

**THY
KINGDOM
COME**

**9. The Letters of Paul – Part 2
The Corinthian Correspondence**

Tim Attaway

**A Teaching Commentary
of the New Testament**

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1. The Corinthian Correspondence

Acts 18 describes Paul's visit to Corinth on his second missionary journey. He spent a long time there – a year and a half. Following his time in Corinth, he moved to Ephesus. 1 Corinthians was written from Ephesus.

To Paul, the young believers that he had led to the Lord were his children. The Corinthian church had a hard time going through its “terrible twos.” Paul's letters to the church in Corinth were written more to correct than to instruct. At times there is considerable exasperation in the tone of the writing. There are individuals in the church who are disrupting the body. Some are challenging Paul's authority. They were in need of a spiritual slap on the knuckles.

The problems in the Corinthian church were varied. There were factions where there needed to be unity. There was open sexual immorality in their midst. Church members were suing church members in civil courts. There were problems with the manner in which the Lord's Supper was observed. There was failure to submit to leadership. There was abuse in the practice of spiritual gifts. The list goes on.

Paul dealt with these problems by writing them and by visiting them. He wrote them in anticipation of his visits, hoping that they would respond to his writing so that he would not have to spend his time with them in conflict. We are not sure how many letters Paul wrote to Corinth, but we know it is more than two (these writings reference other writings that we do not have). 1 and 2 Corinthians are the only two that are preserved. Bits and pieces from the two letters and from the book of Acts suggest the following Corinthian chronology:

- Paul spent 18 months in Corinth. During this time he founded the church. Then he moved to Ephesus.
- After Paul had left, Apollos and some others assumed leadership of the Corinthian church. They kept Paul abreast of the status of the church. 1 Corinthians contains references to letters that the church had written to Paul, asking him questions about particular issues. (See 1 Corinthians 7:1, 1 Corinthians 7:25, etc.)
- 1 Corinthians 5:9 makes reference to a letter that Paul wrote to the Corinthians. It advised them not to associate with sexually immoral people. In 1 Corinthians 5 he clarifies some of the points of that letter. Although some people believe that 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1 contains the text of that letter, it is more likely that it no longer exists.
- Because of numerous reports of problems in the Corinthian church, Paul wrote 1 Corinthians. He sent Timothy with the letter to the church (1 Corinthians 4:17, 1 Corinthians 16:10) and threatened to come himself if necessary to straighten out the problems (1 Corinthians 4:18-21).
- As best we can tell, Timothy delivered the letter, spent an unspecified amount of time in Corinth, and returned to Paul with a report that things had not gotten much better.
- Apparently Paul personally visited Corinth to try to deal with some of the issues. This visit is not recorded in Acts. 2 Corinthians 2:1 says, “So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you.” This cannot apply to the first visit, in which he founded the church. It seems that Paul took time out of his schedule to go to Corinth and to try to deal with issues there. It also seems that during this visit he made little headway in correcting the problems there.
- 2 Corinthians 2:4 makes reference to another letter that Paul wrote, “out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears.” Although this might be a reference to 1 Corinthians, it is probably a reference to another letter which no longer exists. Some believe that 2

Corinthians 10-13 contains the text of this other letter, but more than likely it has not been preserved. Following Paul's painful visit to Corinth, he wrote them a very severe letter.

- 2 Corinthians 12:18 implies that Titus brought this severe letter to the Corinthians. Paul was in anguish waiting for Titus to return and tell him how it was received (2 Corinthians 2:13). Eventually he met Titus in Macedonia (2 Corinthians 7:6) and was greatly comforted to hear that the situation was improving in Corinth.
- 2 Corinthians was written from Macedonia in response to the report from Titus. It expresses Paul's encouragement that things are getting better, but still deals with issues that continue in Corinth. It also communicates Paul's intentions to visit them a third time (2 Corinthians 2:14).

Thus in brief the timeline seems to be:

- First Visit – Founded Church
- Letter(s) from Corinthian Church to Paul
- Non-extant Letter from Paul to Corinth
- Paul Wrote 1 Corinthians
- Timothy Delivered 1 Corinthians to Church
- Paul's Painful Visit
- Severe Letter (Non-Extant)
- Titus Delivered the Severe Letter
- Paul Wrote 2 Corinthians

Although these letters were written out of exasperation, they remain as a marvelous treasure for the church today. What church in any century has not gone through the "terrible twos" and needed this instruction? 1 Corinthians gives us the fullest dissertation that we have anywhere in Scripture on spiritual gifts. 1 Corinthians 13 is the classic chapter on love that has soothed hearts for two millennia. 2 Corinthians provides more instruction on financial giving than we have anywhere else in the New Testament. These are good books.

2. First Corinthians

2.1 Greetings

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

1 Corinthians is written to the church at Corinth and is from Paul and Sosthenes. Sosthenes is mentioned in Acts 18:17 as the leader of the synagogue in Corinth, beaten by the Corinthian Jews for being friendly to Paul.

2.2 Appeal for Unity

1 Corinthians 1:10-4:21

2.2.1 Christ is Not Divided

1 Corinthians 1:10-16

At the beginning of the letter, Paul makes an appeal for unity in the church. 1 Corinthians 1:10-13 says:

I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ."

Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?

Who knows what was really at the heart of this dispute. Perhaps it is not important. What we do know is that people in the Corinthian church were dividing into factions, apparently centered around whomever they viewed to be their spiritual fathers. We do this today. Some say "I am Lutheran"; others "I'm a Methodist"; still others, "I follow Wimber." Denominations are not necessarily a bad thing; there are legitimate reasons that many of them came into being. Furthermore the spiritual fathers that we have had through the ages are very positive influences. Luther, Wesley, and Calvin all the way down to Chuck Smith and John Wimber have contributed significant things to the church which resulted in denominational foundings. When our denominations become walls that divide us, however it is a problem. The things that we have in common must be more important than the areas where we differ. Furthermore we must be united in following Jesus. Being a Christian must be more important than being a Baptist or a Methodist or hanging out in a Vineyard.

Paul wanted unity in the Corinthian church. God wants unity in the church today.

2.2.2 The Simplicity of the Gospel Message

1 Corinthians 1:17-2:16

One of the issues that seems to prevail in both Corinthian letters is a challenge to Paul's authority. This is particularly evident in the "Fool's Speech" in 2 Corinthians 11:16-12:11. This is one of the issues causing the division mentioned in the previous passage. There seem to have been those who tried to cast Paul in a negative light because his message was not overly intellectual in its approach. Greeks loved to debate philosophy and Paul was not much into debate. He stated a simple Gospel message and invited others to follow. Some inside the church scoffed at this and tried to turn the simplicity into a sophisticated philosophical system. This is the background of 1 Corinthians 1:17-2:5:

For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel – not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written:

"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;
the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."

Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."

When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

Paul did not really care that men were saying his message was foolish. He knew that the foolishness of his message was the power of salvation. He knew that this "foolishness" of God is wiser than anything of man. The opponents of Paul looked upon a man who was crucified as something weak, but Paul knew that this "weakness" of God was stronger than anything of man.

