

**What Is Ailing  
the church of God?**

**Reflections on the Book of  
I Corinthians**

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## **Reflections on the Book of I Corinthians**

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# INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

The church of Corinth was founded by the Apostle Paul in his second missionary journey after he left Athens.

Corinth was an important centre of trade and was a wealthy cosmopolitan sea-port. Archaeological findings revealed evidence of a city life-style focused on self-indulgence and entertainment, very much like any great city today. It was a city which pursued status, money, success, pleasure and popularity. It was also a city steeped with idol worship. The city was thought to have some twenty six temples and this was accompanied by lax sexual practices and cult prostitution.

As a travel centre, Corinth drew various itinerant philosophers and rhetoricians; these were influenced by the Greek culture with its emphasis on human knowledge and wisdom.

Corinth appeared to be most unlikely to receive the gospel of Jesus Christ; yet God, through the Apostle Paul and his co-workers, brought many to the knowledge of God and the gospel. Paul stayed there for one and a half years, preaching and teaching, and even the synagogue leader came to believe in Jesus Christ. The church in Corinth however was plagued with many problems: there was division, jealousy, spiritual arrogance, sexual immorality, incest, abuse of spiritual gifts, social and ritual disorder. There were also wrong attitudes, even towards the Apostle Paul, accompanied by a wrong understanding of the gospel, its teachers as well as the meaning of the cross and salvation.

Interestingly, many of these problems became obvious from feedback from the house of Chloe and questions directed at Paul on various subjects in Christian living.

The epistle of 1 Corinthians is therefore not a 'normal' epistle but a 'collection' of Paul's responses and teachings to both the issues

raised and the problems which became obvious in the church.

Nonetheless, the issues in this epistle are still very much alive today and they affect the Church of God in our current context. As we ponder 1 Corinthians, in so many ways, we are looking at ourselves and the Church of God in various localities.

The epistle covers the important subjects of love (chapter 13), the resurrection (chapter 15), the place of spiritual gifts, the warnings of taking our calling for granted, the role of Christian leaders and the centrality of the cross in Christian life and ministry.

Let us look to the Lord God to teach us and to help us avoid the pitfalls which beset the church in Corinth.

# CHAPTER ONE

## 1 Corinthians 1:1-17

The epistle begins with Paul greeting the church in Corinth by identifying himself as one called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.

Paul was not self-appointed in declaring himself as an apostle; he saw the resurrected Lord Jesus and he was given the right hand of fellowship by the apostles in Jerusalem (including James and Peter) who acknowledged Paul as one sent to the Gentiles with the gospel. He wrote with the authority of an apostle of Christ Jesus and he expected the church in Corinth to realise this.

He gave thanks for the grace of God extended to the church in Corinth and he noted that the church had been enriched by God with many spiritual gifts and the right knowledge of the gospel. We noted earlier that the city of Corinth was one most unlikely to respond to the gospel and yet the Lord God did a mighty work among this paganised and worldly city.

The word grace appeared several times in Paul's greeting, reminding the Corinthians that what they had received from God was not based on merit but it was through God's unmerited favour and mercy. If it was based on the grace of God, there was no room for boasting or pride. Straightaway, the apostle prepared the believers to receive what he wanted to rebuke them and reprove them subsequently regarding the negative situations that had arisen in Corinth.

Before this reproof, Paul went on to tell them that they would be kept in their faith by the faithfulness and grace of God until the day of the Lord; just as they first received grace, they will continue to receive His grace and be kept by His faithfulness. It will not depend on their

gifts, abilities and spiritual performance; hence the reminder comes in that there is no room for boasting and spiritual arrogance. Also, the believers in Corinth were set apart to be God's people together with all those who acknowledged the Lord Jesus. This focused on the fact that all believers belong to God's family under the lordship of one Lord - Jesus Himself. The implication of unity and oneness was highlighted. Is there a place for a partisan spirit and disunity in the light of this calling?

Then Paul addressed the problem of division and disunity among them. He was grieved to find various groups aligning themselves to Apollos, Cephas, himself and even those who arrogantly declared that they belonged to the 'Christ' group.

Apollos and Cephas together with others had visited Corinth and this gave rise to a comparison with Paul and his ministry. Paul understood the complementary roles of various ones in God's ministry but he was not happy with what developed subsequently.

The rhetorical questions followed, making it clear that Christ is not divided and no one else was crucified. Baptism and faith are in the name of Christ and not in the name of various servants of God.

The division was fuelled by spiritual pride, the exaltation of man and personality cults. The apostles and teachers are just stewards and servants of God. There is no place for idolising men and putting them on a pedestal; doing this gives glory to man rather than to God who alone deserves the glory and honor. Spiritual gifts also tend to exalt the ones using the gifts rather than the giver who dispenses the gifts, God Himself. Servants of God should be careful not to add on to this problem by glorifying themselves and their gifts.

All good gifts come from God and all glory belongs to Him alone. Paul distanced himself from highlighting himself and he rebuked the Corinthians severely for glorifying themselves.



## 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Paul started off by contrasting human wisdom and power with that of God as far as receiving salvation from God in Jesus Christ is concerned.

He makes it clear that human wisdom cannot help men to come to the right judgments about God without the revelation from God. Human wisdom can never help human beings to find their way to God and to the salvation of their souls.

The message of the cross may appear foolishness to human, man-centred wisdom, but because this has always been God's plan for salvation, it is in fact anchored in God's wisdom and power to save.

Paul explained that Jews sought for signs and Greeks looked for wisdom but both parties could never find true salvation apart from God's revelation, grace and mercy. In fact, these gifts were extended to them through the apparent foolishness of the message of the gospel.

The gospel demonstrates that the God who rules the universe does so by suffering, dying love. Furthermore, a man must humble himself to receive God's reconciling grace through His Son. Fulfilment for man in this world is found in self-giving love, for that is the nature of God in whose image man is made. Consequently, the message of the gospel would not be received by arrogant human wisdom.

The Lord Jesus, while He was on earth, told the Jews that the wicked generation was always looking for signs; the only sign that would be given to them was the sign of Jonah (referring to the cross, burial and resurrection).

The Greeks, who admired debates, would soon realise that the interest in such discussions will not lead them the true knowledge of God.

Human wisdom and power - the pursuit of this in the Church exposes the Church to worldliness. Indeed, it can kill the life in the Church. These values belong to the world that is in rebellion against God; the God of the gospel was not delivered from the cross - He suffered and bled and died.

# CHAPTERS TWO & THREE

## 1 Corinthians 2:1-5

With the understanding of true wisdom and power manifested in the gospel of Christ crucified, Paul went on to explain his approach in sharing the gospel when he first came to Corinth.

Paul was careful not to depend on human wisdom, eloquence and rhetoric in sharing the gospel; he was concerned that the message of the gospel he communicated should be a demonstration of the Spirit and power from God. Paul's message was not based on his own ability in speech and persuasion. His burden was that the faith of the believers in Corinth should rest in the power of God and not in the wisdom of man.

The gospel may appear foolish to man-centred wisdom. However, because it is God's wisdom, the gospel of Christ crucified is the only power to save.

The Corinthians esteemed eloquence and delighted in debates but Paul wanted them to know that the gospel comes to them not as something for them to debate and discuss as if they could judge it, but as a word from God to judge them.

Cleverness for manipulation and self-glorification is becoming a curse in Christian communication today. To catch people's attention we may need to vary our style of presentation. The Apostle Paul was not against the use of intellect and good communication; he himself communicated very effectively in all his epistles. However, Paul was conscious that he was not to feed God's Word into the area of debate, but simply to proclaim it with the authority of the Lord Himself from whom it comes. He sets himself to announce the good news, to explain it and to enforce what God has said but to rely on cleverness for manipulation or self-glorification is not something Paul would turn to.

His main aim was to persuade men to receive and respond to God's truth in the gospel, always in dependence on God's Spirit to enable them to do so in God's power.

## **1 Corinthians 2:6 - 3:23**

The Apostle Paul went on to share that although the message of the gospel appears as foolishness to human wisdom, there is a higher wisdom, and this message of wisdom is from the Holy Spirit of God.

A person's thoughts are known by the spirit of the person; similarly, the thoughts of God are known by the Holy Spirit of God and these thoughts are communicated to those who have received the Spirit of God, namely believers.

Unbelievers are not able to receive these thoughts as they do not possess the Spirit of God. Therefore, they find these thoughts unacceptable and cannot understand them, branding them as foolishness.

Even rulers and leaders of this age cannot understand the thoughts of God and His plan of salvation. Kingdoms rise and kingdoms fall but the plan and purpose of God remains and will come to pass and last for eternity.

Paul declared that believers not only have the Spirit of God but they have the mind of Christ. In Romans 8, Paul clearly stated that those who do not have the Spirit of God do not belong to God.

We have seen earlier that Paul addressed the believers in the church of Corinth as saints, that is those set apart to God. The Apostle Paul acknowledged some in the church of Corinth as believers, belonging to God and set apart to Him. As believers, they would have the Spirit of God and the mind of Christ. But why is it that the church in Corinth seemed to behave not as those with the mind of Christ?

They quarrelled, pitting one leader against another. They also exalted themselves and their own gifts. Even though they had the Spirit of God, they were behaving as those without the Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit.

We know that the Holy Spirit is the agent of new birth; He gives us understanding to know God and a new heart to obey Him. He dwells within us; He guides us and teaches us in our daily pilgrimage; and He also gives us joy, peace, power and special gifts. The Holy Spirit is also the ‘Spirit of adoption’; God not only forgives us, He accepts us as His adopted children, allowing us to share the love, inheritance, and glory of His Son now and eternally. The Spirit makes us realise in increasing measures the meaning of our filial relationship with God in Christ and leads us into an ever increasing response to God in this relationship, allowing us to call God Father. The Bible reveals that we can grieve the Holy Spirit; we can harden our hearts to His ministry in our lives; we can be guilty of not using the mind of Christ. This was in fact the problem with the Corinthian believers.

Hence, Paul began chapter 3 by addressing them as worldly (carnal or fleshly in other translations). He called them infants in Christ, not able to partake of more substantial spiritual ‘food’ When they were quarreling among themselves, being jealous of one another, they were demonstrating traits that showed their spiritual immaturity.

Their wrong understanding of spiritual leaders further illustrated this state in their lives. Spiritual leaders are mere servants of God; there is no place to idolise them. The church does not belong to them but to God. Paul used farming as an illustration; he and Apollos only planted and watered but it is God who gave the growth.

