur of God, the glory of His person, the sweep of His saving purposes; and those from outside the faith who come amongst us will sense little of worship, reverence, godly fear or the urgency of salvation. Note that Paul speaks of a conscious and deliberate decision to put away childish things in order to get down to the business of thinking things through in relation to Christian faith and practice. His illustration of seeing in a mirror would have real point in Corinth, which was famous for its mirrors. Few of the Christians would have been able to afford one of good quality and the reflection they saw would be true but blurred. So it is in things spiritual. We see and we know truly, but as yet both sight and knowledge are limited and therefore we must never be presumptuous or over confident in spiritual issues. There is so much more yet to learn, and in Heaven, face to face with Jesus, we shall see with total clarity and we will then truly appreciate the salvation, life and blessing we have been given in Him. If we have followed Paul's reasoning truly, we should have been brought to a spirit of worship.

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### 13:8-13

Who can possibly expound the last verse in one daily note? To live and serve as a Christian it is not essential to have and to use the various gifts dealt with in chapter 12 and about to be dealt with in terms of caution and correction in chapter 14. These things may change and give place to others but faith, hope and love stand fast. These three graces or virtues are of the essence of Christian life. In relation to the past, faith looks to the finished work of Christ, salvation accomplished and secured, and all our sins forgiven. In the past, apart from Christ, we were without hope (Eph. 2:12) but now have been born again to a living hope (1 Pet. 1:3-5). We look back to the past and marvel that while we were yet sinners God loved us and Christ died for us (Rom. 5: 6-8). In relation to the present we walk by faith and that gives substance, solidity and assurance to things hoped for (Heb. 11:1-3). We walk by faith (2 Cor. 5:7). We live by faith (Gal. 2:20). And, as we go on in the present, day by day, we are saved in hope (Rom. 8:24-25) in the sense that we are pointed on ahead, knowing a restlessness that will not let us settle down in a world that is no longer our real home. We look for a city and a better country (Heb. 11:10, 13-16) and we are confident, which hope we have as the anchor of our souls (Heb. 6:17-20). As we

go on in the present we begin more and more to love Him who first loved us, and in that love we serve. It is not duty. And we begin to share that love with others, telling them of the love of Jesus. All the time we become increasingly aware that we have a future. The best is yet to be. Paul is quite sure about that (Phil. 1:21-23; 2 Cor. 5:1-9). At times, to the eye of faith the whole of eternal Heaven seems very near. Faith trusts, even in the dark, and it kindles hope and expectation. Heaven really is something to look forward to because in every sense it is fulfilment but never static, and always with more to discover. 'His servants shall serve Him and they shall see His face' (Rev. 22:3-5). Then we shall see that God is love, and to that love there is no end.

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### 14:1a

Make love your aim. Focus on the theme of love: God's love for us, our love for Him, His love for others, and our beginning at least to show His love to others. GOD IS LOVE. Everything about Him is love, and we love Him because He first loved us. Read 1 John 4:7-21 and then take time to think, to worship and to open our hearts to God. In the Revised Church Hymnary that we use, there are twenty-two hymns in the section headed 'Love and Gratitude'. One of many sweet and wonderful hymns of worship we make our meditation today.

Hark my soul: it is the Lord;  
'Tis thy Saviour, hear His word;  
Jesus speaks, and speaks to thee:  
"Say, poor sinner, lov'st thou Me?"

"I delivered thee when bound,  
And, when bleeding, healed thy wounds;  
Sought thee wandering, set thee right;  
Turned thy darkness into light.

"Can a woman's tender care  
Cease toward the child she bare?  
Yes, she may forgetful be,  
Yet will I remember thee.

"Mine is an unchanging love,  
Higher than the heights above,  
Deeper than the depths beneath,  
Free and faithful, strong as death.

"Thou shalt see My glory soon,  
When the work of grace is done;  
Partner of My throne shalt be;  
Say, poor sinner, lov'st thou Me?"

"Lord, it is my chief complaint  
That my love is weak and faint;  
Yet I love Thee, and adore;  
O for grace to love Thee more!"  
(Cowper)

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### 14:1-5

This chapter is full of controversy. It begins by emphasising that the chief objective must be love. It goes on immediately to say that the most important 'gift' is prophecy, which has to do with communicating the Word of God, from God, in the gracious power of the Spirit of God. But the exercise of this gift and all other gifts must be in love, and love, whatever else it does, is always willing to forfeit its own rights and self-expression. We

shall see as we go on through the chapter, which is largely dealing with the gift of 'speaking in tongues', that a deliberate decision has always to be taken as to whether or not the 'gift' is to be used and expressed (v.28,32). There is no question of 'having to speak' because one is constrained, inspired or compelled by the Spirit. Love must always be the controlling factor, and in Corinth, as we have seen, pride and competition were operative. As he starts to deal with his subject, Paul makes a distinction between what may be right and appropriate in personal and private life and what is right for the church when it is gathered for worship (2-4). Both tongues and prophecy use language, but one is not understandable except to the interpreter. This makes clear that the gift of 'tongues' is different from the similar phenomenon in Acts 2:4, because in that instance people all heard in such a way that they could understand the wonderful works of God (Acts 2:5-11). In the story in Acts the 'tongues' gave way immediately to a clear exposition of the truth of the Gospel. Paul said to the Corinthians that those speaking in tongues were dealing in a personal way with God; dealing with mysteries which even the speaker in tongues might not be understanding. This means there is not necessarily any communication to others nor fellowship with others in the exercising of this gift. Who is to say whether or not it is necessary, or selfishly indulgent (carnal human nature likes to think it has a secret no one else has) or necessarily inspired by the good and holy Spirit of God?

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### 14:1-5

We cannot avoid the suggestion that in Corinth (and no doubt in other places) the gift of speaking in tongues was over-coveted, over-valued and over-indulged. It is also clear that in these days there were false prophets and false spirits seeking to impose their 'words' over against the Spirit-inspired words of the apostles (2 Thess. 2:2). Keep in mind that once we are in the realm of the 'supra-natural' the possibility of being deceived is real. If Paul was thinking of 'tongues' in terms of enlarging, deepening and refreshing the Christian's private communion with God, we can see the point of his words in 5a. But if he was aware of the competition and the feeling of superiority among those claiming this gift, then his words have a different thrust. He is then simply saying that this gift is open to all (at God's discretion) and not to a favoured few. Far from tongues being the criterion of spiritual maturity, Paul states clearly that the one who prophesies is greater because he is serving the church. If, as Paul seems to suggest, speaking in tongues is a private gift, why should it be intruded into the life of the church where it needs an interpreter to make the 'message' understandable? The two gifts, tongues and interpretation, together become prophecy, speaking God's message to His people. It would seem far simpler and more straightforward if God gave His message directly by His servant in language understood by the people. Of course, there is always the temptation to try to impress the church rather than be just a servant. Those who have gifts, of whatever kind, always tend to feel they are special cases who deserve special place and recognition. It is interesting that Paul says so very little about the 'uncanny' gifts of the Spirit in his other epistles. Preparing the young minister, Timothy, for his ministry following on from his own, Paul's emphasis on the 'gift' given was in terms of power, love and self-control (2 Tim. 1:6-7). It is also interesting that Paul, who had experiences of the Spirit of God of a very special kind, kept very quiet about them (2 Cor. 12:1-7).

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### 14:6-12

The fact that Paul goes on at such length to deal with this subject indicates the degree of confusion and distraction it had caused in the church at Corinth. He looked ahead to his next visit to Corinth and made plain he would not be speaking in tongues, because that would not meet the need for the teaching and up-building of the church. Right through the Acts of the Apostles, Paul's pattern of ministry was that of reasoning out of the Scriptures. In a sense his ministry was very 'ordinary' and very realistic, as Acts 14:21-23 makes plain. This contrast between ordinary and extra-ordinary seems to have been in his mind when he used the illustrations of stringed instruments and bugles. Both kinds of music in their own way can stir the emotions without there being any moral or mental benefit. Ministry or experiences that simply thrill the senses but do not instruct, equip and prepare for service and for battle are a deception. Satan can give us all the impression that we are being very spiritual when in fact we are simply being indulgent. There is also great challenge here in v.9 with regard to all we mean by preaching. It is all too easy to indulge in rhetoric, flowing passages of eloquence, endless stories that produce laughter, and impressive quotations from the books of famous people (and all these can be a form of speaking in tongues) without bringing the Word of God to people in a way that slays 'self', grounds people in



God's truth and calls them to sacrificial service to the glory of God. People may be impressed by the 'spirituality' of the preacher and speak of 'a wonderful service' but no real meeting with God has taken place. 'Speaking into the air' is a devastating comment on much of what was going on in Corinth. In v.10-12 Paul speaks of how language can be a great barrier to instruction and to fellowship. Think of the difficulties overseas people have in understanding our services. Think of the effort linguists make to put God's truth into language understood on the mission field. Why then is there such a desire to speak in our own churches in a strange tongue?

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### **14:13-19**

The introduction to this passage is in the previous verse and it is a strong challenge that is not without criticism. Those who are eager for manifestations of the Spirit (and their motives may he suspect) should show and prove themselves eager, ready and willing to work hard for the building up of the church. Without doubt there is reference here to the party-spirit that was dividing, disturbing and distracting the church and hindering its witness in the community. The person with the gift of speaking in tongues should recognise the serious limitation of that gift because it will benefit no-one unless there is the gift of being able to interpret. Of course, if the person has both gifts then he or she can give the message without a 'demonstration' of the exciting ecstatic gift. That we are in the realm of 'emotion' is clear in Paul's affirmation that in certain kinds of 'spiritual' activity the mind is not involved. Paul is not in any sense speaking against emotion and enthusiasm, because when that is missing religion becomes formal, routine and sterile. But he insists that spirituality that does not engage the mind, the thinking and understanding, quickly becomes little more than emotional indulgence which has neither moral nor spiritual dynamic. Note how Paul insists that, in both praying and singing in the context of the life of the church, the mind must be engaged. We must be practical, realistic, factual and disciplined in every area of Christian life. There are matters for prayer that should be dealt with in private or in family prayers not in the church prayer meeting. In prayer we need to use our minds lest by sheer multiplication of words we take so long to come to the point that others have ceased to follow us. In Christian praise, especially in a gathering of different age groups and different backgrounds, care must be taken lest the songs sung and repeated become merely a means to generate feeling rather than engage the mind in relation to God. True worship should engage all our faculties at their best level.