God has always worked this way. Gideon was a quivering coward but God used him along with an army of three hundred unarmed men to defeat the army of the Midianites. David was a young boy with a slingshot but God used him to defeat the mighty Goliath of the Philistines. Moses was a runaway from Egypt with very low self-confidence, but God used him to deliver the

people from bondage. God chooses people with no obvious strength – the weak of this world – to work mighty deeds – to shame the strong of this world. He does this for a reason. When Gideon won, nobody suspected that it was because of Gideon's superior strength or military strategy. They knew it was from God. Likewise with David. God wants people to know that he is doing a mighty thing for them. He wants his provision to be obvious. That is why he works through the foolish and the weak.

When Paul came to the Corinthians, it was with weakness, fear, and trembling. He had just had a bad experience in Athens. Furthermore, Corinth was a town with a reputation for being a morally bankrupt place. Thus when he arrived, his message was not one that was eloquent or full of intellectual reasoning. He tried that in Athens without much success. He tried the simplistic approach and just told them the truth, without arguing about it. 1 Corinthians 2:4-5 says: "My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power." He proclaimed the Kingdom and then demonstrated its power. It is the best approach to preaching the gospel.

Paul continues in the remainder of Chapter 2 to describe a wisdom available to those who have already responded to the simplicity of the message. When one throws off the intellect of this world and responds to the "foolishness and weakness" of the Gospel, he receives the Holy Spirit. In that transaction, he exchanges the finite wisdom of this world for the infinite wisdom of God.

Just as the spirit of a man is the only thing that can know his secret thoughts, the Spirit of God knows the secret thoughts of God. When we receive Christ, that Spirit takes up residence in our lives. He begins to communicate to us the wisdom of God. 1 Corinthians 2:14-16 says:

The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment:

"For who has known the mind of the Lord
that he may instruct him?"¹

But we have the mind of Christ.

Thus Paul's message to the Corinthian church is to forget about those who try to entice with worldly wisdom. Those who belong to Jesus – and only those who belong to Jesus – have the wisdom of the universe at their disposal. It is sad that today so many – even some in the church – still try to turn religion into an intellectual pursuit. We should serve God with our intellects. We should try to grow in the knowledge of God. But only when we have first submitted ourselves to the foolishness and weakness of the Gospel can we be wise and strong in the things that matter. Jesus did not come to bring knowledge. He came to restore relationship. Only when the relationship is intact does the knowledge matter.

2.2.3 Maturity Leads to Unity

1 Corinthians 3

Paul continues the theme of unity in Chapter 3. He ties unity to maturity. Having the wisdom and strength of God dwelling in the lives of believers should lead them to maturity. Unity should

¹ Isaiah 40:13

be a sign of that maturity. Unfortunately the Corinthian church is not at that point yet. He indicates this in 1 Corinthians 3:1-9:

Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly – mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not mere men?

What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe – as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, God’s building.

The factions that exist in the church at Corinth are a product of worldliness and immaturity. The people need to “grow up” and realize that they follow Jesus – not Paul or some other human leader. As Paul points out, he, Apollos, and others are merely servants of the master. The people should serve the master but instead they are trying to serve the servants.

As stated before, human leaders do have their place and purpose. Ephesians 4:11 says, “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers.” God does set up men in positions of leadership and authority for the purpose of structuring, edifying, and instructing the church. The writings of Paul – even the Corinthian letters, teach us to submit to this authority. Still, we must be united in that structure. The leaders that we have are not given for the purpose of dividing us into warring camps. We are squadrons of the same army, reporting to the same Commander In Chief.

The previous passage concluded with the assertion that “you are ... God’s building.” Paul continues with that theme in 1 Corinthians 3:10-17:

By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man’s work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.

Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him; for God’s temple is sacred, and you are that temple.

The church in Corinth is God’s edifice, and each person contributes in his own way to that building. Paul laid the foundation (i.e. when he originally came to them, bringing the Gospel message), which is Jesus Christ. A building can have only one foundation. Thus there is no room for a “Paul” foundation or an “Apollos” foundation. People are now in the process of building on this foundation. This happens day-by-day as they lead their lives. If they live lives submitted to God, such that their minds and their activities are pure, then they are building with gold, silver, and costly stones. If they live lives that are still characterized by rebellion then they build with trash – wood, hay, and straw. In fact, we all have lives that are a mixture of both. The day will come when God will refine the elect. He is going out to that tool shed in the sky to get

his Holy Blow Torch. He is going to turn it up all the way and put a flame to each of our edifices. When he does, the trash will burn away, but the gold, silver, and costly stones will remain.

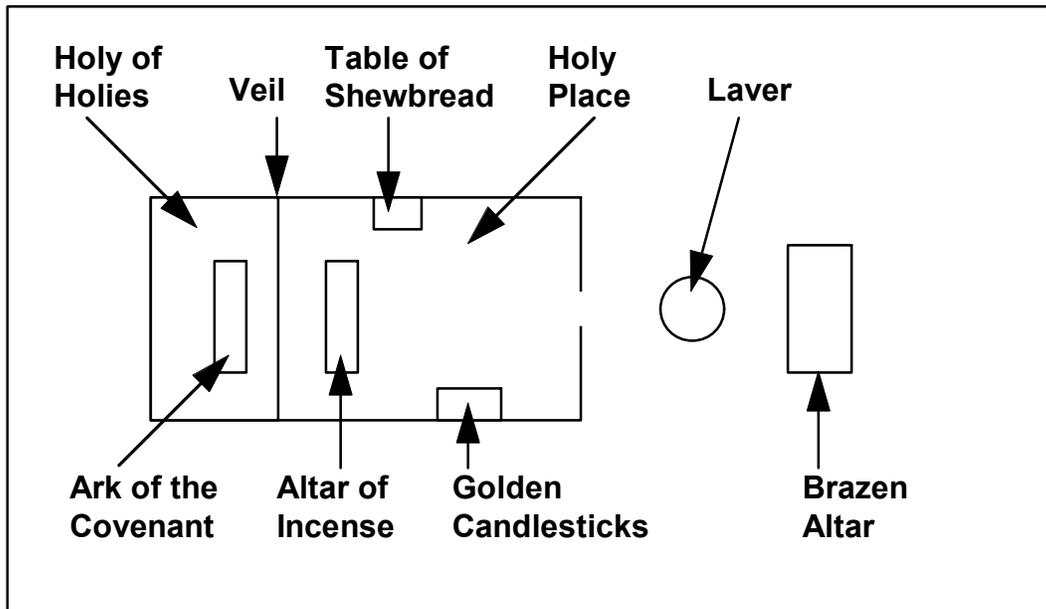
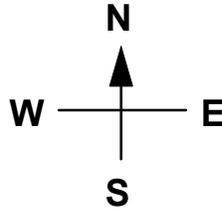
1 Corinthians 3:14-15 says, "If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames." The implication of this is that there are rewards in heaven. The sort of reward that you receive is going to depend on how well you do in the "blow torch" test. If you managed to lay up treasures in heaven then you will have rewards in heaven. If you spent your life satisfying your flesh then your rewards will be few. Note that the text says "he himself will be saved..." Doing the things that bring rewards is not a condition of salvation. Salvation is a gift received by grace and cannot be earned. Once a person is saved, however, and has the foundation of Jesus Christ, he should begin building. You cannot be saved by works. Once you are saved, you should respond in gratitude with works.