He went on to illustrate this principle by focusing on a building. The foundation of the Church can only be Jesus Christ and no other. Paul and his co-workers were responsible to build on this foundation. The quality of their building will be manifested on the day of the Lord;

those that survive the test of fire, that is God's evaluation and judgement, will be rewarded but those who fail the test will be burned.

The servants of God need His wisdom and His mind to build the Church; those who depend on their own understanding and human wisdom will suffer loss. What will last and remain are given by God; there is therefore no room for any boasting.

What is required of servants is faithfulness to God. Paul gave a sober warning: "Don't you know you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple" (verse 14).

God's temple is destroyed by those who sow division; it is destroyed by those who seek to build her by using worldly wisdom and methods, focusing on wrong teachings and doctrines.

The Church is made up of individuals; each believer has the Holy Spirit dwelling in him or her: in that sense, each believer is also 'temple of God'. In the same vein, the temple of God must be holy and fit for God to dwell in, individually and as a Church. The individual Christian is also responsible to keep his or her body holy; as Apostle Peter wrote: 'Be you holy as God is holy' Individual believers cannot afford to be worldly, for God has called us to holiness.

It is interesting to note how the Apostle Paul used the word "crucified" three times in Galatians to describe conversion and salvation.

"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live' (2:20); 'Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (5:24); 'May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world' (6:14).

When we become believers, we are born again spiritually; the old has gone, the new has come. This corresponds with ‘I have been crucified with Christ’. However, the old human nature, the flesh, is still very much alive and the believer tends to allow the flesh to rear its head again and influence his life and decisions. This was what happened to the believers in the church in Corinth; they were fleshly. The flesh was also described by Paul in the epistle to the Ephesians as the “old self” or the “old man”. There Paul exhorted the believers to put off the “old self” and to put on the “new self” or “new man” created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

Putting off the “old man” corresponds to “those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh and its passions”. The flesh has to be dealt with severely; it has to be put to death, crucified, and this is a continual process. It will continue to trouble the believer until the Lord Jesus comes again. The term “mortification of the flesh” is sometimes used by theologians to describe this process. The Corinthian believers, although they have the Spirit of God, were making decisions and serving God based on their “old self” and mere human values of the “old man”. They were not using the mind of Christ and putting off the ‘old self’ instead they allowed the “old man” to dominate their lives as a church. Pride, jealousy, selfish pursuits and many other aspects of the flesh rule in the lives of many of God’s people.

“The world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” clearly points to the fact that believers no longer should live their lives according to the values of the world. As far as the believer is concerned, the values of the world are dead, he or she should not be making decisions and living life based on the values of the world. The believer should be dead to the world. Unfortunately, in the lives of the Corinthian believers and many of God’s people today, the ‘world and her values’, championed by the ‘prince of the world’ are influencing the outworking of their Christian lives. Worldly wisdom, status, wealth and many other worldly values are rampant in the lives of carnal Christians.

Do not be mistaken; carnal and worldly Christians may possess spiritual gifts, given by the grace of God. But spiritual gifts exercised selfishly, with pride and arrogance do not edify the Church. The Apostle Paul will deal with such issues in subsequent chapters.



# CHAPTER FOUR

## 1 Corinthians 4

Paul began by telling the Corinthian believers how he and the other Christian workers should be regarded: as servants and stewards of Christ entrusted with the mysteries revealed by God.

As servants, they were to carry out the instructions of the master. As stewards, they were to manage the resources of the master.

The most important qualification of a steward is faithfulness. He must give an account to the master of how he has managed what has been entrusted to him. In the case of Apostle Paul, he was the steward of God, and he had to be faithful to the message of the gospel and to communicate it according to the master's desires and goal. Paul had to answer only to the Master who will judge him.

As servants, they were to carry out the instructions of the master.

Paul was not the servant of the church in Corinth; the church in Corinth had no right to judge him. Even Paul did not even judge himself, for he knew his judgement would not be reliable as he might not be fully conscious of any possible failures in his life. This does not mean that Paul was never self-critical and that he did not constantly examine himself to keep a clear conscience before God and man. Paul knew that there would be a day when God would judge, not only him, but all His servants. Hence the Corinthian believers should not make any premature judgement on God's workers.

We are reminded that what God is looking for, in the Church and in her leaders is faithfulness. He is far more interested in the motives of the heart than in external signs. His yardstick in judgment will not be outward appearance and success but godly faithfulness which may

not be so obvious to the world at large, even to the believers in general.

The church in Corinth was warned by Paul not to be puffed up in favour of one against another; she was not to go beyond what had been revealed in Scriptures. There was no place for boasting, as all had been received from the hand of God.

Verses 8-10 are full of irony. The Corinthian believers were claiming that they already had everything in their possession: wisdom and power. They were reigning as ‘kings’ with all spiritual authority!

All the blessings in heaven were already theirs. What God, in the Scriptures, had promised for the end of time for believers was in their hands already, so they claimed.

The Apostle Paul derided their boasts. He had told them previously that they were in fact immature and worldly. An overemphasis on the ‘already’ leads to triumphalism. They prematurely claimed perfection, either moral (being sinless) or physical (complete health), which belongs only to the consummated kingdom, in the new heaven and the new earth, the ‘not yet’.

We see triumphalism not only in the church in Corinth. Today, some teach that all sicknesses should be healed now and God’s people should be reigning with all spiritual authority and prosperity.

They forget that the devil is still very active. Our fallen nature (the old man) continues to assert itself and death will go on claiming us until Christ comes again. The power of sin and death has been broken. They have been overthrown, but they have not been abolished.

The Corinthians, with a false sense of their importance and achievements, wanted to be rich and to be kings. They forgot the gospel and actually resented taking up their cross daily to follow in the steps of their Lord and Master.

Paul then contrasted the triumphalism of the Corinthian Church with the life of an apostle, marked by humiliation and considered as the scum of the earth. Whereas the Corinthians were seen as choosing wisdom, strength and honour, the apostles were seen as foolish, weak and dishonoured. The apostles suffered physical deprivation, homelessness and rough treatment. Paul himself worked hard with his own hands to support himself. When reviled, they blessed their revilers; when persecuted, they endured; and when slandered, they answered kindly. The power and wisdom of God is seen in such a response to the world's hostility.

In effect, Paul was describing lives focused on the cross and Christ crucified, lives that are participating in the sufferings of Christ. The cross may speak of death but it includes a life of self-denial. To deny oneself is to turn away from a life of self-centredness. It implies death to self, putting an end to a me-centred life.

We ourselves must deliberately put to death our old nature, though by the power of the Holy Spirit. So Paul says, 'I die daily'. It means, on the one hand, dying for Jesus' sake and, on the other hand, experiencing the resurrection power which He makes perfect in our weakness.

We began 1 Corinthians by focusing on grace. The purpose of grace is to restore our relationship with God. The work of grace aims at an ever deeper knowledge of God, and an ever closer fellowship with Him. Grace is God drawing us sinners closer and closer to Himself.

God does this by not shielding us from the assault of the world, the sinful nature and the devil, not by protecting us from burdensome and frustrating situations, not by shielding us from troubles. Rather, He shows us grace by exposing us to all these, so as to overwhelm us with a sense of our own inadequacy, and to drive us to depend entirely on Him. We see this grace of God in the lives of the apostles. It is a life centred on the cross and the lifestyle of those under the cross.

Paul ended this chapter by reminding the Corinthian believers that he was their spiritual father. His love for them caused him to rebuke them and to exhort them to follow his example. He wished to come to them in gentleness and not with a rod of discipline. It would depend on their response.

# CHAPTERS FIVE & SIX

## 1 Corinthians 5-6

The Apostle Paul confronted the Corinthian believers regarding the practice of incest among them. It was a sexual immorality that was not even approved among pagans; yet the believers in Corinth seemed indifferent to this in their midst.

They probably thought that they were so spiritual that earthly standards no longer applied to them. There was this idea that only the spirit mattered and the body or the material was insignificant. This notion later was foundational to the teaching of Gnosticism. The Corinthians likely thought that what they did with their bodies was unimportant spiritually. This wrong understanding was applied also in the area of sex in marriage which the Apostle Paul had to address in a later chapter. We see the dangers of adhering to wrong teachings which affect the proper outworking of churchlife. In the case of the church in Corinth, it led to tolerating sin and sexual immorality of a serious kind.

Paul was appalled at what was happening; he urged them to take immediate action and deal with the unrepentant wrongdoers. Although absent, he had made his judgement and he advised them to expel the persons involved from the congregation so that they might repent and be restored to the fellowship of the believers.

Here is a place for church discipline in order to preserve the holiness of God's temple. A little leaven can spread through the whole dough; sins of one individual, uncorrected, can affect the whole congregation and incur God's wrath and displeasure. The Church is the temple of God and the body of Christ; believers affect one another in their behaviour and this is a spiritual reality. There is no place to assert the rights of individuals to live as they please; we must not overlook the responsibility of the whole congregation for the right conduct of its

individual members. Paul rebuked the church in Corinth for not taking action against a serious case of immorality in her midst. Underlying this careless attitude in the church was a wrong understanding of freedom from the law and a wrong view of the importance of the body. These would be addressed in chapter six.

The Apostle Paul went on in chapter five to urge the believers in Corinth not to fellowship with so-called brethren who continued to live in immorality, greed, idolatry and drunkenness so as to purge the evil from among them.

This was not directed at not associating with such individuals among the non-believers; they needed the gospel message and the Church had to reach them through interaction and sharing the good news of salvation in Christ.

The Church has a responsibility to judge those within the Church. When the sin is clear and the perpetrator is unrepentant, expulsion, by withdrawal of fellowship and other forms of social friendship may be the most loving response. The purpose is to cause the sinner to face his sin, repent and be restored to the fellowship. At the same time, the Church continues to preserve the sacredness and holiness of her calling. It is also a clear demonstration of love for God and love for neighbour.

In chapter six, the Apostle Paul exhorts the Corinthian believers not to take their disputes to the secular courts but to settle them within the fellowship of the church. Many of these disagreements might have arisen from the dissensions and disunity mentioned earlier in the first chapter.

This does not mean that Paul did not recognise the place of the secular courts for the good of the society. Instead, Paul felt that the Church should be able to handle such disputes rather than turn them over to the pagans to arbitrate. After all, there will be an ultimate day when the saints will be seated with the Lord on the throne of

judgement and participate in the judgement of created beings, including the angels. Surely they should be able to handle comparatively trivial cases in their context, especially as they boasted of their spiritual maturity and wisdom.