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### **14:13-19**

Paul continues to challenge the self-centredness of those who insist, at any and every opportunity, on exercising the gift of speaking in tongues. In v.16 he asks, if they bless or give thanks to God with the spirit, in a tongue, how can the Christian without the gifts of tongues or interpretation share in that prayer and say Amen. The RSV uses the word 'outsider' and NIV the word 'inquirers' in v.16 and we have a reminder here that we never know who will be in any gathering for worship. What will thinking outsiders make of an endless babbling in tongues, especially if they have come to find out what the Christian message is all about? In v.17 Paul seems to acknowledge that many, even most, though not all, who indulge their gift of tongues may be genuinely speaking right things to God but no one else is helped or edified. Paul keeps on emphasising that things are assessed according to whether or not they do in fact edify the hearers. This is a test that applies to a whole variety of modern methods of preaching and evangelism. People may like doing various things and others like seeing and hearing them, but if the result is not the building up of spiritual life leading on to spiritual duty, then things are suspect. The church is not in the entertainment business. The entertainment world and the political world do 'their own thing' far better. If, as we suggest, Paul is dealing with self-seeking in the matter of the gift of tongues, we do well to consider other 'spiritual' exercises that are also suspect. Some try to sing louder than everyone else; some speak out their Amens and Hallelujahs loudly so that all will hear; some stand in silence during praise, an effective way of getting others to ask what is wrong; some sit in prayer after the Benediction so long that people think they must be specially holy. Paul's words in v.18 indicate that he is not speaking from a position of ignorance or inexperience in the matter of the gift of tongues, and he goes on to state that his clear choice in church is to speak in intelligible language, however briefly.

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## 14:20

It is never easy for a congregation to accept what is said if it suggests they are being childish rather than childlike, but this is exactly what Paul is saying. They were being spiritually precocious and demonstrative in relation to their spiritual gifts, and some of them, at least, were like children, showing off how gifted they were, drawing attention to themselves. In the realm of Christian service it is all too easy to be interested in things that give immediate pleasure rather than in the business of hard work that has its reward only in the long-term. Paul really commands them to get their thinking straight because they were confused about the really important spiritual issues. But we must note that he speaks graciously and with real affection, calling them brethren, because, after all, he did care for them and he did desire the best for them as well as from them. There is a time to be truly and radically childlike and that is in the face of temptation to evil. Christians should shrink back from it, recognising its danger and refusing to be involved or contaminated. It may have been that some of the Christians, thinking themselves very strong spiritually, were actually experimenting with doubtful things, ostensibly to gain knowledge and experience but perhaps to gain a 'thrill' while still being able to claim they were not getting 'involved'. That is a dangerous ploy, and Paul insists they must become mature or adult in their thinking. The phrase in the AV reads 'In understanding be men' and that became the title of a handbook on Christian doctrine (T C Hammond) which was of immense help to generations of Christian students. It is important to grow up in our speaking of and presentation of the Gospel, otherwise people will think it is only for children.

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## 14:21-25

'Children love anything that shines or moves or makes a noise. That was why the Corinthians loved ecstasies, speaking with tongues, and spectacular charisma in fact. Many modern Christians have the same mentality. They flock after evangelists who make a stir; they would rather be made to feel than to think.' (Deluz) Paul now points out that this kind of attitude has an adverse effect on people who are not believers who happen to come into our services. What are they going to think? What will they make of the atmosphere and the incoherent babbling of tongues, especially if a whole lot of people are all speaking at the one time? One thing is likely: the Christians will be so busy and preoccupied with each other that they will not have time to speak and listen to the newcomers who very possibly will never come back. That would be significant failure. Paul quotes from Isa. 28:11 f f but his words do not justify the practice of speaking in tongues. The situation Isaiah addressed was that God's people would not listen to God's Word from the prophets, and in discipline their land was to be over-run by the Assyrians and they would perhaps hear God speaking to them through the foreign tongues of their enemies who lorded it over them. The foreign tongues would be a clear sign of God's displeasure. In applying this Old Testament reference in v.22, Paul seems to say that tongues are a sign to Christian 'unbelievers', Christians who were not listening to and receiving God's Word spoken to them in clear, understandable language. It is a fact of experience that Christians who are over-aware of their spiritual gifts are seldom very keen on the kind of expository ministry that makes them think and which aims to slay by God's Word the 'great Pope Self' that dominates and tends to displace God. Some who have holidayed abroad have gone to church and through a whole service have not understood a single word because the language was different. If a soul seeking God comes to church and hears only language he does not understand what benefit is there? He will feel unwanted. That would be true also of a visiting Christian if he or she did not have this gift of tongues.

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## 14:21-25

In the realm of the miraculous we need to remember Jesus' words about the wrongness of seeking signs in order to believe (Matt. 16:1-4; John 20:26-29). We must also remember that while a 'miracle' can confirm faith, the need for a miracle can be a rebuke to unbelief (Lk. 8:22-25), and it can lead to an attitude that always looks for a miracle and we become more dependent on the 'sign' than on Jesus. Being amazed, fascinated and excited by the extra-ordinary is not the same as being built up in faith and increasing in understanding of God and His Word. We have to see clearly in these verses the emphasis Paul puts on the centrality of hearing and understanding God's Word. Whether we regard prophecy in terms of a charismatic gift, God's Word coming directly from Spirit-inspired messengers (the canon of Scripture being not yet given and completed), or in terms of God's

Word being preached, expounded and applied in the ongoing biblical ministry of the church, the vital thing is to hear and understand what God is saying. Whether it is the Christian believer, or the indifferent or seeking outsider, all need to hear God's Word laying bare the truth about sin, salvation, life in Christ, sanctification, service and the realities of Heaven and Hell. It is in the context of preaching the Word that the Holy Spirit does His work of conviction and conversion (John 16:7-11). Faith comes by the hearing of the Word (Rom. 10:17). It is the work of the Spirit to quicken and make alive the person dead in sin (Eph. 2:1-6). We need to recover the sense of purpose and spiritual dynamic involved whenever we gather for worship and ministry. We are meeting with God. There is to be a 'divine encounter' and this is what Paul said regarding his ministry in Thessalonica. The preaching was none other than the coming of the powerful Word of God and it was received as such (1 Thess. 2:13). Paul is suggesting that in Corinth this meeting with God and hearing God was being obscured and hindered by their preoccupation with the gifts of the Spirit. This could have serious results, as Heb. 2:1-3; 4:1-2 makes plain.

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### **14:26-33**

These verses refer to the congregation gathered for public worship and Paul, describing what has been going on in Corinth, obviously seeks to set some sort of order. He is not setting forth a pattern for church services, saying this is how it should be Sunday by Sunday, but insisting that all activity and behaviour in church should be worthy, seemly and the opposite of confusion (33,40). If we link v.26 with v.32 we begin to see that some, perhaps many, who gathered came feeling they were 'God's gift' to the church and were instantly seeking place and opportunity to express their gifts. Such was the insistent competition that several, perhaps many, were all speaking at once, some in intelligible language and some in tongues. The chaos can be imagined. Was this edifying? If not, it was out of order (26b). Hunger for God's Word (1 Pet. 2:1-3 AV), growing in grace and in knowledge (2 Pet. 3:18), and being built up in faith personally and as a church were the priorities (Jude 20, 21). A claim to be inspired by the Holy Spirit is not necessarily a warrant to speak in church. There is such a thing as the gift of humility, and Paul emphasises this in v.30. There must be no self-seeking, no insistence that 'I' must be given the platform. Think, for example, in a long established Prayer Meeting how very seldom two people begin to pray at the same time and how, if it does happen, one will instantly give way or even both will fall silent and after a pause perhaps someone else will pray. There is no disorder, no confusion and the saints are not faced with trying to listen to two or more people praying at the same time. How could anyone say an Amen of concurrence in a confused situation like that? There is great challenge to pride and self-display in Paul's words in v.32. There is no compulsion in the constraint and leading of the Spirit. Just because a man or woman 'feels' the Spirit, that does not justify his or her speaking there and then, expecting the whole church to listen in awed silence.

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### **14:26-33**

It seems that everyone in Corinth wanted to 'do' something in the service for worship and this can lead to a situation of 'all Chiefs and no Indians'. Perhaps some felt the need simply to be led in worship and to be ministered to but, from Paul's words about edification, these people tended to be forgotten. The pattern in Corinth was not one where the 'leader' of the fellowship appointed beforehand or called at the time for various people to take part. That happens in many places but it is not necessarily more helpful nor more spiritual than places where a 'minister', who is simply the first among equals, leads the whole service. It is, in fact, often the case that those most equipped humanly and spiritually to 'do' things are those most eager to be ministered to and to be led through the service in orderly, seemly worship where the focus is not upon any man but upon God. It is also often the case that those who most insist on 'doing' things are those who sit lightly to the church Prayer Meeting. Paul is very strict about the exercise of 'tongues' in gathered congregation, regulating the number so that the particular 'gift' would not obtrude or distract. If the person with the gift of tongues knew beforehand that someone with the gift of interpretation was to be present, could not the 'translation' have been made before the service, or would the two people want it to be seen that they were 'gifted'? The words about keeping silent and speaking to 'himself' and to God are very pointed. In v.29 Paul is not insisting that two or three prophets should speak, but restricting it to two or three 'sermons', no doubt brief. The picture is almost one of 'discussion' and it is not clear if there was someone to 'chair' the discussion. It is all too easy for discussion to become competition,

or for it to be dominated by one strong-minded person. In that kind of situation there is little learning and less encouragement. No one is compelled to speak (32) and when too many do, the result tends to be confusion.