What is the nature of these rewards? Any answer to this question would be conjecture. It is an interesting question, but one that is not answered by Scripture. We can be certain of one thing, however. The people about whom Paul said, "he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames" are still better off than those who did not get in at all. Even if you get into heaven with your coattails on fire, you had better get in.

In 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, Paul continues this theme of being God's buildings. Why does he care so much about the composition of our buildings? Because we are God's temple and God's Spirit lives in us. At the crucifixion, the veil of the temple was torn from top to bottom and God's Spirit ceased to dwell there. Instead he has taken up residence in the lives of believers.

Think about the temple. When one approached the temple (not the massive temple complex but the temple itself), the first thing encountered was the brazen altar. This is where sacrifice was made. Before one could even think about approaching God, atonement must first be made for sin. Sin did not enter the presence of God. Beyond the brazen altar was the laver. One who would enter would stop at the laver for ceremonial cleansing. Jews were very careful to observe cleanliness laws so that they might not be disqualified from participating in religious activities. Uncleanliness did not enter the presence of God.

The brazen altar and the laver were outside of the Holy Place. Having separated from sin and uncleanliness, the priest could then enter the chamber of the Holy Place. On the left were the golden candlesticks and on the right was the table of shewbread. The candles illuminated the twelve loaves of bread, indicative of God's ever-present watchfulness over his people. Beyond that, just outside the Holy of Holies was the altar of incense. Here incense was burned daily as a fragrant offering to God. Then behind the veil in the Holy of Holies was the Ark of the Covenant, the seat of the Spirit of God.



That is the way it was in the old covenant. In the new covenant, God's spirit dwells in us. We are the Holy of Holies. Jesus is our brazen altar. He has already made atonement for our sin. It matters what we do from there. Do we allow sin to march boldly past the brazen altar into the presence of God? What do we do with the laver? Do we bring uncleanness before the Spirit of God, dwelling in us? Are we mindful of his ever-present watchfulness over us? Do we live lives that are a fragrant offering to him?

God has taken up residence in us because it is the best thing for us. Do we grieve his Spirit by giving him a temple made of wood and stubble or do we honor him by building with gold, silver, and costly stones?

1 Corinthians 3:17 says that God will destroy anyone who would seek to destroy God's temple. He will come down hard against false leaders – pastors, teachers, etc., who would lead the people astray and cause them to build trash temples.

Paul is speaking very sternly about those who are causing dissension in the church. Those who are casting doubt on Paul's "foolish and weak" message are coming against the temple of God. God will not take it lightly. He is calling the people to the wisdom and maturity of God and calling them to reject those who are stirring up trouble. He reiterates the thought in 1 Corinthians 3:18-19:

Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a "fool" so that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight.

2.2.4 Defense of Paul's Apostleship

1 Corinthians 4

Paul now turns to the attacks being made on him personally. Although we have no record of exactly what was said, it is easy to infer from the text. There were obviously men in the Corinthian church saying that Paul was nothing more than a second-rate itinerant preacher. He was a weak man with a foolish message. If he was really a man of God, he would be well off financially and would not be in trouble with the law so much. In contrast, the men who were making the accusations were stable, financially secure men of the community. They were much better role models and thus could provide much better leadership for the church. Or so they said.

Word of these statements reached Paul. He was not concerned so much for the effect on him as he was with the impact it had on the church. The people were confused by this. They did not know who to follow. And if they could not follow Paul, could they really believe his message? That is what made Paul rise to the defense.

He begins by stating that men ought to hold them (i.e., Paul and his companions) in regard as servants of Christ, entrusted with his message. He would be judged on how faithfully he ministered that message. Furthermore he will stand before God alone in judgment, not before these accusers in Corinth.

In 1 Corinthians 4:8-13 he addresses the accusations in a somewhat sarcastic manner:

Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have become kings – and that without us! How I wish that you really had become kings so that we might be kings with you! For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men. We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.

The men in Corinth were measuring the success of a ministry in human terms – financial wealth, human wisdom, strength, receiving honor from men, etc. Paul says that the real faithfulness comes from remaining Christ-like regardless of the circumstances. Submission is the key. The men in Corinth were submitted only to their own status. Paul was submitted to God and willing to be spent however he saw fit. The men in Corinth are seeking power (“You have become rich!” “You have become kings!”) but Paul is seeking to serve (“God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena.”).

In 1 Corinthians 4:15, Paul reminds them that he is their father in the Gospel. He expects the loyalty from them that is due their father in the faith. In 1 Corinthians 4:16 he says “Therefore I urge you to imitate me.” Shut out the noise of those who were telling them to seek power and wealth and follow Paul in service.

The situation in Corinth is serious. Paul intends to see that it is corrected. He plans to visit them personally to ensure that the situation is made right, but he wants to give them a chance to “clean up their act” first. Writing the letter is the first step that he takes towards urging them to comply. In 1 Corinthians 4:17 we learn that he is sending Timothy to Corinth as the second step.

Timothy is being sent to try to deal with the situation and to call the people back into faithfulness. The hope is that when Paul arrives, he may spend his time edifying them rather than disciplining them.

One way or the other, he will deal with the problem. In 1 Corinthians 4:18-21 he says:

Some of you have become arrogant, as if I were not coming to you. But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing, and then I will find out not only how these arrogant people are talking, but what power they have. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power. What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a whip, or in love and with a gentle spirit?

2.3 Sexual Immorality and Lawsuits in the Church

1 Corinthians 5-6

For the majority of the rest of the book, Paul deals with specific issues that are going on in the Corinthian church. They include:

- Sexual immorality in the church.
- Lawsuits among members.
- Marital issues.
- Eating food sacrificed to idols.
- The rights of an apostle.
- Freedom in Christ.
- Order among men and women in the church.
- Order in the observance of the Lord's Supper.
- Order in the practice of spiritual gifts.
- Questions about the resurrection of the dead.
- Collection for the church in Jerusalem.

The first question is explained in 1 Corinthians 5:1-5:

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.

A man in the church was sleeping with his stepmother. The church not only failed to discipline the individual, but they were proud of the tolerant attitude towards him. Their Sunday bulletin probably had some sort of logo that said, "Welcome to First Church of Corinth, Where Everyone Is Accepted." The fact is that the church is not supposed to accept everyone and everything.

Are sinners welcome in the church? Yes. Absolutely. It is the best place for them. Are they welcome to fellowship in the church on an ongoing basis without doing anything about their sin? No. The church is to be a place of refuge, but also a place of change. Normally we get "cleaned up" in a loving and nonconfrontive way. For someone involved in blatant, public sin, however, the church has a responsibility to publicly discipline. That is what Paul instructed them to do with this man.

What does it mean to “hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord”? This seems to imply disfellowshipping the individual. Putting him outside the fellowship of the church would be putting him into the domain of Satan. Paul is saying that the man should be allowed to suffer the consequences of his sin until he has had enough. Notice that his overriding concern is for the individual’s spirit – that it might be “saved on the day of the Lord.” Paul’s hope is that the man will suffer from the discipline, change his behavior, and return to the fellowship. Until he changed, however, he should not be allowed to return.

(There is a question as to whether or not the individual mentioned in this passage is the same one discussed in 2 Corinthians 2:5-11. We shall consider that question in the discussion of 2 Corinthians.)