There is a more important principle to bear in mind. The Apostle Paul directed us to the One who carried our guilt through an unjust trial that cost Him His life at the cross. The question needs to be asked: “Did Christ secure the victory at the cross by standing on His rights, safeguarding His own interests, and insisting on His own way?” Of course not. The cross ought to teach us that sacrifice and the giving up of one’s rights lead to the road of reconciliation and forgiveness. This is God’s way and believers should be willing to follow this path if they wish to live under the cross.

Disputes which were brought to the secular courts may have arisen from pride, from insisting on one’s rights and self-interests. Doing this did not honour the Lord but actually proved to be a spiritual defeat. Basically, even for ourselves, it is a failure to trust His perfect will and to entrust ourselves to Him who judges perfectly.

In verses 9-11, Paul warned of the danger of self-deception, “Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God?” The Corinthian believers were in danger of being presumptuous and taking God’s grace for granted: they deceived themselves into thinking that they could combine membership in God’s kingdom with habitual sexual sin, the love of money and the love of the world.

For Christians, this ought not to be. It is true that nobody can be justified by law-observance. But that does not mean that we are free to break the law. It is in fact inconceivable that we should continue to sin.

The Church is comprised of redeemed sinners. Paul told the Corinthian believers that they were habitual wrongdoers in the past. Now they have been saved by the grace of God and should no longer

walk in iniquity.

If we claim to be believers, we cannot be complacent about our sin. Christian freedom is not a licence to sin. Paul asked two questions to help the Corinthian believers to understand the use of freedom. The first: “Is it beneficial?” No longer should we ask “what’s wrong with it” rather we should ask whether it has any value in developing Christian discipleship. The second: “Does it tend to enslave me?” Something that is permissible can so take over our lives that we serve the activity rather than God.

Paul then demonstrated that what Christians do with their bodies has spiritual significance. He reminded them that their body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. Also, they do not own their own bodies; they were bought at a price. Therefore, they were to honour God with their bodies.

Our bodies have been created by God and will be resurrected by Him. Furthermore, they have been bought by Christ’s blood and are indwelt by His Spirit. Thus they belong to God three times over, by creation, redemption and indwelling. How then can we misuse our bodies? We should instead honour God with them, by obedience and self-control. We were the slaves of sin; now we are slaves of Christ, and service to Him is the true freedom.



# CHAPTER SEVEN

## 1 Corinthians 7

The Apostle Paul now focused on answering the question of the Corinthian believers on sexual morality. In this sexually immoral city, the believers tended to swing to the other extreme, elevating complete abstinence from sexual relations as an indicator of true spirituality. Earlier on, we noted that many believed a kind of dualism of spirit and body. They believed that the body was inferior to the spirit/mind. Consequently, ignoring the sexual demands in the body was a sign of superior spirituality.

Paul sought to dismiss such a wrong understanding. He pointed out that withdrawing from marriage or abstaining from sexual relations in marriage is not a good thing. Marriage is not an inferior spiritual option.

In fact, marriage is God's gift for humankind. What is more, a godly marriage reflect positively Christ's relationship with His bride, the Church. There is a need to meet one another's sexual needs in marriage and abstinence should only be agreed upon for a temporary period if both desire to devote themselves to prayer. Otherwise, there should not be any insistence on personal rights of abstinence in marriage. After all, marriage involves the giving of the whole self to each other. Thus, the physical sexual union in marriage is an expression of the essence of love in self- giving.

To abstain from sexual relations in marriage as a pursuit of Christian piety will likely lead to an increasing self-centredness and expose the couple to temptation from the evil one because of the lack of self-control.

Although Paul acknowledged marriage as God's good gift to

mankind, the state of singleness may be an equal gift of God to some. The important perspective is to recognise God's providence in our current situation, to receive it and to use it faithfully as His gift.

Paul went on to address three different groups: the unmarried, those married to a believer and those married to an unbeliever.

The unmarried should not be made to feel that their state is inferior to those who are married. They should not be pressurised to change their unmarried status. On the other hand, if they are struggling with self-control, they should not be made to feel that they ought to remain single and be barred from considering marriage at all.

For married Christians, marriage is a lifelong commitment and ending it is off-limits. But in a fallen world, divorce may happen and this grieves the heart of God. The Lord Jesus in Matthew 5:32 indicates that the only circumstances in which divorce is permitted, not required, are those of sexual immorality which destroys the "one flesh" unity on which marriage is based. The guilty divorced party should remain unmarried, for remarriage based on such an unacceptable divorce would multiply the offence.

As for believers married to unbelievers, as when one party subsequently became converted after marriage, Paul had some advice. The believer should not divorce the unbelieving partner if the latter was agreeable to remain in the marriage relationship. The unbelieving partner and children produced in the marriage come within the sphere of God's grace; the gospel is communicated by the believer's influence and sharing. However, if the unbeliever insists on leaving, divorce can be an acceptable option for the believer.

Paul then went on to encourage the believer to lead the life God had assigned to him, remaining in the situation God called him to. Paul believed that God's sovereignty extends over all the circumstances of every believer's life. Thus, each one is assigned a role in life. This

sovereignty of God is not limited to a person's conversion; God governs everything from the beginning of creation. This is true for everyone, and the circumstances of our lives are not just accidental.

Paul raised the examples of circumcision and slavery to illustrate this principle. What matters is the keeping of God's commands, not physical changes. True freedom is becoming the bond slave of Christ.

Paul then focused on how believers should live in the light of the last days. For the believers will face distress and difficulties. During such times, to maintain undistracted devotion to the Lord, it may be helpful not to be involved in situations which may make it more difficult to keep our priorities right. We are tempted to live as if the world is the ultimate reality and that it is going to last forever. We can be guilty of holding too tight the things we have in this world to the detriment of our spiritual perspectives. Consequently, we end up losing the understanding that we are citizens of heaven. Whether it be marriage, vocations, social relationships, professions, careers, if we become too engrossed in them, we may end up worshipping them rather than worshipping the Creator.

For believers, we need to live our present life in the light of the future, looking for the blessed hope of glory with Christ that the Father has promised. We should see life here as travel to, and preparation for, and indeed a foretaste of a life hereafter. There ought to be a resolute detachment from pursuing this world's offer of pleasure, profit and position, a detachment through the power of our newfound love for God and our hope of future glory with Christ.

If we fail to do that, the evil one will work tirelessly to use the world and her attractions, our flesh and its passions to cause us to set up idols in our lives. Sooner or later, we will end up losing clarity and intensity in our devotion to God. The evil one delights to sever the believer from his holiness more than physically hurting him in persecution. He knows that persecution only trims the Church, which soon comes back stronger, but unrighteousness ruins the Church

of God. Neutralising the believers by making them careless and indifferent Christians means more to the evil one than direct confrontation in hurting them. He can then use them to further undermine the kingdom of God.

# CHAPTERS EIGHT & NINE

## 1 Corinthians 8-9

Turning to food offered to idols, the Apostle Paul began by emphasising that knowledge makes one proud while love builds up.

In the city of Corinth, idol worship was rampant. Oftentimes, the Corinthians would offer food to their ‘gods’ in the various temples. Some of this food would be eaten in the temple premises with friends invited to join in; in big offerings of food, some of the food ended up in the markets for sale to the public.

The Corinthian believers might be invited to some of these gatherings in the temple surroundings; they might also buy such meat in the market for their own consumption. To the enlightened and knowledgeable believers, it was not wrong to partake such food. Otherwise, they would have to keep away from social gatherings with unbelievers. They would also need to refrain from buying meat in the market, for it was common to have the market selling such meat. That would not be helpful, for they were also aware that idols were not really gods and there was and is only one true God whom they worshipped.

However, younger believers who were associated with the worship of such idols prior to becoming Christians might have their conscience pricked when they observed the older Christians eating this meat. They might end up being stumbled; some might even be encouraged to return to idol worship, thinking that it was perfectly acceptable. For older Christians to ignore the consciences of the relatively less knowledgeable believers in such matters and to continue to insist on their freedom to act according to their knowledge would not be a loving thing to do if it caused the younger ones to stumble.

A head full of knowledge should be governed by a heart full

of love; real Christ-likeness is seen in this kind of love, a love which builds up rather than stumbles. No believer should compromise another believer's conscience by imposing his knowledge on one whom he considers ignorant, or his 'strength' on one who is 'weak'. Instead, the Christian should use his new God-given freedom in Christ to set others free to be the best they can be for God. It is no wonder that Apostle Paul declared that if food caused his Christian brother to stumble, he will never eat meat, lest he be the stumbling block to this brother.

Here we see love taking precedence over knowledge in the exercise of the believer's freedom in Christ; to adopt the opposite behaviour is to deny Christ and to devalue His cross. A weaker brother is equally precious to God as the stronger believer; to despise someone who is that valuable to God is to oppose Christ's values. It is tantamount to sinning, not only against the brother, but also against Christ. We are collectively the body of Christ with Christ as the head; to sin against another member of Christ's body is effectively sinning against the head Himself.

Sacrifice is the characteristic by which love is recognised; the way of love meant the way of the cross for our Lord Jesus Christ. It is the way of our Lord and it ought to be the way of His servants. A crucified life-style means that our choices are governed for the good of others and our decisions are based on their spiritual well-being. We see that love, not knowledge, was the governing principle in Apostle Paul's life and he was prepared to surrender his freedom, rather than exercise it in a manner that would harm his brother in Christ. Such a principle is the principle under the cross of Christ. It is uncommon even among so-called mature Christian believers today. This may explain why we choose "knowledge" as the preferable option, for we need not deny ourselves and it is good for our egos. The way of love is the way of the cross which is the only path that will lead to true freedom in our Lord Jesus.

Paul went on in chapter nine to look at the nature of his Christian

freedom in the light of his own ministry. After warning the Corinthian believers to take care that their “rights” and “knowledge” did not become a stumbling block to the weak, he now focused on how the principle of loving, self-sacrificing service governed all the decisions he made in his own ministry as an apostle. He followed the footsteps of “Jesus Christ and Him crucified” in ensuring that his freedom was always cross-shaped. Paul readily gave up his own rights for the gospel benefits of others. This was the hallmark of his apostolic ministry.