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### 14:34-36

These verses are the focus of a great deal of controversy and arouse intense feeling because they seem to devalue women. We commented on this issue in the Notes on 11:2-16 (July 10th-13th) and we do not intend to engage in debate on an issue that has caused many books to be written. Two things must first be emphasised. In v.33b the phrase, 'As in all the churches,' indicates that already in apostolic times and with apostolic authority and example there was an established and accepted pattern. The second thing to keep in mind when controversy arises is that it is both wrong and dangerous and leads to all sorts of confusions when we say that Paul's words here are 'time-bounded', applying only to the imbalances and cultural attitudes of his own day. That would be to depart from the inspiration and authority of Scripture and could lead on, for example, to saying that the Commandments about adultery or that regarding the Sabbath or Lord's Day were no longer applicable to our day. This would lead to an attitude that picks and chooses which parts of Scripture are to be believed and obeyed, which are convenient, and which can be ignored. It is also an important principle in handling Scripture that we must never interpret any one statement in a way that contradicts another Scripture. Now, when Paul says in Gal. 3:26-28 that there is no difference between men and women he is speaking in the context of the ground and basis of salvation. All are saved in the same way by faith in Christ. But when Paul speaks here in Corinthians and again in 1 Tim. 2:11-12, he is dealing with church order, how things should be handled in the public administration of God's House. It is clear from v.36 that Paul is rebuking the Corinthian church for taking its own line in this matter, and, no doubt, saying that the behaviour of some of the women in the congregation would certainly be so misunderstood in the city that it would be a hindrance to the Gospel. We are into the realm of yielding rights, or what we may feel are our rights, for the Gospel's sake.

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### 14:34-36

Following on from yesterday's note we need only look at several references to see quite clearly that the last thing Paul would do would be to denigrate, devalue, or regard as second-rate the persons and service of those women who had worked with him in the partnership of the Gospel (Phil. 4:3; Rom. 16:1,2). Before we jump to conclusions and pronounce on the issue of the particular kinds of service women should engage in in the church, we should remember that at the beginning of the human story in the Garden of Eden it was a refusal of God's way and God's pattern that introduced confusion and disaster into God's order of creation (Gen. 3:1-13, 17-19). The teaching of Scripture, as we have seen makes plain that the man is the head of the woman and therefore the woman should not rule over the man whether openly or surreptitiously! But this requires the man to be true to his manhood, and if he refuses then a new situation is created and the work of God must go on. The predominance of women on the mission field is both an exposure of and a rebuke to Christian men. We must recognise that godly evangelical people hold different views on this whole subject and we do well to preface our statements with the words, 'as far as I understand, Scripture teaches....' The silence enjoined by Paul in today's verses is not specified. Does it refer to distracting chatter, or to women taking over the preaching, or to women taking part in prayer in services or in the Prayer Meeting? If the context is the meeting for prayer, women are not forbidden to pray but they are entitled to expect that the men will take the lead, especially on those occasions when it seems hard to do the work of intercession. Women who are unmarried or whose husbands are unconverted may well raise questions about v.35a. If we press v.35b to extreme we would never hear a woman's voice, not even in the singing of hymns! Perhaps we should think of men as well as women who are determined to be 'out front' and to have what they think is place and power. All who want their voices heard should remember that 'speakers' are more sternly judged than others (Jas. 3:1-10).

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### 14:37-40

It has been necessary, and we trust helpful, to consider all these issues even though clear and categorical answers have not been given. At least we have tried to think things through, but it is a relief to come to the end of the chapter. From the end of v.36 it is clear that attitude lies at the heart of most vexed issues. The

Corinthians were astonishingly sure of their own spirituality and thus of their actions, even if they were out of step with the rest of the churches. Some of these people had not been Christians for long, but already they felt wiser than their teachers and that is never a good sign. Paul challenges them (37), saying that, if they are as spiritual as they think, then they will recognise and acknowledge that he is speaking by the Spirit and with the command of God. It follows then that if people do not recognise this they themselves will not be recognised by the church or by God. The meaning of v.38 is not clear, but there may be an emphasis to the effect that if the church in Corinth failed to acknowledge and to live by the Word of God then it would be ignored by the city in which it was set. Think of our own generation and how the church is largely ignored. It is not even persecuted, although it is often scorned. The reason, or part of the reason, is that the church no longer seems to speak out the authentic Word of God with the authority and conviction of the Holy Spirit. For a variety of reasons and in a variety of ways the church has come to be regarded as a woman's association, and the trend to conform to the attitudes of society and to obliterate the distinctions in function between men and women in the church seems likely to confirm this. The faithful women in one congregation said, 'If we have women elders, the men will do even less than they do now!' Paul ends this discussion still refusing to create a situation of confrontation. He has said enough. He insists that all should be seemly and worthy, and in this he reveals his deep love for the church of Christ. In his other epistles he makes plain that the Christ who loved the church was the Christ who yielded all his rights in order to be Servant (Eph. 5: 25-27; Phil. 2:5-8).

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### 15:1-2

Our studies have shown that the church in Corinth, while not lacking in spiritual enthusiasm, was at times in error regarding moral issues and was also unbalanced regarding spiritual issues. Now it becomes evident that in matters of basic Christian doctrine they were uncertain and needed to be brought back to basic, fundamental truths. If we look on to v.12, we will see that inside the membership of the church there were already some denying the fact of the bodily resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ while still regarding themselves as authentic Christian believers. Paul was determined to show them, and to show us in our generation, that no-one is allowed to re-write the Gospel. We either believe or we do not believe, and the historical fact of the resurrection is absolutely fundamental. That the resurrection was being doubted, let alone denied, is remarkable when we remember that this epistle was being written only twenty-five years after the events of the Cross and the empty tomb. Unbelief is a virulent disease and it can enter and permeate the body of the church very quickly and with disastrous results. Of course, the fact of the resurrection is so remarkable and the implications so glorious that they can seem almost too good to be true. This was the reaction of the disciples when it happened. They were so happy they could not believe it (Lk. 24:41). They were rebuked for their unbelief (Lk. 24:25-27). They had to be reassured again and again (Lk. 24:36-43) and, in the story of doubting Thomas, the importance of believing, of accepting by faith this marvellous fact, was made totally clear (Jn. 20:26-29). Paul had already made plain that in his life and ministry the resurrection was fundamental (2:2) and now he deals with the subject in great and wonderful detail.

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### 15:1-2

The greatest danger to the church is not when persecution arises but when false doctrine begins to be established inside the church. Right from apostolic times it was necessary to contend for the faith (Jude 3). Some denied the coming again of Christ in His glory (2 Thess. 2:1-2). Some denied the resurrection and desolated other Christians (2 Tim. 2:17-18). All sorts of winds of doctrine blew in the church (Eph. 4:14) and for this reason Paul instructed the young minister Timothy to keep on bringing people back to the Word of God so that their lives would be founded on truth, not on lies or mere speculations (2 Tim. 4:1-5). This is exactly what Paul does here, reminding the Corinthians of the content of the Gospel message which was preached among them and which brought them to faith in Christ. His words are a clear challenge as he asks them if they still stand by the message which brought them salvation. If they have stepped aside from that message, then Paul suggests that their faith, or rather, their profession of faith, had been in vain. It is not enough to look back to some point in time when, in response to the preaching of the Gospel, we made a decision. The crucial thing is, 'Where do we stand now?' There is a particular challenge here to those who are called to preach. Do we now have reservations or doubts about the Gospel message that first convicted us of the need of salvation and brought us to Christ, to

forgiveness, and to sure hope of Heaven? There are ministers who in personal conversation would confess that they are 'saved', or if the language offends them, would say clearly that they trust Christ for salvation, life and Heaven. But some of these ministers when they preach Sunday by Sunday do not impress on their people that they need salvation. Too many ministers simply assume (with little evidence to confirm it) that all who listen Sunday by Sunday are in fact Christians. What we all need to do with this daily reading is to go back in thought to when we first believed the Gospel and confessed our faith in Christ. Then we must ask if we still stand there, and if we have grown in grace.

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### 15:3-7

Paul affirms that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a historical fact. It was the raising from the dead of the physical, dead body of the man who died on the Cross. It was not a 'spiritual' resurrection, nor just a case of Jesus living on in the memories of the apostles and disciples. The Gospel records make plain that the central fact was an empty grave and the presence with them of Jesus alive from the dead, persuading them by touch as well as word they were not seeing a ghost (Lk. 24:36-43). Paul lists instances of Christ's appearing after the resurrection, and while the testimony of one or two independent 'sightings' might be doubted, the evidence of five hundred is powerfully conclusive. It is interesting, and perhaps surprising, that Paul does not mention the appearances to the women (Lk. 23:55-24:11). But of course, at the time, the men scorned the women's testimony, possibly regarding it as emotional, wishful thinking. It would not be surprising if some of the women in the church at Corinth pointed out this fact and asked how this could be reconciled with the business of keeping the women silent! Paul's clear emphasis that Jesus 'suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried' (The Apostles Creed) was necessary because there were those then, as there are people and sects today, who said that Jesus did not really die, but was taken down from the Cross deeply unconscious. Of course, if He did not really die, then there was no resurrection. If He did not die, then there was no atoning death to pay the price of sin. The whole Gospel begins to crumble. But the soldiers of Pilate made sure Jesus had died (Jn. 19:31-37). Salvation was secured (Heb. 9:12). The resurrection was the public authentication or demonstration of the fact, and it was this that Peter preached on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:22-24; 4:5-12). Christ is risen. This is fact, whether or not He lives in our hearts. Our experience of Christ (and our awareness of this fluctuates) is not the foundation of our faith. We stand by faith on historical facts.