Having addressed the error of the individual, Paul now addresses the error of the church in tolerating the individual. He says in 1 Corinthians 5:6:

Your boasting is not good. Don’t you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough?

The Corinthian church was proud of its tolerant attitude. That attitude actually encouraged the sin. By permitting this sin to go unchecked in the church, they opened the door to a plethora of sin in their midst. Their tolerance was disobedience.

Paul is also careful to distinguish the attitude that is to be held towards those inside the church versus those outside the church. In 1 Corinthians 5:9-13 he says:

I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people – not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat.

What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. “Expel the wicked man from among you.”²

Paul picks up on the theme of judging those inside the church and moves briefly to another issue in the Corinthian church. Apparently members were suing other members in civil courts. This displeased Paul greatly. First of all, it was a public sign of disunity in the church. He cared that people did not get along but it made matters worse that they flaunted it publicly. Paul cared about the public image of the church.

Paul was realistic and knew that people would not always agree. There would be areas of dispute among believers. He believed, however, that they could get more righteous judgments from those inside the church than from those outside. Surely arbitration could happen in the fellowship rather than in civil courts. He says in 1 Corinthians 6:1-8:

If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the saints? Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life! Therefore, if you have

² In the quoted text, Paul paraphrases Deuteronomy 17:7, Deuteronomy 19:19, Deuteronomy 22:21,24, and Deuteronomy 24:7, passages all dealing with discipline among the Jews.

disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church! I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers? But instead, one brother goes to law against another – and this in front of unbelievers!

The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated? Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers.

There is some interesting information in this passage. The text says that believers will participate in the judgment of the world and in the judgment of angels. This is the only place in Scripture where such a statement is made, so it is hard to read too much into it. Who knows what our role will be in this process? It is one of those unpolished gems that we find in Scripture. Unfortunately we will have to wait until “we know in full” to understand exactly what it means.

Paul did not write this passage to teach us about judging angels, however. He is instructing us on how to settle disputes among ourselves. He asserts that “even men of little account in the church” would be better than the best judges outside of the church. We should find ways to settle matters within the jurisdiction of the church rather than in civil courts.

Paul is not talking about church members who break criminal laws. He would never suggest that they should be excused from being brought to trial. These are civil disputes among brothers. Typically money was the object of the trial.

This is a hard issue. What do you do when you honestly believe that you have been cheated by a brother in Christ? I can relate to this issue very personally. A few years ago, I had a contractor who at least claimed to be a Christian take several thousand dollars from me to do some work on my house. After he collected the money I never saw him again. He never came to do the work. He never called. He would not return my calls. I ran the gamut of emotions, from rage to depression. I was indignant. I had been wronged. Surely this man must be brought to justice. Surely I have a personal responsibility to take him to task for this.

For me, all of this indignation did nothing but make me more and more depressed. The only thing that brought relief to my emotions was when I finally forgave him and put the incident behind me. A tremendous weight was lifted from my shoulders when I turned this thing over to God.

Paul says that it would have been better for me to be cheated than to have taken the issue to court. I believe that. Getting a settlement in court would not have caused me to forgive. Besmirching his name publicly would not have honored the God that he professed to follow.

I freely admit that this is a very hard issue. There are scoundrels in the church. There are people in the church who will take advantage of us. What do you do when you are wronged in a big way by someone who professes to be a brother? The fact is that the church does not have legal authority to force an erring brother to make things right. Perhaps there are situations where things have to end up in civil courts. But our first obligation must be to try to settle things within the family before we take our disputes to unbelievers.

In the remainder of chapter 6, Paul compares the character of the unbelievers with that of believers. Then he winds his way back to the topic of sexual immorality, which is how this section began. 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 says:

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor

homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

The people in the church at Corinth came from a variety of less-than-reputable lifestyles. Since coming to Jesus, however, they have been sanctified from those ways of life. Surely they now are in a better position to settle disputes than they were before. Surely it is better to rely on those who are undergoing sanctification than those who are still immersed in all manner of sin.

Then Paul turns his attention back to the issue of church members still living lives immersed in sin. 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 says:

“Everything is permissible for me” – but not everything is beneficial. “Everything is permissible for me” – but I will not be mastered by anything. “Food for the stomach and the stomach for food” – but God will destroy them both. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, “The two will become one flesh.”³ But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit.

Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.

The blood of Jesus covers all kind of sin. We have freedom in Christ to do just about anything. Therefore “everything is permissible for me.” In spite of that, “not everything is beneficial.” There is a multitude of stupid choices that we are free to make, all of which are bad for us. God will not strike you dead for sinning, but he will let you suffer the consequences of your choices. That is the point that Paul was making when he said “hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.”

Then he makes a very serious point. When you become a Christian, you are part of the body of Christ. Wherever you go and whatever you do, you take the body of Christ with you. If you engage in sexual immorality, you engage the body of Christ in sexual immorality. The same goes for any other kind of sin. That thought should make us take sin very seriously. Paul says that sexual sin has an extra measure of repugnance, because it is sin against the body itself. Our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit and should not be involved in sexual immorality.

We are to honor God with our bodies.

2.4 Marital Questions

1 Corinthians 7

1 Corinthians 7:1 begins, “Now for the matters you wrote about.” The Corinthians had written Paul a letter asking him for guidance on some issues. Some of the questions obviously dealt with marriage. We have no record of the letter that they sent, but we can look at the contents of

³ Genesis 2:24

chapter 7 and discern some of the questions that they must have asked. One would expect that the letter included some variation on the following:

Since Jesus is going to return at any time, does it make sense for people to get married? If not, is there some other permissible outlet for sexual passion? Is divorce permissible? What about a believer who is married to an unbeliever – should they separate?

These are the issues addressed by Paul in chapter 7. It is interesting that he labels some of the advice in the chapter as being his own and other as being from the Lord. In some of these areas, Paul is responding with “Thus Saith The Lord” mandates. Other times, he finds no scriptural mandate and is supplying his own interpretation of Scripture. He is careful to distinguish between the two.

The points that he makes in the section include:

- If possible, it is best for those who are unmarried now to remain unmarried and celibate. Paul believed and taught that the return of Jesus was imminent. If you really thought that Jesus was coming back next week, then it would be distracting to get married this week. It would not make sense. The fact is that marriage requires a great deal of time and attention. Those free from these distractions could focus better on the work of the Lord. Note that Paul does not label this as a “Thus Saith The Lord.”
- Paul turns around immediately and says that he is realistic and knows that people need an outlet for sexual desires. People who need that outlet should marry and enjoy a monogamous sex life. Husbands and wives have an obligation to fulfill one another in this area so that Satan will not have fertile ground for temptation. He recognizes celibacy as a spiritual gift that not everyone has. He nowhere condemns people who need an appropriate outlet for these desires. He also nowhere implies that there is any other appropriate outlet for sexual passion than a monogamous marital relationship.
- As for the issue of divorce, Paul says that it is wrong. Becoming a believer is not grounds for divorcing an unbelieving spouse. 1 Corinthians 7:12-16 says:

To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?

This passage contains a curious idea, “For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband.” Does this mean that a person can be saved by having his or her spouse become a Christian? Not exactly.