He first defended his apostleship by affirming that he had seen the Lord Jesus and that the existence of the church of Corinth itself was proof of the divine enabling in his ministry as an apostle. He then established his rights as an apostle: he had the right to receive financial support for his ministry; he had the right to be accompanied by a wife like the other apostles; he need not work another job to earn a living but could concentrate on the ministry. Paul showed that even the principle of God’s decree in the Torah stated that an ox helping the farmer to thresh his crop had a right to eat some of the product. Surely God was not just concerned for the ox but the principle applies also to man. Paul was indicating that he had a right to share in the spiritual harvest, not just spiritual things but also material things, as he had laboured spiritually among the Corinthians.

Then comes the punchline: Paul had not made use of these rights and did not intend to! Why? He and his co-workers endured anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel. To them, something is far more important than their personal rights: the gospel of Christ. Their primary objective was the clear proclamation of the gospel and the unhindered spread of this good news. Paul did not criticise those who used their rights for he was fully aware that those employed in the temple service get their food from the temple.

As for Paul himself, the essence of his freedom lies in his ability to use his freedom to deny himself, for the sake of the gospel. He knew he had every right to be financially supported by the Corinthian church,

but he was concerned that this could lead to a misunderstanding that would undermine the progress of the gospel in that context. He declared that although he was free from all, he had made himself a servant to all, for the sake of the gospel.

Paul disclosed that he was under a divine compulsion to preach the gospel and he was convicted that a life of gospel preaching is inseparable from a life of gospel sacrifice. Paul saw his self-denying sacrifice as expressing the very essence of the message of Christ crucified. Therefore, he would not allow anyone to deprive him of this approach in his ministry.

As a servant to all, Paul was willing not to assert his rights. Instead, he sacrificed his rights as he brought the gospel to various groups. He was willing to adapt his approach as long as he did not need to compromise the ways of the Lord in order to win as many as possible for the gospel.

Paul then turned his attention to athletes competing in a race. The city of Corinth was familiar with this illustration as it hosted the Isthmus games regularly. The runners exercised discipline, self-control, not only in the race, but also in the preparations in order to win a perishable wreath. Only one runner would receive this prize and all the runners were very clear of their goal to win.

There ought to be the same level of determination, discipline and dedication at the heart of the believer's spiritual life and race. The prize for finishing the Christian race is not just something perishable but an eternal prize! And the winner is not just one individual; all faithful servants of Christ will receive this prize. Paul here was not referring to salvation but rather to the reward for faithful service.

Paul knew that the whole course has to be completed until the finishing line. He was aware that he himself could be disqualified if he did not exercise self discipline even though he had preached to



others. He had to keep the goal and the finishing line in mind. This is a warning to believers and churches not to be ill-disciplined spiritually and just to drift along without any gospel urgency and radical discipleship.

Listen to the words of J. I. Packer in *Seeing God in the Dark*:

“A mistake is to suppose that growth in grace is automatic; to suppose that it is something you need not bother about because it will look after itself, something which is guaranteed, particularly if you are a professional minister, missionary or church officer. The enemy wants to encourage all who seek to serve God to take it for granted that as we do our job we shall automatically grow and mature in Christ and therefore need not bother about sanctification at all. He wants to encourage us to think this way because, if we are not striving to grow, we are actually in danger of doing the very opposite, namely, shrinking as a person behind the role we play.”

Note that we need to be striving to grow. Paul speaks of discipline, self-control, wholeheartedly running the race, bringing our lazy, self-indulgent bodies and our proud, selfish spirits under the daily challenge of Christ’s authority. But we need to know that it is by God’s enabling through His Spirit. This does not preclude daily discipline, self-control and the partaking of the disciplines of grace, offered to us through the study of the Bible, Christian fellowship, community worship, communion and the other graces. Some call it grace-driven effort. This effort needs to be deliberate and directed, not aimless and sporadic. This effort is empowered by God’s Spirit.



# CHAPTER TEN

## 1 Corinthians 10

After exhorting the believers to run the Christian race and finish well, Paul went on to share about how God was displeased with most of the Israelites in the wilderness after the exodus from Egypt. He recounted how God led them through the Red Sea, guided them and provided for them in the desert. Despite the privileges they enjoyed from God, their responses were repulsive and many of them died in the wilderness without entering the promised land.

We see the dangers of taking our privileges for granted and becoming presumptuous in our Christian walk as we learn from the negative example of the Israelites. Privileges from God do not guarantee that in the end we will not incur God's displeasure. External identification with God's work and involvement in Christian activities, meetings and even listening to God's Word preached and taught do not guarantee that we will be acceptable to God in the end.

When we become presumptuous and careless in our response to God, assuming that our privileges and activities provide immunity for us in our spiritual lives, let us not be surprised when God decides to lay His chastening hand upon us.

Let us not forget that privileges and grace from God require responses of gratefulness, perseverance and fulfil our spiritual obligations sincerely before Him.

One of the biggest threats to perseverance in the Christian life is presumption; it is the assumption that we can muddle through in the end no matter how we live and how we conduct ourselves as believers. As believers, we have greater blessings than the Israelites in the wilderness, and for us to drift away because of presumption would

be a greater tragedy. We need to recall Paul's exhortation to run the race well and to finish well, not ignoring the need for discipline and self-control, in dependence on God's Holy Spirit.

The Apostle then pinpointed the fact that the stories of the Israelites are examples for us to take heed that we do not end up desiring evil as they did. We therefore need to pay close attention to them. Complacency may lull us into spiritual dullness. Then, we may fail to identify the danger we are in and think that we are standing spiritually when in fact we are on the verge of falling. The church of Corinth was in such a precarious state.

The truth of God, as it illuminates our minds, affects our direction in life, stimulates our emotions and moulds our behaviour. If there is no radical positive change in character and behaviour, something is definitely amiss.

Three problem areas were highlighted by Paul: idolatry, sexual immorality and grumbling. All of these were seen in the lives of the Israelites in the wilderness.

Israel was guilty of worshipping the golden calf when Moses was up on the mountain with God. We must remember that anything or anyone that occupies the centre of our lives, in place of, or alongside God is an idol.

We need to evaluate what is the driving force in our lives. What takes first place in our choices when it comes to the bottom line? What is it that we cannot live without? These questions help us determine whether anything or anyone matters more to us than God.

Together with idolatry, Israel immersed herself in sexual immorality. Self-gratification and sexual pleasure at the expense of holiness to God is tantamount to self-worship. This is the root of sexual immorality and we see it exposed in the church of Corinth.

The people of Israel tested God's patience and grumbled against

God again and again. They even rebelled against Moses and the leaders, longing to go back to Egypt, the place of bondage. In the process, they forgot God's gracious providence, His miraculous deliverance from Egypt in the great exodus, and His preserving grace.

Let us be clear that in one key way we are no different from the Israelites. Idolatry, immorality, and grumbling are endemic in the human heart. If we do not appreciate the ugliness of sin and we do not appreciate the good news in Jesus, then these sins easily surface in our lives. Only deep gratitude to God will keep us away from presumption and careless living.

It is comforting that Paul shared that although trials and testing are used by God to mould us into the image of our Lord Jesus, the Lord God knows our limits and He regulates in His love and kindness. He offers a way of escape and we need to take hold of it by battling the flesh, the world and the devil, in the strength He provides through His Holy Spirit. We shall not be spiritually wrecked if we continue to trust in a faithful God.

Paul ended the chapter by telling believers to flee from idolatry. Although Paul had indicated earlier on that food offered to idols means nothing, yet behind them are something sinister - participation in worship of demons and evil. Here is a call for believers to refrain from having anything to do with demonic activity. Besides obvious occult practices and their associations, believers should beware of less obvious and subtle inroads made by the evil one; these include materialism, greed in gambling, the addictive power of sex, pornography, drinking, drugs, and lastly the relentless quest for power, status and wealth.

In ending, Paul, in outlining Christian behaviour among unbelievers exhorted believers to do all to the glory of God and to seek the good of many, giving no unnecessary offence to any whenever possible. There should be no compromise though when it comes to honouring God and being faithful to Him. He told believers to imitate him as he imitates Christ.



# CHAPTER ELEVEN

## 1 Corinthians 11: 2-16

Some passages in Scriptures are hard to understand; some are hard to accept. 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 belongs to the latter category. The passage is both attacked and rejected vigorously by Christian feminist lobby and liberal Bible commentators. Nonetheless, it is part of the Holy Scriptures and we need to approach this passage prayerfully and in dependence on the Holy Spirit to lead us and to help us understand and apply it in our lives.

The Apostle Paul stated it clearly, ‘but I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God’. The concept of headship is present in the chain of relationships mentioned. The Greek word for head may mean the physical head, the source or origin or a person in authority.

The more common interpretation throughout church history (after comparing Scripture with Scripture and looking through the whole Bible) is to view the verse as referring to authority/responsibility in the context of headship. It is not to be understood as a matter of inherent superiority so much as one of different functions or roles.

In the Trinity, there is an equality of the three Persons in the Godhead. This equality allows for the role of the Son in His work of salvation to be subordinate to that of the Father and the role of the Holy Spirit to point to Jesus, shining the spotlight on Jesus rather than on the Spirit.

Likewise, scriptures affirm the equality of the sexes both in creation and redemption. Men and women, together, are made in the image of God for the tasks of procreation and dominion in God’s world. In Galatians 3:28, Paul, speaking of the new creation and the order of

redemption, declares that “there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Hence we should treat each other as equals in Christ and determine our behaviour toward each other by the fact that we are equals in Christ.

In Genesis 2, we learn that man was created to be God’s representative and head of the created order. While the woman shares that role equally and fully as a human being, nevertheless in her relationship to man there was a differentiation which was indicated by the facts of her being created from the man, and being created for the man as a helper/partner suitable for him. As the man glorifies God by fulfilling the headship role assigned to him by the Creator, so the woman ‘glorifies’ man by recognising him as her head. The matter of headship is an issue of role and function rather than a matter of superiority.

There is a distinction between the sexes that should be exemplified in public worship. This distinction seemed to be lost in the church in Corinth. Ironically, it had to do with the new-found freedom for women in Christ. Women had always been treated and viewed as second-class citizens in the days when the Lord Jesus walked on earth. However, He treated women with respect and dignity. This was carried forward subsequently in the Church of God.

The opening section of 1 Corinthians 11 affirms a role for women in the congregation, both in prayer and prophesying. These activities are not forbidden. But the participation of women in these legitimate activities must not obscure the differentiation of the roles of men and women that God has built into His creation order.