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### 15:3-7

This is the second time in this epistle that Paul speaks of passing on what he had received from the Lord, cf 11:23ff, and he is clearly emphasising that the message did not have its origin in him but in God (Gal. 1:11-12). When he uses the phrase 'according to the Scriptures' he does not mean simply that the Bible records the facts, but that both the death and resurrection of Christ have to be understood in accord with the teaching of Scripture and that, of course, means the Old Testament Scriptures because the New Testament was not yet written. Paul affirms that the death of Christ is not to be spoken of simply as a display of God's love, nor as an example of how love suffers at the hands of evil men. He affirms that it is of first importance to recognise that the death of Jesus Christ was in relation to our sins, and that it must be understood in relation to the Old Testament. This is what Jesus Himself insisted on in the story of the Emmaus Road (Lk. 24:25-27,44-47). This was the significance of John the Baptist's testimony when he named Jesus as the Lamb of God (John 1:29, 35-36). God's appointed spotless Lamb was slain at the time of the Exodus to give both safety and deliverance to His people (Exod. 12:1-13). Right through the Old Testament forms of worship there was emphasis on the sacrificial lamb whose death was the sacrifice for sin to make atonement, to effect reconciliation. The lamb took the place of the guilty sinner. It was a substitutionary death. The Epistle to the Hebrews, written to encourage Jewish believers in Christ, takes up the pattern of Old Testament worship and says, 'Look: what was promised in the Old Testament was fulfilled in Jesus' death and resurrection' (Heb. 9:1-14,23-26; 10:11-14). The Cross was not a stop-gap emergency measure. It was promised and prepared for. Does the Old Testament speak of resurrection? The High Priest of Israel, after making the atoning sacrifice, came out again to the people, otherwise they would not have known that the sacrifice had been accepted. Consider Job 19:25-27; Ps. 16:8-11, quoted in Acts 2:25-28; Ps. 49:14-15; Isa. 53:10-12; Dan. 12:2. Jesus used Jonah 1:17 to speak of His resurrection (Matt. 12: 38-40).

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## 15:8-11

Having spoken of the resurrection in terms of historical fact which has to be understood in terms of the Scriptures, Paul now speaks of the resurrection in relation to his own experience. We must not forget, of course, that the God-given New Testament Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:16-17) must also be the basis on which we understand the significance of the resurrection. Consider Acts 2:32-36; 17:30-31; 24:14-15; Rom. 5:22-25; 6:1-11; 8:11, 31-34; Heb. 7:25; 1 Pet. 1:3-5. The whole of the New Testament throbs with the fact, the significance and the power of the resurrection. Indeed the experience of conversion, coming to faith in Christ, even though the actual experience is very different from what happened to Paul on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:1-9), is spoken of as being raised from a condition of being spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1, 4,5). Every conversion is a resurrection miracle. Note how Paul refers to his personal meeting with the risen Christ as being not 'normal' (v.8). It was an unusual spiritual birth. There may be reference here to some of the horrid slanders hurled against Paul and his ministry, people saying, 'so far from being born again, Paul was an abortion.' (Barclay) More likely there is reference to and defence of Paul's apostolic calling and authority. The apostles were men who had seen Jesus and had walked with Him. Paul testifies that he had seen the risen Christ; that he had been spoken to by the risen Christ; and that he had seen and learned the lordship of the risen Christ. He says the risen Christ came to him, met him, and spoke to him just as He had done to the others. Paul does not in any way suggest he was an inferior or second-rate apostle whose words, counsel and rebuke could be disregarded. That is clear from 2 Cor. 11:5 and Gal. 2:11. But we learn more from Paul's testimony tomorrow.

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## 15:8-11

The thing that moved Paul deeply and made him such a servant of the Gospel was not his 'position' or people's recognition of it but rather the fact that Christ had laid hold on him and called him to the privilege of being His servant. He had a genuine sense of unworthiness and deep regrets about his past, because he had been such a bitter persecutor of the church. He had realised on the road to Damascus that his enmity had in fact been against the person of Christ (Acts 9:4). This sense of unworthiness stayed with Paul right through his ministry and in fact increased, as Eph. 3:8 and 1 Tim. 1:12-16 makes plain. This does not mean in any sense that Paul devalued his apostleship. How could he? He had been called to it by the Lord Himself. But he did freely acknowledge that all he was in his person and all he had ever accomplished in service was the gift and work of God's grace. The impact of God's grace on him caused him to work hard, to the point of weariness, and something of the cost of that is seen in some of the language he uses. He speaks of travailling in birth until Christ is formed in others (Gal. 4:19). He speaks of carrying in his very body the dying of the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:7-12). He speaks of suffering all manner of indignities rather than let the Gospel be hindered (2 Cor. 6:3-10). He shows how totally his person and life were involved in the service of the Gospel in 2 Cor. 11:21b-30. Aware of his great debt to Christ and aware of the honour and privilege of being called to be His and His servant, Paul was ready to wear out his life for Jesus and the Gospel. But again (10b) he affirms that the praise should not be given to him, because it was all of God's grace. Paul was aware that some questioned his apostleship, some despised his person and his ministry (2 Cor. 10:1, 10), some preached with wrong motives, seeking to hurt him (Phil. 1:15-18). But the great thing was that Christ was preached and these Corinthians had believed. Paul was prepared to be nothing so that Christ could be everything. There is a principle of service in the words of John 3:30.

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## 15:12-19

Read these verses slowly and carefully and see what the situation was and how Paul dealt with it. The resurrection was central to the preaching of the Gospel and by that Gospel people were saved and brought into the church. But there were already in the church those who denied the resurrection. Now, an evil heart of unbelief which draws people away from God is always to be guarded against (Heb. 3:12-14). Unbelief is always associated with doubt regarding what God has said. That began in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:1). But why should this unbelief manifest itself in the church, especially in a congregation so enthusiastic about spiritual gifts? There were in religious society before the Gospel came the Sadducees who rigorously refused to believe in the ideas of resurrection, the life to come, or anything miraculous (Acts 23:6-8). In secular society there was the accepted idea of the immortality of the soul (whatever they meant by that) but no belief in the idea of the

resurrection of the body. There are always those who, if they cannot understand a concept nor tabulate it scientifically, refuse to believe it exists. All these worldly attitudes influence people's thinking more than they realise and this is why we, in Christ's church, need to have our minds taught and directed constantly by what God has said and revealed so that we will think as believers and not as unbelievers (Rom. 12:1-2). Paul challenges these unbelievers inside the church by pointing out that they are denying a historical fact (13). If the fact of Christ's resurrection is refused, there is no Gospel, no Christianity, no point in preaching, and the 'faith' of those people denying the resurrection was worthless: the whole thing is a charade, a hoax. No doubt in Corinth, as in the church of our own day, some of the preachers did not believe in the resurrection, and said openly that it did not matter if the bones of Jesus were still buried somewhere in Palestine. If that be so, then, said Paul, these preachers and all the apostles are frauds, perjuring themselves by bearing false witness (15).

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### 15:12-19

Paul is devastating and direct in his argument. We cannot preach good news of Christ alive for evermore if He has not been raised from the dead. If all we have is a dead Christ, and His death took place long, long ago, then we may have memories of Him but we cannot say He is with us. We cannot believe it is true when Jesus said, 'Lo, I am with you always (Matt. 28:18-20). We cannot sing about not being afraid when we go through the dark valley of death because we cannot say He is with us. If Christ has not been raised, then death claimed and kept the only sinless man who ever lived and there is no hope at all for sinners such as we are (Acts 2:22-24). If there is no resurrection then we are still in our sins (17), accountable to God for them with no hope of forgiveness. We are victims of our own personalities and trapped in hopeless circumstances. Those who have lived and died in faith have died to perish eternally if there is no resurrection. If this life is all that there is (19), then we are indeed to be pitied. There is nothing for us but to eat, drink and try to be merry because tomorrow (and it may be as soon as that, cf Luke 12:20) we die. The picture is bleak. 'Death is the end of life, Ah, why should life all labour be?' (Tennyson). To deny the resurrection is not just a theological or philosophical game, it is to demolish the Christian message, to extinguish the Christian light and hope, to leave men and women living their lives moving resolutely to ever increasing darkness. The sad thing is that is exactly how many people do live. They have nothing now and nothing to come. Some would like to think there is something beyond the grave; some hope there is; the Christian declares that there is because Christ is risen. Read Jesus' words in John 11:25, 26. Little wonder the Christian sings, 'O death, we defy thee! a stronger than thou path entered thy palace; we fear thee not now!' (Plunket)

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### 15:20-28

Paul has dealt with the resurrection in terms of historical fact (1-7); personal experience (8-11); the Gospel message (12-19); and now he deals with the resurrection in terms of the purposes of God. We are compelled to think on a broader scale than our own personal experience because, in Christ, we are caught up into a plan, programme and purpose that are vast, sweeping through history into eternity. The resurrection was not the conclusion or terminus of God's activity. In His resurrection Jesus Christ is the first fruits, the token or guarantee of the final harvest or gathering in of all those who have lived and died in faith. The glorious fact of the resurrection is the full answer to the fact of death which has blighted and darkened human experience since Adam first sinned (Rom. 5:12; Heb. 2:14-15). We have to see here the total answer that Christ is and that He brings to the disaster and death that came by human sin. It is thrilling to see here how Paul fixes all attention on Jesus, His death and resurrection. Jesus Christ is indeed the answer. Newman expresses it perfectly in the words of the hymn: 'O loving wisdom of our God! when all was sin and shame, a second Adam to the fight and to the rescue came.' And what a rescue it is! We go where Christ has gone; we are led along in His triumphal procession (2 Cor. 2:14 NIV); the issue is no longer in doubt. Wesley, as he so often does, gives us the words of truth to sing with glad enthusiasm, and it is a pity we tend to keep them to Easter. Every Sunday is a celebration of the resurrection Gospel. 'Soar we now where Christ has led, following our exalted head; made like Him, like Him we rise, ours the Cross, the grave, the skies.' Christ's resurrection is our resurrection, but it does not all happen at once (23). Christ's resurrection was at the watershed of history; ours will be at His coming again.