The key to this seems to be found in the next paragraph. It says, “How do you know wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?” The presence of a believer in the home brings sanctification to the home. The favor of God is on the believer and those living in the home are indirect beneficiaries of that

favor. Hopefully, but not absolutely, the presence of that believer will lead others in the home to become believers. Thus by remaining with an unbelieving spouse, the believer may have an opportunity to lead the spouse to the Lord.

Your circumstances in life do not necessarily change because you become a believer. Whether you were circumcised or uncircumcised when you came to the Lord, that should stay the same. Whether you were slave or free when you were saved, that is not changed by becoming a believer (although Paul encourages slaves to seek their freedom when possible). If you were unmarried when you became a believer, it is best (but not required) that this does not change. If you were married – even to an unbeliever – when you became a believer, that should not change. If, however, the unbelieving spouse chooses to leave the relationship, then Paul releases that believer from responsibility.

2.5 Food Sacrificed to Idols

1 Corinthians 8

The issue of eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols was explored fully in Romans 14-15. This seems to be an issue in the Corinthian church as well.

Without rehashing all that said in the discussion of Romans 14-15, the focus of Paul's discussion in 1 Corinthians 8 is on concern for the weak brother, motivated out of love. There is no call to maturity in this chapter.

1 Corinthians 8:1-3 says:

Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. But the man who loves God is known by God.

This passage may be a bit hard to follow. "Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge." What in the world does the second clause have to do with the first?

Paul is addressing this response to those in the church with knowledge that it is permissible to eat meat sacrificed to idols. This knowledge and the freedom that it gives them are not as important as the love that they should have for weaker believers. It is apparent that they made a point to eat the meat in front of believers who were not comfortable eating it – an arrogant display of their freedom in Christ. It was their way of saying "Look, I am better and stronger than you because I can eat this and you can't."

Paul says that, yes, there is nothing inherently wrong in eating the meat, but that it was necessary to be sensitive to those who were weak in the faith and had a problem with eating it. If I eat meat in front of someone who believes that it is wrong to do so, then I may be leading him into a behavior that for him is sin. I have no business doing that.

Love must override my freedom. 1 Corinthians 8:9-13 concludes this discussion:

Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.

2.6 The Rights of an Apostle

1 Corinthians 9

In Chapter 9, Paul turns back to those who have questioned his authority. It seems that they have called his apostleship into question. Paul is somewhat unique in that he was not one of the original twelve. Thus it may have been easier to question his authority. He also did not act like some people apparently expected an apostle to act. Someone with the status of an apostle surely would be supported by the church. Paul, on the other hand, worked to support himself. Because of these and other issues, the authenticity of Paul's apostleship had been questioned.

He starts off chapter 9 by asserting that the very existence of the Corinthian church was testimony to his apostleship. 1 Corinthians 9:1-2 says:

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord? Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

Paul was called to apostleship later in the game than the other apostles, but Jesus appeared to him personally on the road to Damascus and called him to service. Paul did not consider his calling to be second-rate by any means. Furthermore, he asserted that he deserved all of the same considerations enjoyed by the other apostles and church leaders. 1 Corinthians 9:3-6 says:

This is my defense to those who sit in judgment on me. Don't we have the right to food and drink? Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas? Or is it only I and Barnabas who must work for a living?

There is a bit of interesting biographical information in that passage. If you have ever wondered whether or not the apostles gave up any semblance of family life as they traveled about, the answer is "not completely." We also see from this passage that Jesus had sisters-in-law.

Paul goes on to assert that he has every right to expect the church to support him, as his detractors say they should. Paul chooses not to have them do it, however. He asserts very strongly that the church has an obligation to support its ministers, but he himself has chosen not to rely upon that support. He realizes that if he looked to his spiritual children for support, that very fact might turn some people away from the gospel. Therefore, in spite of the fact that he had the right to expect it, voluntarily he has chosen not to accept that support. He says in 1 Corinthians 9:15-23:

But I have not used any of these rights. And I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me. I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of this boast. Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me. What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make use of my rights in preaching it.

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law.

To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

What Paul just said could be interpreted as “When in Rome, do what the Romans do.” That is not really what he is saying. There is nothing phony or arbitrary about his methods. Paul lived his life in service to God and in service to his fellow man. He sought to find common ground with all people so that he could communicate with them on their levels. He had a passion to bring people to the Lord. He knew that if he was to be successful in that, he must meet people where they were rather than waiting for them to come to him. He did not want to do anything to distract from that goal. If taking financial support from the church might deter some people from coming to Jesus then Paul would not do it. To him his service for Jesus was like a race to be run. He kept his eyes on the finish line and would not be distracted by things along the way. 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 says:

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

The attitudes in this chapter reflect sentiments that have sounded throughout this book. 1 Corinthians 6:12 said, “Everything is permissible for me – but not everything is beneficial.” 1 Corinthians 8:13 said, “Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.” These are ideas that Paul put to work in his own life. They were not just platitudes. He was a man who seriously put the benefit of others above his own needs and comforts. He did it out of love – love for other men and love for Jesus.

2.7 Flee from Evil

1 Corinthians 10:1-11:2

Chapter 10 is a call to the Corinthians to avoid sin. He reminds them that their forefathers wandered in the desert, accompanied by God all the way, but they still turned away from God and practiced idolatry, sexual immorality, etc. As a result, God destroyed many of them. Why should the people in the church expect anything different if they turn to the same sorts of sin? Just as the Jews were faced with temptation in order to test them, so it will be with the Corinthians. There is good news, however, 1 Corinthians 10:13 says:

No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

That is excellent news! Temptation can be an overwhelming thing. God will never allow us to be put into a situation where we are tempted beyond what we can bear. He is always there bidding us to faithfulness. He himself will provide us the strength to overcome. All we have to do is be faithful.

Paul resumes the topic of eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols. Although it is permissible to eat this meat, it is not permissible to eat at the tables of the pagan temples, participating in their ceremonial rites. That is engaging in idolatry. Anyone who eats at the Lord's table (i.e. participates in communion) has no business eating at the table of idols.

Paul adds another twist to the question of eating meat sacrificed to idols. If a believer goes to the home of an unbeliever, the unbeliever serves meat and specifically says that it had been offered to an idol, then the believer should not eat it. The believer has no way of knowing what sort of impression it might make on the unbeliever if he eats. The unbeliever might take it as an endorsement of his idolatry. A follower of Jesus should in no way give the appearance of endorsing idolatry. If no mention is made of the source of the meat, then there is no problem – the believer is not obliged to ask.

2.8 Order Among Men and Women in the Church

1 Corinthians 11:3-16

Some of what one finds in Scripture must be understood through a cultural filter. It will not make sense any other way. A general rule of thumb is to try to avoid filtering the Bible through culture, because it leads to a dangerous tendency. Taken to the extreme, one might conclude that anything in Scripture that challenges behavior must be a cultural nuance and not applicable to today's culture. More often than not, that is hogwash.

1 Corinthians 11:3-16 is one of those passages that must be understood culturally, however. Consider the passage in its entirety:

Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head – it is just as though her head were shaved. If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head. A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head.

In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God. Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering. If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice – nor do the churches of God.

At times like this, it is comforting to turn to 2 Peter 3:15-16 and read:

... just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand...