Gospel freedom was being used in the church in Corinth to obscure and overturn these norms and to usurp the role of man and in the manner of participation. Paul was saying that a woman may take part in prayer and prophecy provided that she is covered (the precise nature of the covering is disputed) as to show that she knows her place in the order of creation by not seeking to upstage the men in their role.



Paul, in verse 10, added the clause “because of the angels”. Angels serve God by executing His purposes among human beings and they are observing all that is going on in the world. The angels would want Christian women to enjoy both their freedom and dignity that the gospel has brought to them but this will only come about by such women fulfilling their God-given role, not usurping that of the men. Likewise, the angels also would want Christian men to take on their role of leadership and not to abandon it. In the manner of participation, men should not behave as women and fail to fulfil their responsibility, thus dishonouring the head who is Christ.

Gospel freedom and kingdom values fulfil creation principles and never undermine them. By submitting to God’s creation order and kingdom values, men and women find their true fulfilment.

Jesus Christ came to destroy the work of the devil and to redeem men and women to become like Him, regaining their true humanness as it was meant to be from the beginning. Obedience to God manifests our love for Him, our complete confidence in Him and in the fact that whatever He commands us to do, it is in line with His perfect goodness and love. He never asks us to do what is not ultimately good for us. This includes His commands and His laws, given to guide us and to help know what His desires are for us, His people and His children.

## **1 Corinthians 11:17-34**

Paul now turned his attention to the Lord’s Supper as practised in the church of Corinth.

The Lord’s Supper is meant to remind believers of Christ’s death for them at the cross. In 1 Corinthians, Paul again and again stressed the centrality of the cross and Him crucified. True spirituality finds its focus and shape in the cross of the Lord Jesus. What was happening at the church in Corinth was undermining the sacred meaning of the Lord’s Supper and the centrality of the Cross.

The believers came together for a fellowship meal preceding the communion service. Food was brought together for all to share. What took place however was dishonouring to the Lord. The believers in Corinth could not wait to fill their own stomachs, without regard for how it was affecting others in the group. The rich were providing much food and drink for this meal which they were consuming themselves. But the poor remained hungry.

The cross should bring the end of human pride, the distinction between the rich and the poor, and the death of elitism. But the fellowship before the communion which was supposed to express unity in the gospel had degenerated into an occasion for pride, snobbery, greed and selfishness.

The believers in Corinth were not approaching the Lord's Supper with a right spirit and had actually desecrated the meaning of the communion service with such negative behaviour at the fellowship meal.

We need to pause here and evaluate whether congregations today have taken on such a negative behaviour as well in the interaction among believers. Have we allowed financial and social distinctions to harden into indifference and separatism? Are members of the congregations being despised because of their social and financial background?

Then comes the Lord's Supper proper. Participation in the Lord's Supper is a refreshing reminder to live a godly life, by 'feeding on Him in our hearts by faith' with thanksgivings as we eat the bread. Drinking the cup of wine emphasises our oneness with God and all fellow believers in the new covenant created through the blood of Christ shed at the Cross. The communion proclaims to God and men our faith in Christ's death for us. It implies not just our saving faith but a life-style lived under the lordship of our Lord Jesus Christ. It also anticipates an eternity with Christ who has risen and will come again in power to inaugurate the new heaven and earth. It is a solemn and

sacred service and should not be abused by believers who come before the table with a wrong attitude.

Our unwillingness to die to self and our despising of our brethren denies the very purpose of what the communion stands for. The one bread implies the oneness and unity of the body of Christ.

Paul warned the Corinthian believers not to partake of the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner. To come with unrepentant hearts is to sin against Christ's body and blood. The Supper proclaims salvation through humble faith in Christ and dependence on His substitutionary death. There is therefore a need to prayerfully examine ourselves as we come, checking our attitude and affirming once more His grace and mercy towards us; seeking to obey Him and to honour Him in our hearts, glorifying Him in the Cross and in our crucified life-style.

Paul reminded the Corinthian believers that the Lord would discipline those who abused the Lord's Supper in their attitude. The call to the church was to repent. God would not allow His Son's name and work to be despised. This is a warning to us as well. If we are honest in acknowledging our sin, God need not discipline us.



# CHAPTER TWELVE

## 1 Corinthians 12

Here Paul was responding to the Corinthian believers regarding their queries on spiritual gifts. 1 Corinthians 12-14 focuses on the work of the Holy Spirit in connection with the local church. Chapter 12 concentrates on the issue of the variety of spiritual gifts given by the Holy Spirit while Chapter 14 encourages pursuit of gifts which builds up the church; sandwiched in between these two chapters is the chapter on love: the excellent way which guides the exercise of spiritual gifts in the Church of God.

The purpose of spiritual gifts is to build up, unify and edify Christ's body, not to tear it apart. It is a tragedy that in the Corinthian church, and amongst Christians today, spiritual gifts have become a divisive issue instead.

In the Corinthian public worship, apparently, there was a chaotic uproar with many talking all at once, some in ecstatic gibberish. Women may even have been heard screeching above the general noise (note 1 Corinthians 14:26-35). There was rivalry, self-display and disorder in connection with leading the prayers, singing and sharing. These problems, in part, were due to the fact that the Corinthian church had been enriched by God with spiritual gifts but the outworking had been wrecked by pride, division, their pagan background and self-centredness.

Lest we become glad and feel that our churches today are free from such disorders, the fear is that there is orderliness simply because we are spiritually asleep. The Corinthian believers met with eagerness and excitement, anxious to share with fellow believers the spiritual gifts; whereas churches today often gather with indifference, seeking only to receive, without preparation of spirit.

Admittedly, the disorders in Corinth were grievous and not to be desired. The question remains whether the exuberance and risk of disorder accompanying the exercise of gifts by the Holy Spirit may be preferable to spiritual deadness, neat and orderly.

Paul shared that to distinguish gifts from the Holy Spirit from those mystical experiences carried over from pagan practice, the test is to gauge the attitude to Jesus: No one can say, “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit will always bear witness to the true nature of the Son of God. It is not just saying the words, but the devotion to the lordship of Jesus in practical daily outworking that points to the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Paul went on to focus on the themes of unity and diversity. He referred to the variety of gifts from the same Spirit, the variety of services from the same Lord and the variety of activities from the same God, bringing out the unity and oneness of the Holy Trinity.

The list of spiritual gifts is not exhaustive; there may be many more but the emphasis is on serving others for the benefit of the body of Christ. If we lose this focus, then the exercise of spiritual gifts becomes more gift-centred than God-centred. God chooses the gifts and He chooses their recipients. If there is rivalry, division and selfish comparison, then God’s people are guilty of worldly immaturity. The real purpose of the abilities given by God is to build up the church and promote Christian harmony among believers under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

The new birth for believers consists of union with Christ in His death and resurrection, leading to fellowship with Him in His risen life. This union with Christ implies union with all others who belong to Christ. In Christ, my fellow-believer is my brother, for we both belong to the same family. In a real sense, we are part of each other because we are vitally linked to our Saviour; we are members one of another and are in reality part of one body. Here the Apostle Paul brings in the

concept of the church as a spiritual body with Christ as the head and we as members of the body. In the body, all are members of one another; in the new person, racial distinction, sexual and social distinctions too, are transcended. In and under Christ, Christians are called to “fit in” with one another, to feel for one another, and to stand together in love, loyalty and care.

The local church is not merely a club or a human organisation; she is a divine creation called to glorify Christ. The church’s life should be one of love and gratitude to God in which we seek to imitate our Saviour by love towards all people, and especially those who are both His brothers and sisters and ours. The members must have the same care for one another. This life of love is to be a life of fellowship whereby we share the good things that God has given us individually. No one is self-sufficient; we all need one another and what God has given to one another. We must learn to express our love in the give-and-take of Christian fellowship. This loving fellowship is in fact a form of service, a ministry to which every Christian is called. God’s gifts to various ones are not primarily for themselves but for others, to be used for their good in the fellowship of the body’s life.

Every part of the body has its own function and unique contribution to the body. Every part is needed; there are many parts but one body. No part should feel it does not belong and none should declare to another that it is not needed. Each one counts and needs to contribute but what we contribute depends entirely on God’s appointment and distribution.

If we see these truths clearly, then our divisive spirit towards others in the body becomes a serious transgression against the head of the body, Jesus Christ Himself. It is not just “I cannot get along with this fellow” or “the sight of this sister makes me sick”; it gives rise to serious considerations of whether we truly belong to the body of Christ. If we truly belong together, the pain of one member affects the whole body and the joy of one ‘infects’ the body.

Envy, jealousy, the lack of love and harmony: all these grieve the heart of God as He yearns for the oneness and testimony of His people. The one-upmanship and pride displayed in the exercise of gifts in congregations do not identify the reality of the discipleship and calling of God's Church; it hurts the body of Christ and minimizes the glory of God. Ponder what was written by William Gurnall in *The Christian in Complete Armour*:

“The sin of a natural man is theft because he robs God of the glory due to Him; but the sin of a saint is sacrilege because he robs God of the sacredness which his profession of faith has vowed to Him”.

Christians beware: our sins against our brethren in the body of Christ are not just personal matters; they rob God of the sacredness of our profession of faith to Him, and it is not a trivial matter.



# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

## 1 Corinthians 13

This chapter on love needs to be read as a contrast to what was happening in the church of Corinth. The church in Corinth was deeply divided in doctrine, practice, social class and spiritual gifts. There were divisions in following various leaders, conflicts in ministry and spiritual one-upmanship.

This chapter was written primarily for loveless people in the church who think themselves superior than their brethren. In that light, it is very relevant to local churches today where God's people are entrenched in a similar mould; what is characteristic of churches today is not far different from what was happening in the church of Corinth.

As we read this chapter, we need to note the standard of love described and realize with soberness that none of us lives with this kind of love. The love described here is the love of Jesus Himself; it is the exact opposite of our sinful, self-centred human nature and it is precisely a corrective passage to the particular denials of love shown in the church at Corinth.

The chapter begins with a clear message: love is foundational, and without love there can be nothing of value in the eyes of God. The spiritual life of an individual, or of a congregation, is measured not by gifts or busy activity, not by size and impact, not by commitment to sound doctrine, or keenness to experience God's power but by love. The existence and use of spiritual gifts are not in themselves the mark of genuine spirituality. It is only the presence and motivation of love that denotes the presence of God's Spirit, because biblical spirituality is all about the self-giving love of Christ in His atoning sacrifice for sinners on the cross. In a nutshell, this love is superior to all extraordinary spiritual gifts and talents.