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## 15:20-28

The full details of what we are being taught are beyond us and in the final day of resurrection there will be amazing discoveries. Of course, as Paul teaches in 1 Thess. 4:13-18, in the end some believers will not in fact go through the experience of death. Perhaps this is meant to make us think of the irrelevance of death. It is an intrusion into God's order of things and Christ came to abolish death, to give it its notice of redundancy (2 Tim. 1:10). This is both comfort and hope because there is in human nature not only a fear of death but a resentment at death, the spoiler of all that is meant by life. But the resurrection does not mean that all men and women will automatically share in Christ's victory. All die, but it is all who believe in Christ unto salvation who will live in Him and with Him. Jesus made this plain in John 5:28-29. Paul does not deal here with those who refuse to believe nor with those who have never heard the Gospel. Mystery and ignorance remain, but when baffled or burdened we rest in this: 'Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?' (Gen. 18:25). When Paul speaks of the end in v.24, he speaks also of a completed work and kingdom and we have to be quite clear that he is thinking of climax and victory. Too many Christians seem to think as worldly people do of the experience of the world running down to disintegration and nothing-ness. The dread theme used to be 'The Bomb'; now it is pollution and the ozone layer. But the theme of the believer is that we look for a whole new order of existence freed from the blight of sin, death and disorder (2 Pet. 3:13). The message of the resurrection refuses to allow us to be pessimists. We look for the complete victory and establishment of God's eternal kingdom. When we pray, 'Thy will be done on earth even as it is in Heaven,' we are not simply expressing an earnest desire, we are stating a fact that cannot be denied.

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## 15:20-28

There is wonderful relief and hope in the thought of every form of evil power and person being finally dealt with and put away (24b). It may seem stern, but if we have once seen what evil can do to human lives we will be glad of its final judgment. In v.25 we have the fact stated that Christ reigns now and will continue to reign, exercising His authority and power in ceaseless war against all the enemies of God and man. When faced with all the battlements of personal experience and world experience we must shelter in this: He reigns. The Devil does not reign. Men, philosophies, economics do not reign. The Risen Lord reigns, far above principalities and powers, exercising His power in the interest of the church (Eph. 1:15-23). We must not think that it is at some point in the future that Christ will reign. God has already given to Him the name to which every knee in Heaven, earth and under the earth must bow (Phil. 2:9-11). He is indeed Lord, and all power has been given unto Him (Matt. 28:16-20). We do not yet see all things put under Christ but we believe, and we are assured that the issue is never in doubt. In v.27-28 Paul seems to be speaking of the order and harmony of the eternal Trinity. We are told of the glorious and willing submission of the Son to the Father. Having won the kingdom by His glorious victory as 'God's proper man', He says in sweet and contented humility, 'Father, I have finished the work you gave me to do,' (John 17:4 AV). We see the same triumphant humility in the words from the Cross, 'It is finished....Father into Thy hands....'What an example of humble obedience to all who follow Him! The RSV translation, 'That God may be everything to everyone' is pedantic and heavy, but both AV and NIV get the 'feeling' right and read, 'That God may be all in all.' That certainly accords with the great doxology in Rom. 11:33-36. Jesus, as true man, demonstrates that the chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. (Shorter Catechism; cf John 17:1, 4)

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## 15:29-34

This section deals with resurrection and conduct, and Paul seems to be asking what is the point of battling and struggling to be faithful in Christian life and service if there is no resurrection. It is the reality of the world to come that gives meaning, evaluation and interpretation to the costly experiences of this life. We are faced at once with the baffling statement of v.29 regarding the practice of being baptised on behalf of the dead. The very many explanations or interpretations signify that no-one really knows what the verse means. The Mormons seem to use this verse for their practice of searching out relatives long dead and someone actually being baptised 'for' them, so making them Mormons and securing their 'salvation'. It may be that in the confused thinking of the church at Corinth some believers were worried about the eternal destiny and welfare of those

who, having trusted Christ for salvation, had by accident or martyrdom died before they could be publicly baptised. But this would give to a ceremony like baptism a magical significance of power. Some suggest Paul is asking what Christian martyrs gain by their 'baptism' of blood if there is no resurrection. Some suggest there was a practice of being baptised on or at the site of the graves of martyrs. Some say simply, 'What is the point of baptism at all if the resurrection is fiction?' No-one can say what exactly this practice was, or what people meant by it. There is no indication that Paul approved of it. He is simply pointing to a certain piece of religious behaviour or sentiment or superstition and saying that it has not a shred of significance if there is no resurrection. He seems to be looking back to v.12 and to the clear fact that some in the church at Corinth were doubting and denying the fact of the resurrection. Paul then goes on to speak of other areas of Christian experience.

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### **15:29-34**

It cost Paul a great deal in terms of scorn, criticism, rejection, and suffering to be faithful to Christ and His service. He says that he died daily to human comfort, reputation, acceptability and ambition. Everything had to go for Jesus' sake, and everything actually went, as he testifies in Phil. 3:7-11. He speaks of dangers again and again and refers to being thrown to wild beasts at Ephesus; whether the lions in the arena or the equally savage human beasts. What is the point of all that if there is no resurrection and no life to come? Paul is quite clear that it was for the joy set before Him that Jesus endured the Cross (Heb. 12:2). The 'eat and drink' way of life had neither appeal nor value for Paul, and in our own day when you look at the faces of people going home after 'a good night out' you cannot but wonder why they spend so much money 'enjoying themselves', because even before 'the morning after' they look so miserable. Isaiah 55:1-3 poses a good question. The affirmation in v.33 is certainly true and should make us examine our choice of friends and companions. But why does Paul introduce this subject here? He seems to be referring to those who are in fact denying the resurrection, and he is insisting that professing Christians who begin to qualify and deny the facts of the Gospel are dangerous people to be too close to. After all, what we believe or do not believe affects both actual behaviour and the essential influence of our lives. Paul calls the Christians to come to their senses, to wake up to their responsibilities to witness to a lost world that is dying without Christ. If there is creeping unbelief in our companions and we allow their influence to draw us away from living commitment to Christ and His service, making excuses for our companions' unbelief, then we are sinning. It is as serious as that.

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### **15:35-41**

The thought of Heaven has little appeal to many people, including Christians, because from childhood they have been taught of Heaven in terms of some ethereal, non-substantial existence with cherubs and angels playing harps. It sounds unreal and dull. This is the impression given when we speak of the immortality of the soul, but that is not the Christian doctrine. We believe in the resurrection of the body and this indicates the substantial nature of the life to come. It is through our recognisable bodies that our personalities and identities are expressed and just as there is a vast variety of personality and expression, even within families, here on earth so there will be in Heaven. But there is a difference. For various reasons, heredity, conditioning and circumstances, many people, perhaps most people, find a real frustration in life, feeling inhibited and unable 'to be themselves' as they long to be, feeling that there is much more to themselves and to life than has ever been realised. What Paul begins to expound now in speaking of the resurrection body is the glorious prospect of the full expression of all our human potential, set free from all limitations. Many would testify that since coming to Christ they have been set free to be themselves; they have been given back their personalities; and they have found fulfilment they (and other people) never thought possible. When we look forward to the life to come and to the possession of our resurrection bodies, we begin to realise we shall be able to be our true selves in a way never possible here on earth. This is what Paul says in Phil. 1:23; 3:21; and 2 Cor. 5:1-8. In today's verses he begins to answer the question posed genuinely by the Corinthians: 'What is Heaven like?' It is difficult to imagine it. It is spoken of in Revelation in glorious technicolour pictures and in appealing negatives (Rev. 21:1-4; 22:1-5). Paul will help us to think and to begin to be glad.

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## 15:35-41

Paul seems to say it is foolish and certainly misguided to try to visualise life in Heaven simply in terms of life here on earth. He uses an illustration from agriculture. The seed that is sown is valuable and has the germ of life in it. But that seed planted dies and from it grows not a mere replica of a single seed but a full head of grain. The wheat seed becomes the fully ripe harvest of wheat. The final is greater in every way than the beginning. Then, Paul insists, just as there are many varieties of seeds and each grows true to itself, so it will be in Heaven. There will be infinite variety, not monotonous sameness. The bare kernel that is now will be given a body chosen, prepared and ordained by God. Note that the emphasis is on the power and activity of God. It is God who raises the dead. In v.39-41 Paul emphasises the fact and principle of differentiation. Each body is fitted to serve the purpose for which it was created. Think of how we see, in the newspapers, an artist's impression of some new project. It is interesting and we feel it will be good. Then when we see the project completed it is far better than we imagined. We may have a painting on the wall but always feel a little dissatisfied. Then we get a new, more appropriate frame and we are amazed by the difference. A lady may be looking for a new outfit, tries one on, looks in the mirror and rejects it saying, 'It does nothing for me.' The right outfit will show off the personality of the wearer. We speak of some old people, saying they have great spirit but they feel it never really gets expressed because their bodies and faculties are going done. In Christ, we shall one day be given our new resurrection bodies. There will be continuity with our unique personalities here on earth but life will be richer, service greater, and fellowship sweeter. It is something to look forward to with thrill. It does not yet appear what we shall be (1 John 3:2). The experience may well be like that of a blind person seeing colour for the first time. Sat. 10th 15:42-50 From v.35 Paul is dealing with the whole idea of our resurrection bodies and in v.42 he takes up again the idea of seed being sown in order to produce the full corn. Our present bodies are both limited and perishable. They do not last and we get frustrated with their limitations. The bodies we shall have will be full of vigour and free from limitation and decay. We must also remember that it is through the body that all manner of temptations come to work their decaying results. It will not be so in Heaven. All that we mean by our besetting sins, our problems and phobias will be gone forever. How often our bodies with their appetites and inclinations let us down and lead us into dishonour. Our 'lowly' bodies, our bodies of humiliation, will be transformed (Phil. 3:2 1). We will still be ourselves, but we will be different. There will be capacity and ability which may never have been glimpsed or thought possible here on earth, even though they may have been there, latent, inhibited and frustrated (43b). However reverently a body may be laid to rest or cremated, we are more aware of denial than of honour. But we look forward to a resurrection body which will be a perfect vehicle for the expression of all that we are in Christ. It will perhaps help to think of Jesus. He had a natural body, born of Mary, a true and totally human man, but in His resurrection He had a new, spiritual body which was not less than human and He still companied with His disciples and ate ordinary food with them (Lk. 24:36-43; Jn. 21: 9-14). Think of the wonderful way Paul speaks of this in Rom. 6:4-11, a passage we should return to again and again to see the full glory of our salvation. Today's passage goes on to contrast the first and the last Adam, verses that many sermons could be preached on, and they end with the affirmation that mere flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God. Jesus pointed this out to Nicodemus in John 3:3-7.