Perhaps he had just read this passage from 1 Corinthians when he said that Paul writes “some things that are hard to understand.” This is a very difficult passage. Some of the finest commentators of today can write pages and pages on this passage that reach the basic conclusion of “I’m not really sure what this means.”

What can we discern from this passage? First let us look at what we should not get out of this passage. Some people take this passage, particularly the phrase “the head of the woman is man,” and conclude that women should live in subjection to men. That is a great disservice to

the passage. In the first century, the word “head” did not carry a connotation of “authority.” This means that man was the source of woman, i.e., Eve came from Adam.

Paul is going to great lengths to convince the Corinthians that men who pray or prophesy in church should do so with their heads uncovered and women should do the same with heads covered. His arguments are somewhat lost on us, but they probably made sense in the first century Corinthian culture. We do know that this was a day and time when women were very modest and society demanded that they go about with their heads covered. For a woman to appear publicly without her head covered would have been a sign of rebellion at least and even perhaps immodesty to the point of immorality (i.e. prostitutes would have gone about with their heads uncovered – the women in the church had no business portraying themselves in this manner.)

In that time, the church was a force that was liberating women. In the Jewish community, women were allowed in the church, but they were kept at the back. Women did not receive instruction on religious issues or in the Word of God. In the Christian church, this was not true. The very fact that Paul wrote this indicates that they were praying and prophesying in church. They were finding freedom that they had never had before. Perhaps that freedom was going too far and they were taking off their head coverings.

We need to understand from this passage is that the church should be sensitive to cultural norms in its practices. Cultural rights and wrongs do exist. If a woman showed up to church bare-chested in parts of Africa, nobody would notice. In urban America, it would be a very wrong thing to do. The people in the church need to be citizens of good reputation, and some of that depends on cultural norms. Freedom in Christ should not invoke cultural shame.

2.9 Order in the Observance of the Lord's Supper

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

The church in Corinth was having trouble with the observances of the Lord's Supper. In 1 Corinthians 11:17-22 Paul bluntly writes:

In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not!

The church met in homes. Part of the church meeting would be an observance of the Lord's Supper. This was not done like we do it today. Part of the observance was a meal, called a “love feast” in Jude 12. The trouble is that whoever was hosting the event would make sure that his friends sat close to the table. Those people would help themselves to the food, eating until they were full. Whoever ended up being at the back of the room may or may not get anything to eat. It created a system of classes in the church – the first class members and the second class members. Paul did not like it. All that it did was contribute further to the divisions in the church. Paul told them to eat their meals at home before coming to church. At church they could observe the Lord's Supper without consuming an entire meal.

Then he reminds them of the real significance of the Lord's Supper. 1 Corinthians 11:23-31 define the manner in which we observe Communion more than any place else in Scripture:

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world.

Communion is one of the two ordinances that are almost universally observed by all denominations (baptism being the other). It is interesting that Jesus told us to "do this in remembrance of me," but did not really give us any instructions on how that remembrance was to be carried out. We find that the church in Corinth was having a Lord's Supper observance, but it looked more like an all-church picnic than what we do today.

This letter may have been the instrument that turned this around. Paul focused the observance on the bread and the wine – the elements about which Jesus spoke that fateful night.

It is also interesting that Paul said "you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." Communion will be for us a reminder of the sacrifice of Jesus until that day when he returns. At that time we will cease to observe it because we will be with him.

The second paragraph of the passage above also put some new parameters around the observance. Paul says that a man should examine himself before eating the bread or drinking the cup. The observance is a reminder of the fact that Jesus died – broke his body and shed his blood for our sins. It should be an event that reminds us that sin exacts a terrible price. Before we take the elements, we should first confront the sin in our lives. It is time to get right with the Father before partaking of the sacrifice of the Son. Failure to do so is sinning against the sacrifice that was made. Doing this will bring judgment upon ourselves. Paul indicates that God takes this seriously. Failure on our part to take this seriously has brought sickness and death upon some. Paul urges us to judge ourselves so that God will not judge us.

Paul's desire is that the Lord's Supper in Corinth be turned from a buffet that leaves some people feeling left out to a sacred event, reconciling people to God and edifying the church. He writes them this now and tells them that he will address the matter further when he comes. 1 Corinthians 11:33-34 says:

So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other. If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment.

And when I come I will give further directions.

2.10 Order in the Practice of Spiritual Gifts

1 Corinthians 12-14

1 Corinthians 13 is well known as the “love chapter” of the Bible. It is a very poetic and inspiring essay on love. It is not an isolated thought, however. 1 Corinthians 12-14 is a unit dealing with the practice of spiritual gifts in the church. Chapter 13 cannot be completely understood outside of this context.

The church in Corinth seems to have been a place where spiritual gifts flourished. The church did not quite understand what to do with them, however. There seems to have been some competition in this area, i.e. “my gift is better than your gift.” Paul wanted them to understand the purpose of the gifts and he wanted them to practice the gifts in an orderly fashion.

Some people who study this topic attempt to draw up an all-inclusive list of spiritual gifts. This is really impossible to do. Paul gave a list of spiritual gifts in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4. The lists are not identical. Since the lists vary, each is incomplete. When you put them together, you have a bigger incomplete list. The fact is that the Holy Spirit ministers when and how he sees fit and not necessarily according to categories that we would like to define.

It would be useful today to have Paul come back and give the church a bit more instruction on spiritual gifts. Unfortunately, Satan has managed to take these precious gifts and turn them into sharp instruments of division in the contemporary church. There is widespread teaching in the church that at least the more miraculous (i.e., signs and wonders) gifts ceased sometime during the first century and are no longer available today. This belief is labeled “cessationist theology.” This teaching was probably instigated by people who had long since ceased to rely on the Holy Spirit for supernatural intervention in their lives. Failure to observe these spiritual gifts as a contemporary phenomenon implied that the phenomenon must not be contemporary. Thus a theology evolved that said the miraculous gifts were a first-century manifestation given to authenticate the work of the apostles in the early church. Once that work had a solid beginning, the gifts were no longer necessary and thus they ceased.

The problem with this teaching is that the need for these gifts has never ceased. Who among us does not need healing? Who does not need to hear the word of God spoken into his life via prophecy, word of knowledge, and word of wisdom? Who does not need a miracle from time to time? And why would God need to validate the work of the church any less today than he did in the first century? Since when did we become self-sufficient?

Still the church is divided on this issue. Even among those who fully embrace the operation of spiritual gifts today there are divisions.

There are differing understandings on exactly who receives the spiritual gift. Consider the gift of healing, for instance. One school of thought would label certain people as healers – those whom God has equipped with a gift of healing. God gave them a gift of healing and therefore they can now pray for people and see them healed. The other school of thought says that a gift of healing is something that God gives to a person who is sick. The person who prays for the sick person is like a messenger delivering a package. The gift belongs to the recipient and not to the messenger.

If I follow the first school of thought, then I will be uncomfortable in my spiritual life until I discover what my gift is. Once I think I have found it, I will operate within the confines of that gift, perhaps missing other things that God might really like me to do. Furthermore this viewpoint assumes that I have some control over who will benefit from my spiritual gift.

In the second school of thought, my role becomes one of seeking whatever God wants me to do today. It removes any presupposition about how he will use me in ministry. It leaves him in control of the administration of the gifts.