The Apostle Paul went on to make a series of comparisons of such extraordinary gifts with love and show how essential love is. Without love, having a gift of utterance with words would result in our words producing only an “empty sound coming forth from an hollow lifeless vessel”. The gift of knowledge and understanding of mysteries is nothing without love; no one cares how much we know unless they also know how much we love. The gift of great faith that is able to accomplish the ‘impossibles’ is nothing too without love. Even the greatest good works like giving away everything and suffering martyrdom can be done without love. They may be done to boost our spiritual pride or to get something from God. Unless such deeds are motivated by genuine love for God, they will amount to nothing. No matter what gifts God has given us and no matter what we have done for God, without love, they mean nothing.

It is certainly possible to use our gifts for ministry without love for anyone except ourselves. The Apostle Paul was not denying the value of spiritual gifts and ministry in the church; instead, he was saying that every spiritual gift must be used in a loving way and what really matters is how loving we are and not how gifted we are. The love in this chapter is really the love of Jesus. We will only learn to love by having more of Jesus in our hearts and lives. The only way for us to become more loving is to have more of the love of Jesus. The Holy Spirit is given to us so that we can start to love the way that Jesus loves. 1 Corinthians 13 is in fact a portrait of love personified in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, and this love is available to us more and more as we become more and more like our Lord Jesus.

Paul went on to comment on the characteristics of love, stating what love is like and what love is not like. The first feature: love is patient and kind. Anyone who can testify to God’s kindness in his life is called to show kindness to others. Love begins not with us loving but with us being loved. Only through faith in Christ can we begin to love the way Jesus loves. Knowing the love of Christ through faith enables us to love others; similarly, knowing the kindness of God enables us to

start showing the kindness of God to others. The kindness we are called to show also means showing it to people who do not even deserve it; it includes showing selfless kindness to those who have been unkind to us. Do not wait for others to be nice to you before you are nice to them, but treat others as kindly as God has treated you through the cross of Christ.

As believers, are we known as people of kindness, or do people associate Christians as those with attitudes that are judgemental, hypocritical and self-centred?

Paul went on to define love according to what it is not. The first of this: love is not irritable. It is not grumpy or grouchy, going into a tirade, or verbal abuse or silent treatment. Whenever we start to get irritated, we should see this as a failure to love. So if we get angry about trivial things, rather than putting the blame on others, our exasperation is not just a failure to love other people but also a failure to love God. Irritability has a negative view of God; instead of seeking God's help, irritability chooses to be angry. Anger does not just hurt other people, it also hinders our own relationship with God.

The second feature: love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. Envy is really a form of hostility; instead of rejoicing in the success of others, the envious person will be troubled by it. This is something that love never does. True love does not begrudge the honour of another, but delights in it for their sake. Why are we green with envy when someone gets what we want and why is it important for others to praise us for our achievements? When we are envious, boastful, rude and arrogant, we will not get down on our knees to serve like Jesus did in washing the feet of His disciples; instead we expect others to get down on their knees to serve us. It is only when we humble ourselves to go to the cross on our knees in repentance that we can ask the Lord Jesus to help us love the way He loves.

The third feature: love does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love does not celebrate someone else's sin; it

does not feel a sense of satisfaction when someone else does something wrong, especially someone with whom we disagree. It is not the way of love to always track down and point out what is wrong in others' lives. It wants to rejoice in what is right.

The fourth feature: love does not insist on its own way. Jesus taught us to be intentional about loving others and resisting the temptations to put ourselves first. One way of loving others is by not insisting on our way. It is by not living for self-interest or self-advantage. It does not pursue self-gratification but practices self-denial instead.

Our love for ourselves is one long love affair that most of us never abandon. We see this in the way we pursue our careers, getting ahead of others by whatever means available; we see this in the way we spend our money for personal pleasure rather than for the good of others. We see it also in the way we neglect our families, our children, abandoning our spouses and putting our old folks away. Our highest calling for most of us is to take loving care of ourselves. There is a limited sense in which believers are to take care of themselves and be good stewards of their bodies, but it should not gravitate toward self-interest and self-centredness.

Then comes the profound statement: love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. What does this really mean?

Love bears all things and endures all things in the sense of suffering patiently all the troubles that come from dealing with other people, including people who try to harm us. We may be prepared to come alongside others to help carry their burdens, but to deal patiently with all the hurts that come our way when people attack us is a most difficult thing. Yet love is able to put up with anything and continue to love; it is willing to endure all sufferings for the sake of Christ and the gospel. Only the love of Jesus can empower us to love in such a manner; only the love of Jesus will carry us through.

Love believes all things does not mean that love will believe absolutely anything. Love is not gullible. Love believes all things and hopes all things means that love is able to continue believing through the most extreme situations of hardship and suffering without losing hope. Love enables us to persevere in the present because of our confident belief and hope in the eternal future and there is in fact no limit to love's believing, for the object of this belief, confidence and hope is in Christ and His promises. Knowing our Father's love and the love of Jesus strengthens our faith. The more we experience God's love, the more we will learn to trust Him, even in times of extreme need and desperate hopelessness; love, therefore, believes all things and hopes all things in Christ.

Verse 8 declares: love never fails or love never ends. Prophecies will pass away, tongues will cease and knowledge will also pass away but love endures. Paul used two contrasting images from everyday life to help us understand this profound reality. He compared childhood with adulthood and the reflection in a mirror with the reality it represents. He was saying that no matter how much we mature spiritually in this life, it will only be a childhood compared with the complete maturity we will realise in heaven. The second picture reinforces the same idea; with the second coming of Christ, the reflection in the mirror will be replaced with the reality, and gifts will no longer be needed. Faith is no longer needed when the reality is fully apprehended; hope is no longer in existence when what was hoped for has been fully realised. But love never ends and love never fails. In the new heavens and new earth, we will learn to love God to perfection and to love all those who are His children. Love will never be superseded.



# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

## 1 Corinthians 14

The Apostle Paul returned to the theme of the exercise of spiritual gifts within the Corinthian church and his treatment of this matter did not lose sight of the priority of love in chapter 13. In the light of love as a priority, there was a need for the Corinthian believers to desire gifts and exercise them with the emphasis on edifying the church and not displaying their gifts in a proud and self-centred manner. Also, there should be proper order and decorum in their time of worship which is in line with the manifestation of love rather than disorder which dishonours the Lord God.

Paul then addressed the gift of tongues and the gift of prophecy. As edification of the church is what matters most, God's Word should be spoken intelligibly in the power of the Holy Spirit. In that light, Paul concluded that the one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets the meaning of the tongues.

We need to spend some time to understand what Paul meant with regard to the gifts of speaking in tongues and prophecy. Glossolalia (uttering sounds unintelligible to oneself) or speaking in tongues, is seen as a gift that enables worshippers to sustain and heighten moods of adoration, penitence, and intercession in a way they could not do otherwise. The gift is regarded as mainly, though not entirely, for private devotional use. The present-day tongue-speaking, in which the mood is maintained but the mind is on vacation, cannot be confidently equated from any point of view with New Testament tongues.

Tongue-speaking in the New Testament context seemed to be exercised under fully self-conscious rational control and Paul was able to exhort those speaking in tongues to refrain unless there was interpretation, and the exercise of it even with interpretation should be

done in an orderly manner.

Tongue-speaking should be contrasted with Xenolalia (speaking real foreign languages) which was manifested in Acts 2 at Pentecost, considered as an exception rather than the rule in the New Testament.

The essence of prophecy is not predictive of the future so much as revealing the mind and will of God. It is the means by which a congregation is built up and encouraged. If we believe that the Bible is God's clear authoritative Word, spoken in specific historical contexts, but unchanging in its truth because it is revelatory of our unchanging God, then "prophecy" today will be the authoritative proclamation of the Bible's truth in the power of the Holy Spirit. Nothing said by any contemporary "prophet" has the quality of authority to be bound into our Bible as a sixty-seventh book. Indeed, any so-called prophecies must be tested by Scripture and should not be accepted as true unless they are in accord with the perfect and completed revelation, the attested and assured Word of Scripture.

The Corinthian church and present congregations must be motivated by love for one another when the believers come together in worship. To allow meaningless speech to dominate their times together is to cease to love and care for one another as they should. To insist on using certain gifts in public such as tongues that have no beneficial effects without interpretation is to depart from the way of love; those who pursue love will excel in gifts that strengthen and encourage the whole body, not in confusing or alienating the people of God or even unbelievers who happened to come into the meetings.

Paul was not undervaluing or dismissing the gift of tongues, for he himself spoke in tongues. He was not forbidding speaking in tongues per se but he was concerned about regulating it. His main point is that in the exercise of spiritual gifts, the edification of the congregation is the primary criterion. If the mind is not engaged, no one else can be edified. If no one else can comprehend the tongues because what is



being said is not understandable, then it is best to restrict the use of tongues to private devotion.

What did Paul mean when he wrote that the women should keep silent in the churches? In all likelihood, Paul was trying to end an abuse in Corinth, the abuse, namely, of women interrupting worship when something was said that they did not understand. If so, that is the point of Paul telling them to ask their husbands at home. In the ancient world, the treatment of women and their education was vastly inferior to men's. Consequently, when the good news of freedom and equality made them on par with men for the first time ever, some women, against the background of their very defective education, may have thrown their weight about. In that light, Paul wrote to stop this happening. It is evidently a rule about interruption and not a rule about participating in prayer and prophesying because in chapter 11 Paul had already made it clear that that was permitted, provided the women knew their place in the order of creation and sought not to upstage men and usurp their role. Unnecessary interruption in worship would constitute disorder and a lack of reverence toward God. Paul's statement about women keeping silent in church should be understood with this in mind. Even the exercise of gifts of prophecy should be done with order; prophecy should be shared one by one, so that all may learn and be encouraged. Paul emphasised that God is not a God of confusion but of peace.



# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

## 1 Corinthians 15

What Apostle Paul taught in chapter 15 about the resurrection is full of hope and assurance for the future. We need to ponder these truths, understanding the implications for our Christian lives now, and our needful response as we face the battle against the Devil, the sinful nature and the pulls of the world.

Paul began by reminding the believers of the key teachings of the gospel and the ultimate victory of Christ over all the hostile forces arrayed against God and His people when the end comes.