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## 15:42-50

J H Newman's hymn speaks of our salvation in glorious terms, pointing to how 'A second Adam to the fight and to the rescue came.' It is indeed a wonderful picture, making it so clear that God's Man came and in a human life triumphed in the very area where the first Adam failed. In a somewhat different way Paul here contrasts the two men, the first and the last Adam. The first man, by the act of God became a living being. The last Adam, who is Christ, became not just a copy of the first, not just a pattern for all who follow, but a life-giving spirit. He is the source of life, the giver of life, a totally new and eternal life. By faith in Christ we live in His risen life. This thrills Paul and he says in Gal. 2:20 'I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me.' As natural descendants of Adam we are made of the dust and to dust we shall return (Gen. 3:19). The bodies we have will wear out, no matter how we care for them. But in Christ, the life we have in Him will bear the image or pattern of His heavenly, incorruptible, imperishable body. We are speaking here of eternal life which is life of a totally different quality, not just this old 'Adam' life prolonged indefinitely. When Paul speaks of the physical coming first and then the spiritual, he may be pointing out that what he is saying is not an excuse for escapism, an ignoring of the human, ordinary, present-day life with all its hazards and demands, as well as pleasures and satisfactions. This present

life has a positive relation to and effect on the life to come. 'The life above, when this is past, is the ripe fruit of life below' (Bonar). Paul has already spoken of this in 1 Cor. 3:10-15, and he deals with it again in 2 Cor. 5:1-10. All we mean by life now and life to come is in Christ (John 1:4); He is the life (John 14:6); and in Him life is ours to the full (John 10:10). If we want to know what the life of the resurrection is like we must look at Jesus, and we must look to Jesus. All our hope is in Him. He, and no other, is the resurrection and the life (John 11:25).

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### 15:51-56

Perhaps we should read quickly through the whole chapter to sense the build-up of its teaching. The whole movement points forward to the glory, victory, life and service of the world to come. Paul's words, 'I tell you this,' compel us to look right into the face of death in order to claim the victory. The statement in v.50 about flesh and blood not only points to the need to be born again (see note on Saturday 10th), it also emphasises that it will not be as mere flesh and blood that we enter the kingdom. We must not have crude ideas of resurrection as being the reconstitution of our earthly dust. We shall be changed. In v.51 there is again emphasis: Lo! Behold! Think clearly and radically. Read along with today's verses 1 Thess. 4:13-18. It is stated very clearly that many believers will still be alive when Christ comes again in His full resurrection glory. We must never forget the fact of the Lord's personal return. Read Acts 1:9-11. This same Jesus shall come again. Read Rev. 1:7: every eye shall see Him. This is not a secret coming to gather to Himself His ransomed people. It will be a tremendous occasion. For many, death will be bypassed. But note how Paul takes away from us the grimness of the spectre of death. He refers to us as being asleep in Jesus. The great moment of final resurrection will come suddenly, unexpectedly, quickly (Matt. 24:42; 25:13; Rev. 1:7; 22:7, 12, 20). Paul says he is telling us a mystery. It is something no-one could have worked out for themselves from a human standpoint and this is why many reject the whole idea of resurrection and the coming again of the Lord Jesus Christ. They seek to reduce everything to the scale of finite minds. What a picture is painted in the words, 'the dead in Christ shall rise first' (1 Thess. 4:16), and will be raised imperishable. We shall be changed (what a relief), 'changed from glory into glory' (Wesley). Little wonder that we shall cast our crowns before Him, lost in wonder, love and praise.

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### 15:51-56

We have thought of death being bypassed and left as irrelevant. We have thought of being raised incorruptible and complete. Perhaps to help us understand and to get the 'feel' of the passage we should think of Jesus at the grave of Lazarus, speaking the word of command in an individual situation and causing death to give up its captive (John 11:38-44). Think of the story of the Cross and the reference to the graves opening and their captives going free (Matt. 27:51-53). Think also of the words of Jesus in John 5:25-29. We must never forget there will be a resurrection of the just and the unjust (Acts 24:14, 15), and that God has given notice of the day of judgment by raising Jesus from the dead (Acts 17:30, 31). Too often we forget that after death comes the judgment (Heb. 9:27). But Paul's emphasis here is not on the judgment of the ungodly, nor on the judgment for reward or loss of Christians in relation to their lives and service here on earth. It is the victory and the fulfilment he thrills to. In earlier verses he spoke of seed growing to harvest fullness but here his words 'in a moment' indicate it will not be a long drawn-out affair. It will be sudden transformation and we will be in the world to come, in the presence of Christ and in the full shining of God, who is light and who dwells in light no-one can approach (1 John 1:5; 1 Tim. 6:16). Will we be ready for that or will we have regrets? The trumpet will sound, not in warning, but in summons to great festivity. 'Come, for the feast is spread. All is now ready.' (Matt. 22:1-4) Think of how we love to sing at the Lord's Table about the Lamb's great bridal feast of bliss and love. What a day of rejoicing it will be!

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### 15:51-56

Twice Paul says that we shall be changed (51, 52). There is no doubt about it. The seal and guarantee have been given (Eph. 1:12-14) and the Holy Spirit within our hearts kindles and confirms the hope. As we read v.53, think of how sometimes, after a long spell of hard and dirty work that has left us weary and worn, we put off the working clothes, are bathed and refreshed, and we put on our best suit. We feel better. We are ready for the big

occasion. That helps us to understand this business of putting on immortality. It is not surprising that Paul quotes from Isa. 25:8 because the Old Testament prepares for the New Testament. Why many Christians neglect the Old Testament Scriptures is a mystery and it is a defect in their Christian lives and spiritual development. We are told by commentators that most of what John the apostle saw in the visions of Revelation was foreshadowed in the Old Testament and the 'pictures' reminded him of the words, promises and mighty deeds of his God as they are recorded in familiar stories. Try to grasp the glory of the truth in v.54. There is something satisfyingly majestic about it. Paul's language is similar to that in Hosea 13:14 but the emphasis is more positive. How many have stood at an open grave mourning the loss of a loved one (and mourning is Christian and a necessary part of the therapy in a time of grief) and have found the affirmative challenge of v.55 wiping tears from the eyes and helping the lump in the throat to be swallowed. Why does Paul refer to the 'sting' of death after referring to the 'victory'? He knows that death is the wages of sin (Rom. 6:23). It is when sin has finished its dirty and destructive work that it leads the sinner to death. When sin is forgiven there is no sting because there is no condemnation (Rom. 8:1). The law of God shows us our sin and leaves us condemned (Rom. 7:7). But we are no longer under the law. We are in Christ. We are safe. We are victors.

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### **15 15:58**

God has given us the victory through the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is fact, whether we feel it or not. This is the victory ground on which we stand. This is the salvation which cannot be taken from us by circumstances, people or our sins. Not even the Devil at his most fierce or most subtle can undo what God has done. We are secured and sealed (Eph. 1:13; 2 Tim. 2:19; Rev. 7:3). There is no longer any doubt about our salvation (Heb. 9:12; Rom. 8:29-30, 35-39; John 10:28-29). And the power of that salvation is within us by the Holy Spirit to enable us in life and in service (Eph. 1:19-20; 3:14-21; Rom. 8:11). It is not surprising that Paul says, 'Therefore' (v.58). His exhortation is based on facts and it is full of encouragement. Perhaps there is an echo of Jesus' words in John 16:33. We have good cause to be of good cheer, to be optimists no matter what we face, because Jesus has in fact overcome the world. There is nothing that can stand before Him or defy His gracious and glorious purposes for us. But we must be steadfast, in personal fidelity and undisturbed purpose. We must simply stand fast and stand steady, believing the facts of the Gospel regardless of appearances, and especially in times when the battle is fierce, long and devilish (Eph. 6:10-20). We must in the right sense also be immovable, refusing to be unduly influenced by changing fashions and novelties, even if they have an evangelical or spiritual flavour (Eph. 4:12-16; 2 Tim. 4:1-5). There are Christians who simply cannot be counted on to be in their rightful places in the work where God has set them. Whenever there is a 'special' occasion they are off to it and this signifies that they regard the 'ordinary' ongoing work of the congregation as secondary or less significant. It is when we grasp the fact of the plan of God as well as the power of God that we begin to stand firm.

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### **15:58**

Abounding in the work of the Lord has far more to do with full hearts than with full diaries. Christian activity is not the same as Christian service. Remember that Paul who wrote these words knew more about restrictions on his personal liberty than most. How then could he speak about always abounding in the work of the Lord? He was a man who refused to rebel against his circumstances, because he believed that it was God and no-one else who ordered his life. He saw how the most unpromising events that led to his personal discomfort actually worked out for the spread of his work (Phil. 1:12). At times, in prison, taken out of the main stream of ministry and missionary outreach, he found time, peace and opportunity to write by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit the epistles that have been for the blessing of the church down the ages of history. Little wonder he learned, in whatever situation he was in, to be content. This does not mean it was always easy for him to be like this. He tells of times of distress and agitation (2 Cor. 2:12-13; 7:5), and times of travail and suffering that must have been costly indeed (2 Cor. 11:23-28). But in this one verse he teaches us that if we are where God wants us to be, if we accept His sovereign placements, and if we are glad to do the work He has given us to do, then we can be absolutely sure that our labour is not in vain. This we must believe. If we do not so believe, we will waste both time and energy fretting and God's work will lie unattended. If we once grasp the truth that we are workers together with God and that God is in charge, then our whole concept of service will be enlightened and

energised. When the way is hard and when it seems there is no fruitful result then we must go to this verse for assurance.