It is true that certain people tend to function better administering certain gifts. Certain people are more apt to prophesy more often than others. Certain people tend to be more successful in healing ministry than others. Certain people tend to be gifted in teaching or pastoring. Thus these people assume the role of prophet, healer, teacher, or pastor. The spiritual gift itself, however, is still the possession of God – not the prophet, healer, teacher, or pastor. Just because God may have called me to the role of a healer, that power to heal does not reside within me. I can only heal when God initiates the process. Thus there is a subtle difference between roles and spiritual gifts. In my role as healer, I deliver spiritual gifts of healing. I do not initiate the process and I am not the source of the gift. The only control that I have over the situation is to decide whether or not I will be a faithful messenger.

The church has never really come to grasps with the operation of spiritual gifts. Paul tried to clarify many of these issues for the church in Corinth. The church in the 20th century should pay attention to these chapters.

2.10.1 The Purpose of Spiritual Gifts

1 Corinthians 12

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:4-7:

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men.

Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.

Right away he begins to address the “my gift is better than your gift” issue. There were people in the Corinthian church (as there are people in the church today) who believed that they were better or more important because they operated in “flashier” gifts than others. If I prophesy, then I must be more important than someone with the gift of helps.

Paul begins to put things in perspective. There are different gifts, but they are administered by the same Holy Spirit as he sees fit. We have no room to be arrogant. Furthermore, the gifts that come to the church through me are for the purpose of the common good, not for the purpose of building up my stature in the church. God gives the gifts to edify the church.

Paul then begins to enumerate some of the gifts.

- The Message of Wisdom

A message of wisdom, or “word of wisdom” as it is typically called, is a spoken word, inspired by the Holy Spirit that brings reason or understanding to a situation where it is needed.

- The Message of Knowledge

A message of knowledge, or “word of knowledge” as it is typically called is supernatural knowledge provided by the Holy Spirit, often for the purpose of facilitating a ministry

opportunity. In a recent ministry trip to Australia, a woman asked me to pray for her that she could draw closer to God. When she told me that, it was almost as if a voice shouted in my ear, "She has a problem with her parents." I asked her if there were any relational problems in her life – any history of problems with authority figures, etc. She said "no." I began to pray for her and finally asked the Lord to bless her relationship with her parents. She immediately began to weep. I said, "You have a problem with your parents, don't you?" She nodded "yes." Immediately somehow or other I was overcome with a pain that almost doubled me over. I could feel years of abuse. I cried. She cried. Her problem with her parents was an obstacle to her ability to draw close to God. I told her that somehow she had to find a way to forgive her parents. This was the key to her healing and overcoming her distance with God.

I had never met this woman and knew nothing about her. Most likely I will never see her again. There is no way that I could have naturally discerned this information about her. The Holy Spirit gave me a word of knowledge that would facilitate this ministry setting. Without it she would never have admitted an issue with her parents. She would never have realized the source of her distance from God. She would never have confronted her need to forgive. She would not have been healed. The Holy Spirit wanted her to be free from this however. Confronting it was the only way she would get rid of it. Thus a spiritual gift, a word of knowledge was given to her through me.

- Faith

Hebrews 11:1 says, "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." A gift of faith is given by the Holy Spirit to assure believers. Life is hard. We need to be able to hang onto the promises of God. Faith is a gift that he gives us to enable us to be certain of his word.

- Gifts of Healing

A gift of healing is given by the Holy Spirit to heal a physical or emotional illness. Man is a mysterious blend of body, soul, and spirit. Any of them can be sick. Sickness in one area can manifest in symptoms in another area. A hidden spiritual sickness such as harbored unforgiveness can upset the physical body and manifest in anything from headaches to high blood pressure to cancer. In reverse, a hidden physical illness such as a chemical imbalance can manifest as an emotional problem such as severe depression. The Holy Spirit is concerned with the whole man and with whole healing. In a ministry setting when a person is seeking prayer for a specific problem, the one ministering to him must be sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. When praying for a physical condition, if words such as "unforgiveness" or "adultery" come to mind, they may well mean something. On the other hand, when praying for someone with an emotional problem, if words such as "diabetes" come to mind, it might be the key to the healing.

Learning to be an effective deliverer of gifts of healing is a study in itself. The point is that God is interested in our health, and that involves body, soul, and spirit.

- Miraculous Powers

A miracle is a supernatural intervention of God into the lives of men to alter a natural course of events. In Acts 12, Peter was in jail facing probable execution. The church was praying for him. God sent an angel to lead him safely out of prison and to the house where people were praying for him. This was a miracle. God supernaturally intervened and changed the natural course of events – that would have led to Peter's death. The church – and specifically Peter – was edified by this.

This is a spectacular episode, but hopefully every church and every believer can learn to discern the hand of God miraculously orchestrating lives and events, edifying the church and the lives of individual believers.

- Prophecy

A prophecy is a word of instruction inspired by the Holy Spirit. It is a forth telling of the mind of God. It may also be a foretelling of the history of man. Prophecy may explain or predict events before they happen. It is important that we not overemphasize that aspect of prophecy, however. In most of our lives, it is more important to know what God thinks right now than to know what is going to happen tomorrow.

- Distinguishing Between Spirits

The gift of distinguishing between spirits, or discerning of spirits as it is often called, is a Holy Spirit-inspired ability to recognize the spiritual source behind words or deeds of an individual. Unclean spirits often masquerade as “angels of light” (2 Corinthians 11:13). Particularly in a church setting, a person may have some sort of manifestation that has an appearance of being holy, but in fact is inspired by an unclean spirit. A person with a gift of discerning spirits can tell the difference. This is quite useful in ministry, because it can direct us how to pray.

- Speaking in Different Kinds of Tongues and Interpretation of Tongues

As we discussed when we talked about the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, there are at least three different phenomenon commonly labeled “speaking in tongues.” One occurred at Pentecost, when the believers were able to speak in other known languages that they had never learned, such that men who spoke those languages could understand their message. A second type is “praying in tongues,” a private Spirit-inspired communication between man and God. The third is the type Paul discusses in 1 Corinthians 12. This is a publicly spoken message, inspired by the Holy Spirit, in a language that is unintelligible to the speaker and to the audience. If it happened in isolation it would be of little benefit to the congregation. When the Holy Spirit equips a person to utter the message, however, he will equip someone else in the congregation to interpret the message. Tongues and interpretation together have the effect of prophetic utterance. For reasons of his own choosing, the Holy Spirit uses “two or three witnesses”⁴ to deliver the message.”

Note that the list of gifts in Romans 12 includes several not found here. They include:

- Serving

A spiritual gift of service, or a “gift of helps” as it is commonly called is a Holy Spirit-inspired attitude and availability to be used to meet the needs of others or of the community. A person who is delivering a gift of helps is the one who finds joy in cleaning the church toilets. They recognize that anything they do they are doing for the Lord and this motivates in them a sincere desire to be helpful. They do not have to be in control but they have a need and a desire to be used.

⁴ Deuteronomy 17:6, Deuteronomy 19:15, Matthew 18:16, 2 Corinthians 13:11, 1 Timothy 5:19, Hebrews 10:28

- Teaching

A spiritual gift of teaching is a Holy Spirit-inspired ability to clarify truth of Scripture and to make it understandable and applicable to lives of believers.