The Corinthian believers were exhorted to hold fast to the truth of the gospel; they were to continue believing and living out the gospel. They should not rely only on past profession alone but demonstrate their perseverance by holding firmly to the message of the gospel; otherwise their profession of faith would be in vain. This is also the message for us today who profess to believe in Christ and the gospel. The gospel centres on the cross and the resurrection. Without the cross and the death of the Lord Jesus, there would be no atonement, no satisfaction of God's wrath against sin, no penalty paid for sin, no justification for believers, no forgiveness and no reconciliation. But mark this: without His resurrection, there would be no guarantee of these realities, no victory over sin and death, no defeat of the Devil and evil, and no eternal life!

The climax of the story of the Cross is the resurrection! Without the resurrection, we have no assurance of Christ's victory; with the resurrection, it is now possible for believers to live the life-style of the cross because of, and through, the power of His resurrection.

Paul then went on to elaborate that the resurrection is based on

solid evidence. Firstly, he pointed to the post-resurrection appearance of Christ and the many witnesses who saw Him, some of whom were still alive at that point of time. He appeared to the twelve and to 500 brethren at one time; He also appeared to Paul who felt that he was most unworthy of all the apostles to have this privilege.

Paul thus found it shocking that some of the Corinthian believers were saying that there is no resurrection of the dead. One possible reason for this is that some subscribed to the teaching of triumphalism, thinking that they were already experiencing the full blessings of the gospel which were actually to be experienced only at the consummation of the age. Some were falsely claiming that the resurrection had already happened, in the light of this false teaching.

There was also the traditional Greek belief in the dualism between the body and spirit. In this view, only the spirit matters. So physical resurrection would not be desirable.

The apostle went on to stress the implications of unbelief in the resurrection. Firstly, the preaching of the gospel is in vain and the faith of the believers is also in vain. What had been communicated in the gospel would have been purely fiction and the believers would have anchored their faith in what was not true. The apostles would then have been guilty of misrepresenting God. The faith of the believers would have been futile and they would have still been in their sins. The believers who had died would have remained dead and all those who have hoped in Christ would have been most pitiful. What is the point then for Christians to endure hardship and face spiritual battles against the powers of darkness?

But the fact is Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep! Firstfruits was a celebration and a guarantee of the full harvest yet to come. So, Christ's resurrection sets in motion the inevitable and sure process by which all of God's people will be raised from the dead when He comes again.

J.C. Ryle puts it clearly in *Day by Day with J.C. Ryle*:

“There is a resurrection after death. Let this be never forgotten. The life that we live here in the flesh is not all: the visible world around us is not the only world with which we have to do; all is not over when the last breath is drawn, and men and women are carried to their long home in the grave. “The trumpet shall one day sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible.” All that are in the graves shall hear Christ’s voice, and come forth; they that have done good, to the resurrection of life, and they that have done evil, to the resurrection of damnation. This is one of the great foundation truths of the Christian religion.

Let us cling to it firmly, and never let it go. Let us strive to be like men who believe in a resurrection and a life to come, and desire to be always ready for another world. So living, we shall look forward to death with calmness: we shall feel that there remains some better portion for us beyond the grave. So living, we shall take patiently all that we have to bear in this world: trials, losses, disappointments and ingratitude will affect us little. We shall not look for our reward here: we shall feel that all will be rectified one day, and that the Judge of all the earth will do right.”

Paul went on to say that in Adam, all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive (i.e. all those who are in Christ). Then comes the end: Jesus Christ will be revealed as King of kings and Lord of lords, taking His place in sovereign authority eternally and destroying and every authority and power, human or spiritual, which has opposed God’s rule and authority. God will put everything under Christ’s feet; when this is completed, the Son will present His completed task to the Father and the Son Himself will subject Himself to the Father that God may be all in all.

The Apostle Paul was aware that some may wonder how the dead will be raised and with what kind of body will the dead arise. Paul drew from the natural world two illustrations of a principle to give an inkling

of what this might mean.

He first pointed to planting seeds in the ground and waiting for the plant to germinate, to flower and to fruit. The seed must die first before it comes to life as a plant. What is sown is a seed; what comes forth subsequently is a plant, so different from the seed that it comes from. Yet the plant comes from the seed and continues from it.

Just because the resurrection of the body is so different from anything we see or experience at present, we should not doubt or be sceptical of this reality to come. Look at the variety and beauty of the present creation we can see. Then, perhaps we can see something of the wonders of that new creation that we are yet to see. What we shall see in the resurrected body is something imperishable; it is raised in glory as contrasted with being sown in dishonour; it is sown in weakness but it will be raised in power; it is sown a natural body but it is raised a spiritual body.

The “natural body” belongs to this world of temporal reality; it was created for life in that environment and it is useless for the life of the world to come. The world to come needs a spiritual body (spirit-powered body) and God will provide that for every believer in Christ.

And this will take place in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. The trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall all be changed. When that happens, death will be swallowed up in victory; death will lose its sting.

In the light of these truths, Paul urged the believers to be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of God. Our work and labour in God is not in vain because it has eternal value and reward!

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

## 1 Corinthians 16

In this closing chapter, the Apostle Paul addressed two issues raised by the Corinthian church: the collection of financial help for the mother church in Jerusalem and Apollos' return to Corinth.

Paul had initiated the project of supporting the saints in Jerusalem. This was raised not only with the church in Corinth but also with the churches of Galatia. The intent was to collect offerings from all these various churches and to send the collection to the church in Jerusalem. The church in Jerusalem was suffering financial need at that time and it might have been due to drought in that area and also to the support of many believers in poverty and persecution.

Paul was keen to encourage the churches in Asia and Macedonia to show practical love to those in Jerusalem. After all, the church in Jerusalem had been a great benefit spiritually to those other churches, and now they ought to show Christian fellowship and gratitude in meeting the Jerusalem church's physical needs.

Also, Paul may have been keen to close the apparent gap between the churches founded from his ministry with the church in Jerusalem, assuring those in Jerusalem that the believers in Asia and Macedonia were genuine followers of Christ.

It is interesting to note Paul's approach in handling monetary gifts. He wanted the believers to give cheerfully without compulsion (see 2 Corinthians 9:7). That probably explains his instructions for them to put aside something every week so that when the time for the collection arrives, they need not give under pressure.

Also, Paul was careful to ask the church to nominate responsible

individuals to bring the collection to Jerusalem. If Paul himself were to be involved, it would only be accompanying them in that task. The Apostle was careful that there was not even the appearance of dishonest handling of the monetary gift.

It would do today churches well to emulate Paul's call to practical love and to careful handling of money in the ministry. John exhorted believers not only to love in words but in deeds (1 John 3:18). The misdeeds of churches today in the issue of money and finance have stumbled many unbelievers and surely grieved the heart of God.

Paul outlined his travel plans and his intention to visit the church in Corinth in the near future. The plans were admittedly tentative. He was keen to continue the ministry in Ephesus where opportunities abounded and he also intended to visit the congregations in Macedonia before coming to Corinth. The Apostle seemed to be led by the guidance of the Holy Spirit in his travel plans and also his discernment of the various needs in the different localities (see Acts 16:6-10). His plans were therefore fluid and not confirmed; this led to misunderstanding subsequently with the church in Corinth when they perceived Paul as not honouring his word in his intention to visit them at a certain time.

Paul was also concerned for Timothy whom he sent to visit the church at Corinth. He had experienced a painful visit from certain individuals in Corinth and he did not want Timothy to experience a similar treatment when he arrived.

We see here the heart of Paul and his concern for his co-worker. Paul also expressed his encouragement of Apollos to visit Corinth but Apollos was not keen to do so at that point of time. This was to assure the Corinthian believers, especially those who had an affinity for Apollos, that there was no relationship problem between him and Apollos. He also indicated that Apollos would visit when he had the opportunity to do so.



In closing, Paul urged the believers to be vigilant and courageous in their faith, given the many false teachers and preachers in their midst. He also reiterated the supremacy of love, doing all things in love. They would remember that only Jesus could manifest such a quality of love: the Holy Spirit would enable those in Christ to increasingly grow to love in this manner. Believers love because He first loves us; the message of the cross and Him crucified comes to the forefront again. In that light, the apostle also encouraged them to submit themselves to faithful workers in the faith and to give such ones recognition. He mentioned certain ones from their midst who were such individuals. Paul also sent greetings from Aquila, Priscilla and those meeting in their house, sending their love.



# CONCLUDING REMARKS

## The Centrality of the Cross

The cross features prominently in the book of 1 Corinthians. We saw how the Apostle Paul communicated the gospel: with trembling and fear so that the salvation of the Corinthian Christians would depend on the power of the Spirit and the message of the cross. Paul affirmed that he and his co-workers were just stewards, but the growth of the church and the glory belong to God; they served as servants of the gospel which is anchored in the message of the cross. Throughout the sixteen chapters, the cross appears, sometimes prominently, at times in a subtle manner.

In the concluding remarks, we need to pause and take a good look at the cross and why it is so important in the life of the Church and in the ministry of the servants of God.

The supreme moment of triumph and glory for God is achieved through the humiliation, weakness and betrayal of the Son of God as He was nailed to the cross by humankind, the people He has created and for whom He came to die. The glorification of the Father and the Son, the two are tied together, take place at the cross where the Father and the Son stoop in love and humility to save humankind. Jesus' death on the cross will bring judgement on the world, drive out Satan, eliminate death and reverse the effects of the Fall.

We need to learn and re-learn again and again that God is glorified by the teaching and application of the cross. The main focus should not be signs and wonders, not magnificent church buildings, not large numbers at meetings, not big budgets, clever rhetoric and clear argument (which was highlighted by Paul), not even beautiful music and singing. These can all be good in their proper place. First and foremost, it is

Jesus' death that accomplishes God's glory and reverses all our failure. Throughout church history, the church has stumbled badly when she drifted away from this truth, either by thinking we are good enough to achieve God's glorification, or by failing to understand history from an eternal perspective, looking for God's glorification mainly in a visible way through our work, apart from the enabling of the Spirit.

The cross is central to our adoption into God's family; it is central to our assurance, our day to day forgiveness and to our ongoing life as His servants and messengers. It is central in the discipleship of every believer; it speaks of sacrificial love, humility, self-giving service and unconditional obedience to the triune God. It is therefore indispensable in the life and service of the Church of God.