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### **16:1-4**

Abounding in the work of the Lord involves being very practical with regard to the stewardship of money for the support of the work of the Gospel. We must not speak of coming down from the spiritual heights of the resurrection chapter to the ordinary level of money. Rather we must see the whole question of money being taken up and given its rightful spiritual significance. It seems that the Corinthian Christians were 'hot' on spiritual issues but, compared to other groups, rather 'cold' on the matter of systematic giving of their money. Of course, we must remember that giving money, even on a sacrificial level, may be an escape from giving ourselves to the Lord, to His work and to His people. If we take the trouble (and it should not be trouble) to read 2 Corinthians chapters 8 and 9, we will find that Paul's first letter did not make much impact on the Corinthians regarding this subject and so two whole chapters were written to deal with this question, giving it its true spiritual importance. Read at least 2 Cor. 8:1-9, which enunciates the lesson earlier in this note. It is when we give ourselves to the Lord, to His work, and to His servants that we begin to be realistic about giving time, energy and money for Christian service. Paul's approach to the touchy subject of money is wise psychologically and spiritually, as 2 Cor. 8:24-9:7 makes clear. He really put the Christians on the spot, making plain that the Lord finds no pleasure in reluctant giving or in grudging service. It is the cheerful giver that rejoices God's heart, and the word for cheerful is literally the word 'hilarious'. In all his dealing with the subject of money Paul makes quite clear that those who are blessed spiritually have a practical liability to give, not least to the fellowship where they have been blessed

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### **16:1-4**

It is clear that Christian giving should be systematic and that it should be part of and find expression in the gathering for worship. It is also clear that money matters should be carefully administered and that care should be taken that no suggestion of impropriety should ever arise. It seems that Paul was careful never to handle church money himself. Secretiveness about money matters in Christian organisations is both unwise and indefensible. But we must also note here that Christian giving is not and cannot ever be simply a congregational thing. In the apostolic church it is clear from Paul's words here that there was riot independency but rather an emphasis that the churches belonged together and had a responsibility for supporting each other, according to need and to capacity. It is one thing to pray for others but sometimes it is practical help (not necessarily money) that is the real spiritual service. Quite often the answer to our prayers for others lies in our own power. We may ask the Lord to strengthen and encourage one of His servants in a time of need, and the answer to that prayer may be that we should actually go to the needy one to speak the words of encouragement. That is exactly what Jonathan did for David in 1 Samuel 23:15-17. We need to be reminded about this aspect of Christian giving, just as we need sometimes to be reminded of our failure to give. Paul spoke graciously but firmly in Phil. 4:10-20, and he spoke out of a sore heart in 2 Tim. 4:9-10, 16-17. The prophets in the Old Testament were rather more blunt, as Haggai 1:3-11 and Malachi 3:6-10 make plain. Of course there is also in the Old Testament the glorious situation when the generosity of God's people in their dedication to God and His work was so great that they had to cancel the offering (Exod. 36: 1-7). It does not happen very often nowadays.

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### **16:1-4**

These verses, along with the various other references, are a fruitful study. The offering Paul was referring to was for the impoverished church in Jerusalem and we may well ask why that church was so often in great need. Very possibly it was because most of the believers had been converted from a Jewish background and as a consequence found themselves cut off from and disowned by their families, who regarded them as traitors to the whole tradition of Jewish history and identity. Paul would understand this because he experienced that very treatment, as Phil. 3:4-11 makes plain. Some suggest that the ongoing poverty of the Jerusalem church was the long-term result of the unwise selling and pooling of resources in Acts 4:34-35. In no time there were difficulties, as Acts 6:1 records and, unless there was long-term economic planning, the 'capital' of the central

fund would soon be exhausted. Others suggest that the problem of poverty was the result of the church refusing to go out into the world, especially the Gentile world, with the message of the Gospel. The Christians held on to their place in Jerusalem with all its traditions and its feelings of superiority and as a result were not only persecuted but became spiritually impoverished. Of course, we must not say that if a Christian work meets difficulties and privation this is necessarily the result of spiritual disobedience. After all, the culmination of our Lord's ministry was the public shame and apparent disaster of the Cross. What we must do, whether on a personal, congregational or denominational level, when difficulty comes is to seek anew the face of God so that we might learn what we need to learn in the interest of the future. Of course, if we are prospering we must seek to ease the burden of those hard pressed.

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### **16:5-9**

Paul now discusses his future plans and this is an important lesson for all of us. We must look to the future. We must prepare for the future. But all our plans must be laid before God, seeking His will, seeking confirmation of guidance, and never being presumptuous. In fact Paul here is confirming what he had said earlier in the epistle (4:18-21), and we must emphasise the word Paul was making plain to the Corinthians that he did not consider them to be of such spiritual importance that he was going to neglect or bypass others in order to come to them in a hurry. He was also making plain that he would not stay with them long-term unless God made it plain. There seems to be a clear implication in Paul's words that his stay in Corinth would be extended only if it became plain that their spiritual state was so bad that they would need much help to recover their usefulness. He was not being casual with them (7). He was not writing them off, because he speaks of them helping him on his way in the furtherance of the Gospel (6). But he was keeping his options open. He was waiting on God to be guided clearly. We learn from 2 Cor. 1:15-2:4 that Paul was criticised and slandered for his decisions about when to visit Corinth and he had to defend himself. There were many personal humiliations for Paul in his life and work as a minister of the Gospel and much of it was caused by hard-hearted Christians who were arrogantly sure about their own spirituality. Paul makes it quite plain that he would not bow to the pressures of people nor would he plan and act in order to please people. Nor would he allow the Corinthians to assume that they were of prior importance to God. He would visit them if, and only if, the Lord permitted. The word 'permits' indicates that Paul had been asking the Lord about this very matter. I wonder if the Corinthians believed that. Proud Christians seldom give ministers the benefit of the doubt.

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### **16:5-9**

There are several important lessons to be learned from v.8-9 and the first is that difficulties, dangers and oppositions do not justify resignation nor do they indicate that it is time to move on to another place and another work. Paul was quite sure that for the present he was right in the centre of God's will, and from there he was not prepared to budge. He did not think that his life's work would be in Ephesus because he saw that the need for him to be there would be fulfilled by Pentecost, some months ahead. The story of Paul's two years of ministry in Ephesus is recorded in Acts 19, where v.8-10 tell of how the message of the Gospel spread beyond the actual city to the whole of the province of Asia, probably reaching Colosse and the churches mentioned in Rev. 2-3. In Acts 19:18-20 we are told of the purging of the pornographic and occult practices of the city, and in Acts 19:23ff we are told how the financial side of pagan idolatry was affected by so many being converted to Christ. In Acts 19:35-41 we are told how the secular authorities defused a dangerous situation. At the heart of the situation we are told how Paul's enthusiasm for the Gospel nearly led him headlong into a crowd that would have killed him (Acts 19:30-31). Later on Paul must have thanked God for his wise friends who dissuaded him. Writing to the Corinthians, Paul was accurate in his description of an open door of opportunity and many adversaries. We are not surprised that in his letter to the Ephesians he spoke of spiritual warfare, not against mere flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers of darkness (Eph. 6:10ff). Paul knew full well that wherever there is an authentic work of the Gospel there will be active adversaries. If we read his farewell address to the elders of Ephesus (Acts 20:17-35), we will see how Paul warned of dangers arising from inside -the church, but we will see also the fullness of his ministry in Ephesus and his confidence in God and in His word.

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## 16:10-11

Timothy, the young minister, had the task of carrying Paul's letter to Corinth, and Paul had already spoken on his behalf, making it plain that Timothy had his total trust (4:17). It is clear from 1 Tim. 4:11-12; 5:23; 2 Tim. 1:3-8 that Timothy was young, conscious of his youth, more than a little sensitive and not at all strong in health. We have seen in this epistle that the Corinthians set great store by personality, eloquence and gifts. They could well have devalued Timothy before his ministry among them had begun and Paul insists that they should receive him as a true minister of the Gospel. Paul knew the cost of faithful ministry and, being well taught in the Old Testament, he would recall how the congregation of Israel eventually broke their minister Moses, a man of great meekness (Num. 20:2-3,10-13), He would recall how the prophets were pressurised more by the Israelites than by the godless (Amos 2:11,12; 7:12-13) and how Jesus was harried by the Scribes and Pharisees and indeed by Paul himself (Matt.12:14; Acts 9:1-5), Religious people, backsliders and proud believers can be ruthless in their dealings with God's ministers. There is no justification for putting ministers on pedestals but there is every reason for respecting them, for praying for them and for giving them loyal support and love. Read 1 Thess. 5:12-13 and Heb. 13:17. Of course, ministers need to be able to say what Paul said in Acts 20:18-19 and in 1 Thess. 1:3-12. Teaching elders and ruling elders alike must take to heart the exhortation given by Peter (1 Pet. 5:1-5). Paul made it clear to the Corinthians that he would give great consideration to the report Timothy would bring back to him. This was not a matter of telling tales, but a matter of caring for God's flock, God's work and God's testimony.

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## 16:12

Timothy was very much Paul's junior but Apollos was his contemporary. Apollos was the more brilliant orator, who after counsel by two lay people became a powerful preacher (Acts 18:24-28), But Paul was by far the greater theologian and the more perceptive missionary. It is almost certain that the Corinthians would have preferred if Paul had sent Apollos, and they may have made specific request for this. In today's verse there is no suggestion at all of one minister devaluing or presuming upon another. There was no tension between the two men and Paul made it plain he had urged Apollos to go to Corinth. He did not regard him in any sense as a rival, let alone a danger to his ministry. The RSV reads 'It was not at all God's will for him to go,' but the NIV reads 'He was quite unwilling to go now.' It was Apollos' own assessment of the situation and his own conviction that God would not have him visit Corinth then. It must have been a blow to the Corinthians that their 'idol' preacher held back from them. It may well have been that Apollos saw very clearly the hand of God keeping Paul away from Corinth and he realised that God was saying the same thing to him. If there was grace in the hearts of the believers in Corinth they must have been deeply exercised to be made aware that two mighty men of God were not only reluctant to come to them, but were sure that God was forbidding them to come. Perhaps the lesson we need to learn here is from Paul's attitude to his fellow minister. It is very easy to criticise ministers, and especially easy for those who have no idea of and no experience of the demand and cost of ministry. It is far better to pray earnestly for ministers whom we feel are falling short of what they should be.