The preaching of the cross, the death of the Lord Jesus on the cross, and the meaning of this is the very centre and heart of the gospel and the Christian message. This is never a popular message and the preaching of the cross brings offence to many and it also brings persecution to the preacher.

This explains what the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians that when he preached Christ crucified, to the Jews it was a stumbling block and to the Greeks it was foolishness. Nonetheless, the Apostle Paul determined not to know anything among the listeners except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

The message of the cross declares that we are not saved by human wisdom, or by human ideas or philosophy or understanding; it is the cross that saves us. Jesus Christ saves us by bearing our punishment and by taking our guilt upon Himself. The cross saves us if we believe this message; this is only the one thing we have to do. "...through Jesus the forgiveness of sin is proclaimed to you. Through Him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses" (Acts 13:38-39).

The message of the cross is the greatest insult to natural man; he rejects the remark that he is lost and needs to be saved; he resents the idea that he is a sinner and a failure; he refuses to believe that he is as bad as the hopeless drunkard or the fallen woman and that there is no difference. He cannot accept that 'all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God' (Romans 3:23). The message of the cross is an offence to the pride of the natural man; not only does he not accept that all are equally sinners, but he finds it unacceptable that we are all equally hopeless and can do nothing about it at all. To confess that we are utterly hopeless and helpless hurts our pride and our heart. And to even suggest that all our efforts to be right with God are of no avail is repulsive; and on top of this, to conclude that our only hope is just to believe and accept the message of the cross and the gospel without any contribution on our part makes the message very offensive indeed!

No wonder Apostle Paul, in the epistle, declares that God forbid that he should glory, save in the cross of Christ. The Christian not only glories in the cross but he glories in the cross alone; for he knows that apart from the cross there is no salvation; apart from the cross, there is no hope, apart from the cross there is no power to overcome sin, to be godly and to be fruitful spiritually.

It is imperative that we see the centrality of the cross in Christian ministry and service as well as in building God's Church. This is particularly seen in 1 Corinthians.

The cross speaks of weakness leading to strength. The apostles were acutely aware of this and they knew they had to depend on God and His wisdom and ways to do the ministry and to build His people. As such, they refrained from depending on their ability to debate, to count on rhetoric and oratorical skills in doing God's work and in preaching the gospel. They were prepared to be looked upon as 'unimpressive' teachers, as 'scum of the earth' so that the Word of God could go forth with His power and life and not on the basis of their charisma and skills. In this light, the Apostles were always conscious of not claiming God's

glory for themselves; they considered themselves just as stewards and servants of God and they knew that growth and progress of God's work depends entirely on God.

The servants of God, in recognising the importance of the cross, sought to have a cross-shaped feature in their approach to service and ministry. They therefore took on self-denial in their approach to doing God's work and were prepared to give up their rights for the sake of the gospel even though they were legitimately entitled to these rights as servants of the living God.

The cross also speaks of sufferings leading to glory in God. The servants of God were prepared to suffer for Jesus' sake and they did not flinch in the face of persecution, misunderstanding and pain. They continued to endure and persevere even though they were not appreciated as long as the Lord God was pleased with them.

Finally, the cross focuses on the grace and love of God when Father and Son, in love and humility, agreed to send the Son to the cross to bear the sins of many and to reverse the effects of the fall. The true servants of God know what God's love is like and they were conscious that apart from their message, they need to manifest the love of Jesus in their service and to be willing to be servants for Jesus' sake. They continued to be gracious to those who wronged them and extend their forgiveness and good will to those who repented.

We need to measure the ministry of God's servants today and the work of God in the Church and missions against the characteristics that come forth from the cross of Jesus Christ. If the cross is not central in our life and ministry, we can be sure that the work would not last and the Lord God will not be pleased with it.

## **The Role of the Holy Spirit**

We have seen how the CROSS features so much in the book of

1 Corinthians and how its ‘absence’ and its lack in emphasis had caused so many problems for the church in Corinth.

We now need to focus on the Holy Spirit, His role in regeneration when the gospel is preached, His ministry in sanctification of the believers and His contribution in Christian ministry and in the life of the church.

The apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 2 emphasised that his preaching and message of the gospel were not dependent on human wisdom or persuasive words but rather with a demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, by the Word of God alone or through the ministry of those who preach the Word, convinces the unbelieving world of sin and of righteousness and of judgement (John 16:8). The believers in Corinth were taken up with rhetoric and the oratorical skills of the false “apostles” to a point that they missed the authentic ministry of the Spirit in the proclamation of the gospel. We must not make the same mistake in our desire to evangelise; we cannot afford to depend on human wisdom, management principles, props, psychological influences through emotional music, technical skills and the like to preach the gospel. In depending on all these, we are in danger of ‘ignoring’ the Holy Spirit of God who alone can bring about true conversion and salvation. The church must recognise beyond all doubt that the sole cause of conversion and faith is the Holy Spirit, working through the Word of God. If all good flows from the Spirit of God, down to the first desire to seek God, then dependence and prayer constitute the only fitting attitude for the church in her approach to preaching and sharing the gospel. Too often we focus on techniques and events and activities, but Jesus teaches that if we focus on Him, and our relationship with Him, evangelistic fruit will come naturally, in answer to our prayer, and in this way we will bring glory to the Father.

The Corinthian believers were endowed with many spiritual gifts; yet in 1 Corinthians 3, the Apostle Paul branded them as worldly or fleshly or carnal. Their lives were characterised by pride, jealousy

envy and outright arrogance. Obviously, although they, as a church, was supposed to be a temple of God, they were not a body which is holy and attractive for the Holy Spirit to reign in. Christian love and character is distinctive and a powerfully effective form of witness in the world, while we wait for the Lord Jesus to return. When the world sees the ‘ugliness’ of the church, it is understandable why she recoils from the gospel. We are reminded of what the late John Stott wrote in “The Radical Disciple” that those who shared the gospel do not look like the Jesus they proclaimed. No wonder the hearers found it hard to receive the good news!

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul shared that although there are different kinds of gifts, it is the same Spirit who distributes them, and although there are different kinds of service, we are serving the same Lord and it is the same God who is at work. We must recognise that the church comprises of the individuals who worship together; the church is not the building and the ministry of the church is the collective ministry of the individuals who constitute the church and not only expressed in the organised ‘spiritual activity’ of the church in her programmes and planned activities. Thus the ministry of the church is expressed by the collective ministry of her members in different walks of life and in different locations in society. It does not mean that individuals who do not participate in the church’s planned activities are guilty of not ministering the gospel.

Philippians 2:13 crystallises this truth: “for it is God (the Spirit) who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil His good purpose” The Holy Spirit is the one who is at work to direct us to will and to act according to His good pleasure to fulfil His good purpose. He is the one who works in all individuals who belong to a church; He can work differently in different individuals in different contexts and the believers are to obey His direction and guidance prayerfully. At times, certain ones may be called to focus on certain work which is apart from the planned programmes of the church, yet their work and contribution are no less the ministry of the church as well.



Notice the emphasis that it is the Holy Spirit who works, even to the extent of helping us to will and to do. This is in fact what it means to walk in the Spirit. Let us not forget that it is possible to seek to do God's work by walking in the flesh and the example of the Corinthian believers shows this very clearly.

To conclude, it is the Holy Spirit who makes regeneration and positive response to the gospel possible; it is He who works out sanctification and holiness in the lives of believers and it is definitely He who works in us to cause us to will and to do God's good work and purpose. If the believer and the church fail to see this clearly and work this out properly, the church would not be free from her ailment.

## **The Relationship between the Cross and the Holy Spirit**

We have noted how the CROSS and the HOLY SPIRIT feature rather prominently in 1 Corinthians. The Apostle Paul highlighted this in how the gospel was communicated, how Church-life and outworking depend on it, and how Christian ministry needs to be approached and carried out. Neglect of this leads to dependence on fleshly methods and worldly wisdom and invariably ends up with a church like that of Corinth; oratorical skills and rhetoric took centre stage, spiritual gifts accompanied by pride and self-glory became the norm, partisan spirits and divisive acts devoid of true Christian love and self-denial came to the forefront and the environment was ripe for deception and false teaching to displace faithful teachings and godliness.

A few words may be necessary to tie up the relationship between the Cross and the Holy Spirit in Christian living and the outworking of healthy Church-life. The perfect man Jesus discharged all phases of His atoning work in perfect obedience to the Father. His obedience (which is an expression of His love for the Father) was seen in what He achieved as the perfect man and also in what He suffered, climactic

in His substitutional death on the CROSS. He obeyed, both by fulfilling the law and by accepting its sanctions against the sins of those for whom He died.

As John Calvin pointed out, nothing is received in salvation that is not first accomplished in and through Jesus Christ; everything that is accomplished in Christ is done so, not for His own sake, but for ours. We see therefore the central role of the CROSS and the wondrous grace and love of the triune God. Calvin went on to say that everything that has been accomplished in Christ is to be applied to us and in us by the Holy Spirit. We see here the intimate relationship between what Christ accomplished and the role and work of the Holy Spirit and hence the close relationship between the CROSS and the HOLY SPIRIT in all of Christian life, ministry and mission.

Finally, Calvin summarised it by stating that Christ is bearer of the Spirit not for His own sake but for ours. He bore the Spirit in order to bestow the Spirit; He receives the Spirit in order to accomplish His work so that the Spirit may communicate Him in the virtue of His accomplished work to all who believe. Thus the anointing Christ receives flow over him to all the members of His mystical body, the Church.

Outside of Christ, nothing is worth knowing; says Calvin; but Christ becomes ours through the gift of the Holy Spirit to us.

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- Living in the Last Days
- 末世敬虔生活
- Keeping the Right Focus in the Last Days
- 在末世中保持正确目标
- Berjaga-Jagalah! Engkau Terus Menetapkan Pusat Perhatianmu Yang Benar Pada Zaman Akhir Ini (Indonesian translation)
- We Need Not Lose Heart in the Last Days
- 末世不丧胆
- Missing the Mandate in the Last Days
- Following Christ Jesus in the Last Days
- 末世十架路
- Overcoming in the Last Days  
Reflections on the Book of Revelation
- 末世得胜之道  
《启示录》之默想
- The Great Deception in the Last Days:  
Preaching a Different Gospel
- How Should We Live as We Face the End Times?
- No Turning Back from God's Privileged Calling in Christ in the Last Days:  
Reflections on the Book of Hebrews
- Understanding Suffering, Evil and the Unfathomable Wisdom of God:  
Reflections on the Book of Job