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## 16:13-14

This is a brief but comprehensive five-fold exhortation. It is addressed to Christians who had on several levels shown that they were spiritually immature even though they thought they were mature and experienced (3:1-4). Paul called them to be watchful, on guard, alert to danger. They must not be heedless or careless, assuming all was well, and presuming upon God. They needed to be alive to God in terms of what they needed to learn rather than in self-awareness. Paul then called them to stand firm in the basic things of the faith, recognising spiritual priorities in terms of the defence and proclamation of the message of salvation. He had spoken to them earlier about laying foundations and building what would stand (3:10-15). Perhaps Paul was urging them to make sure their reliance was upon God and not on preachers, however good and gracious these preachers might be. Put it this way: are you ready to stand firm if your minister should be taken from you? They are to be courageous and strong. The AV reads, 'Quit you like men, be strong.' The reference may be to the childishness of the Corinthians, playing at being Christians, just like so many nowadays who much prefer Bible quizzes and Gospel concerts rather than the discipline of prayer and the rigorous business of taking a clear stand, especially in the



business world, for Christ and the Gospel. Be strong, and let God make you stronger. There may be in this a call to be in the front line of true evangelism to 'rescue the perishing and care for the dying.' But evangelism is not for the immature because it brings us face to face with the powers of evil in their strong citadels of power. Think of the exhortation in Jude 20-23. But earnestness is not enough. Sound doctrine and competent expression are not enough. Commitment is not enough. There must be love.

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### **16:13-14**

Read v.14 carefully. It does not say to do everything with love as if love was just a top dressing sprinkled on to make things appear and taste pleasant. Everything has to be done in love and that signifies an attitude that values and cares for others and which motivates the whole of life. This love, poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (Rom. 5:5) has been expounded to us in chapter 13. It is not sentimental or weak and certainly not blind. It looks and sees as Jesus sees. It is mindful of all the loving care given by Jesus and of all the allowances He and Christian friends have made. It is aware that, in Jesus, love incarnate suffered and died for those who were loved but were so unworthy. Read 2 Cor. 5:14-15. The love of Christ controls us (RSV), compels us (NIV), constrains us (AV). It controls and directs us; it compels and urges us to serve; and it constrains or holds us back from a life that is lived on the basis of self-consideration. It is love that gives warmth and tenderness to heart and voice. It is love that grieves over the ones who stray and fall. It is love that keeps on hoping, bearing with and encouraging those whose lives seem endlessly tangled. This is the love Jesus has shown to us, and because we have received so much love we must show it to and share it with others. Go back and read through chapter 13 and then go to 1 John 3:1,16-18; 4:7-12,16. We love Him because He first loved us, and nothing gives Him more pleasure than that we should love those He loved and for whom He died.

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### **16:15-18**

It is not always wise to single out specific persons for praise, partly because it may make others jealous or resentful and partly because in drawing attention to their spiritual worth they are made targets of the enemy. But spiritual worth needs to be recognised and it is set forth as an example to follow. The household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia and, although it is not stated clearly, it seems likely that they were converted in Corinth. These converts were among the very few actually baptised by Paul (1 Cor. 1:16) but it was not his personal involvement with them that drew the commendation. These converts had proved themselves by the sheer dedication of their lives to the business of ministering to others. It is interesting but not necessarily significant that in the account of Paul's ministry in Corinth (Acts 18:1-11) there is no mention of Stephanas. It may have been that Stephanas had been converted in Athens (Acts 17:16ff) where it seemed Paul's ministry was manifestly unfruitful, and then travelled back to Corinth his home town where his whole family came to faith. There is no suggestion that Stephanas had a leading or teaching role in the church. His work was that of lowly service and it was done with constant dedication. He was in every sense a worker who simply went on with the work God had given him to do, a man who could be depended on. Paul makes plain that these are the kinds of men and women who should be followed, supported and appreciated, whereas the Corinthians were more likely to follow 'big' people. It is not necessarily the popular people who carry the main load of the work of a congregation, but it is often the popular ones who create factions and divisions, because they gather people to themselves. Those who work and labour are the ones who see that it is the work that is important and they are glad to carry extra loads rather than see the work hindered.

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### **16:15-18**

Stephanas and two others from Corinth about whom we know nothing were possibly the deputation who carried the list of questions to Paul (7:1; 12:1; 15:1; 16:1). Some other persons had brought news of the unsatisfactory situation in Corinth (1:1 1). If the three men were an official deputation, we can only speculate why they had been chosen. Perhaps the congregation knew they could be trusted. Perhaps some of the 'strong' characters in the congregation wanted rid of these men for a season. After all, godly dedicated men tend to give others a bad conscience. It is not that they say anything but the Holy Spirit convicts through the sheer transparency of their life and service. In v.17 it is clear that Paul had many real friends in Corinth and he wanted them to know that

he missed them. Paul was honest and he never tried to hide his humanity or his need of human friendship and support. He testifies to the whole congregation that these men had ministered to him and refreshed him spiritually, just as they had done for others in Corinth. Again he says to give recognition and respect to such men. Paul was always glad to testify to what other people had done for him in his spiritual life and service, and at times he was not slow to name those who had failed him. We have an example in 2 Tim. 1:15-18. Can you picture Onesiphorus visiting prison after prison looking for his beloved Paul? Another example of this refreshing is seen in the simple business of taking the trouble to go and meet a weary traveller (Acts 28:11-15). The story of Philemon (7, 20) shows the same mutual refreshing. Rom. 16:1-4 is another example of dedicated and costly service. Paul says that such people should receive recognition, but no doubt the people would prefer to stay in the background. They did not serve for recognition, but because they loved the Lord and His servants.

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### **16:19-20**

Paul wisely reminds the church in Corinth that there were other churches with whom they were linked in fellowship, service and prayer. Aquila and Prisca, with a group of believers meeting in their house, join in Paul's greetings. Although we have mentioned this couple several times it is good to be reminded again that wherever they went and set up house they became significant and fruitful servants of God and His people. Because of persecution they had had to leave home, business and friends in Rome, and no doubt had been exercised in heart when they were persuaded that the Lord wanted them to settle in the terrible city of Corinth. But without knowing it they were the advance party for Paul's missionary team, and when Paul made contact with them they must have been thrilled. It was their common trade as tent-makers rather than some 'spiritual' reason that brought them together (Acts 18:1-4). If any who are reading these notes find themselves being 'forced' to change jobs and location, be sure you look out for God. What is happening fits into His plans and will prove good (Rom. 8:28). When Paul went to Ephesus, Aquila and Prisca (Priscilla) were now part of the missionary team, and soon discovered they had a specific ministry of their own (Acts 18:18, 24-29). Think of how Paul would be encouraged and reassured when he heard of needy and struggling Christians being often in the house of Aquila and Priscilla. That house would do them nothing but good. But not all homes where Christians gather have a good influence! The reference to the holy kiss indicates that care needs to be expressed with tenderness and warmth. But it must be natural rather than forced, and it must be done in a way that is seemly. There are various references to the kiss of greeting (2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thess. 5:26; 1 Pet. 5:14), and it seems this was a customary mode of greeting in the East. The equivalent for us may be different.

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### **16:21-24**

It was Paul's custom to dictate his letters to someone who wrote them down but to authenticate the letter he would take the pen and write the final words himself, even if, at times, his poor eyesight and his painfully gnarled hands made this difficult (Gal. 6:11; 2 Thess. 3:17; Col. 4:18). It is clear from 2 Thess. 2:2 that there were actually forged letters purporting to be from Paul. There was need for care. There is need for care in our days too when so much in writing and on tapes claims to be spiritual and appears to be spiritual and yet on examination proves not to be in accord with Scripture. After the gracious greetings in v.19-20 the words of v.22 come as a shock. There are similar words in Gal. 1:6-9 and on the face of it they seem to be what we call 'intolerant'. But toleration can sometimes mean that no one has any real belief or conviction about anything, no concept of right or wrong, no idea of the elemental conflict between truth and error. Could Paul have been thinking of Jesus' words to the effect that those not for Him were against Him (Matt. 12:30)? Could Paul have been recalling the time when Jesus said to the close company of the disciples that one of them would betray Him (Matt. 26:21)? Perhaps what was uppermost in Paul's mind was what he had seen right through His ministry: the deep, bitter, hateful rejection of the Jesus preached in the Gospel. When the redeeming love of God in Jesus Christ is preached and presented in a way that is good and gracious, both by word and by life, and when that love is recognised and rejected with deliberate decision, the consequences are solemn and eternal. If Jesus is the only way to God, and He declared it to be so in John 14:6, and that way is refused, then men and women live and die in their sins (John 8:21,24). It was Jesus who said to some to depart from Him (Matt. 7:23) and Jesus who spoke of the door being shut (Matt. 25:10).

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## 16:21-24

Following on the end of yesterday's reading, we must emphasise the urgency of responding in faith to the call of the Gospel. We must note that Paul makes no mention of names. He does not pass judgment on any. God knows who are His people and who are not (2 Tim. 2:19), and the time will come when that judgment will be a reality. Whatever the exact meaning of the word 'Maranatha' is, it clearly refers to the coming of the Lord. When that day comes there is no more Gospel opportunity. This is why it is so important to proclaim that Jesus saves, to give ourselves to the service of the Gospel in order to rescue the perishing. Something of the urgency of evangelism is expressed in Jude 20-23, but if we are to be in the front-line of evangelism, engaged in what is truly rescue work, we need to be soundly based and secure in our faith. We need to be persuaded about the fundamentals of the faith and to be committed to that faith. We who are Christians need to be living close to God, walking in the light with Him, so that when our Lord comes we will have nothing to be ashamed about (1 John 2:28). We need to be in earnest. The Gospel is not something to be trifled with. Read Heb. 2:1-3a; 4:1-2; 12:16-17. But to end our study in this epistle, dwell on the wonder of the last two verses, which could well be expanded to fill a book. The grace, the unmerited favour and blessing, the all-sufficient and never failing grace of the Lord Jesus is with us and will be with us. The love that is found in true discipleship and service will be ours to enjoy, and it will strengthen us and assure us that we are never alone. The week before this note was written we read in our Sunday evening study about the God who sits on the throne and who shelters His people with His presence (Rev. 7:15). What a way to live, in this world and the next!

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