- Encouraging

A spiritual gift of encouragement is a word, inspired by the Holy Spirit, delivered by one believer to another who is in need of assurance, uplifting, or motivation to proceed.

- Contributing to the Needs of Others

With this gift, the Holy Spirit equips a believer with the attitude and the resources such that he can financially contribute to the needs of others in the church or to the church itself. Although we should all give, it does come more naturally for some than others. Furthermore, God expects more of some than others. This spiritual gift is given to those to enable them to be faithful to that calling.

- Leadership

Leadership, or the gift of administration, is a Holy Spirit-inspired ability to organize and direct the affairs of the church. In a healthy church there will be a proper mix of a few with the gift of leadership and more with the gift of helps. Some need to lead and some need to follow.

- Showing Mercy

God is a God of mercy. He uses others in the church to administer mercy to us in this present age. A spiritual gift of showing mercy is a Holy Spirit-inspired ability to look at a situation as God would see it, to feel the mercy in his heart, and to communicate that mercy to a person in need of it.

Other spiritual gifts found either in 1 Corinthians 12:28 or Ephesians 4:11 include:

- Apostleship

A spiritual gift of apostleship is an equipping by the Holy Spirit for missionary activity. The word "apostle" comes from a Greek word meaning "to send." An apostle is one who is sent. He is sent for the purpose of laying a foundation – planting churches and organizing new groups of believers.

- Evangelism

John 3:5-6 teaches us that the Holy Spirit is the agent of spiritual rebirth. It is his job to convict and convince and to lead people to Christ. Often he uses other believers in the process. Anyone who has ever had the privilege of being used by the Holy Spirit to bring someone to Jesus has delivered a gift of evangelism.

- Pastoring

The word "pastor" comes from the world of shepherding. A shepherd is a pastor. He cares for the need of his flock. His life is spent looking out for their needs and protecting them from predators. His heart is for their well being. He leads them to green grass and still waters. The Holy Spirit cares for believers in the same way. A gift of pastoring is the love,

care, and protection of the Holy Spirit for his flock, administered through an individual in the church (i.e. the pastor).

Thus the Holy Spirit delivers different gifts at different times for the purpose of edifying the church. He uses the members to the church to deliver these gifts. It is all under the control of the same Spirit and is done at his discretion where and when he sees fit.

Unfortunately some of the people in Corinth did not like the roles to which they had been called. There was a feeling that some roles were more important than others and people wanted to be in the more important roles. The church does not work this way, however. Who would want to go to a church where everyone in the room spoke in tongues at the same time, all the time, and that was all that ever happened? There was never any teaching, healing, pastoring, etc. Furthermore there was never any interpretation to make sense of the tongues. It would be a fairly pointless gathering. A proper mix of the gifts is necessary and all roles are important. As he did in Romans 12, Paul turned to the example of the human body for illustration. In 1 Corinthians 12:14-27:

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

An isolated body part is useless and would quickly die. The body, when knitted together is a marvelous instrument. Each part cares for and nourishes the others. Together it can thrive and function. The body of Christ should be no different.

Paul now gives another list, similar to the one above. In this one, however, he is describing roles rather than gifts. They are related, because a person assumes a role when God consistently uses him to deliver a specific gift. Paul says that God has appointed in the church:

- Apostles
- Prophets
- Teachers
- Workers of Miracles
- Those Having Gifts of Healing

- Those Able to Help Others
- Those with Gifts of Administration
- Those Speaking in Different Kinds of Tongues

The list of roles in Romans 12 and in Ephesians 4:11 add to this list:

- Encouragers
- Those who Contribute to the Needs of Others
- Leaders
- Those Who Show Mercy
- Evangelists
- Pastors

God has placed all of these roles in the church. Not all of us are going to be called to all of these roles. In 1 Corinthians 12:31, Paul says, “But eagerly desire the greater gifts.” There is nothing wrong with wanting to grow in the ability to deliver spiritual gifts. Still, we must understand that each of these roles is important and they all need to function in the church. They must all be knitted together into a coherent functioning. 1 Corinthians 13 gives the mechanism by which that happens.

2.10.2 The Overriding Gift – Love

1 Corinthians 13

The chapter in its entirety says:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Remember that this chapter, along with 1 Corinthians 12 and 1 Corinthians 14 were written in response to the “My gift is better than your gift” debate in Corinth. Paul says that you may speak in tongues, prophecy, have the gift of faith, or contribute to the needs of others, but if the gift is not administered in love then it is worth nothing. It benefits nobody. Love is the key that knits the various gifts in the church together. They are not given for the purpose of edifying the messenger. They are given to edify the recipient. If they are delivered by a hostile or arrogant

messenger then it nullifies their effect. If they members of the church truly love one another, then the gifts will flow freely and edify the church.

Thus the people in the church should:

- be patient.
- be kind.
- not envy.
- refrain from boasting.
- not be proud.
- not be rude.
- not be self-seeking.
- be slow to anger.
- be quick to forgive and forget – not keeping a record of wrongs.
- rejoice in truth and turn away from evil.
- protect each other.
- trust each other.
- hope.
- persevere.

If they can maintain this attitude towards one another then love will prevail in the church.

Paul says that when perfection comes the imperfect will pass away. When Jesus returns, we will no longer need the spiritual gifts. In fact, the spiritual gifts that we have are a dim image of the glory that we will see in the future. Our prophecies, tongues, knowledge, etc. are imperfect. They will cease when they are no longer needed. Love, however, will never cease. It will prevail through eternity. Spiritual gifts will pass away but love will remain.

God has given us faith, hope, and love. The greatest gift is love.

2.10.3 The Functioning of the Gifts in Church Meetings

1 Corinthians 14

Thus Paul tells the church that it is natural and acceptable to wish to grow in giftedness, as long as it is happening in an atmosphere of submission. In 1 Corinthians 14:1-5 he says:

Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy. For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit. But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified.

In chapter 14, Paul focuses on the gift of tongues and the gift of prophecy. There must have been a specific debate in Corinth about which was a more valuable gift, or else Paul would not have spent time on it.

The gist of what he says is that:

- prophecy edifies the church and this is a great gift.

- tongues with interpretation also edifies the church and thus the two together are the same caliber of gift as prophecy.
- tongues without interpretation is also a great gift. Paul wishes that all in the church would have this experience. Its value, however, is to edify the individual rather than the church. Thus its value is less than that of prophecy or of tongues with interpretation.

This being the case, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:12-19:

Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church.

For this reason anyone who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret what he says. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind. If you are praising God with your spirit, how can one who finds himself among those who do not understand say "Amen" to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying? You may be giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified.

I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.

Understand what Paul is saying. Tongues are good. They build up individuals in the church. The gifts are for the purpose of edifying the church, and that can happen one individual at a time. If, however, a gift can edify the entire congregation, it is better. It is more useful to the church as a whole to prophesy or to have tongues plus interpretation than to simply have tongues.

1 Corinthians 14:22-25 is a bit of a confusing passage:

Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is for believers, not for unbelievers. So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, "God is really among you!"

Following this passage, we see:

- Tongues are a sign for unbelievers rather than believers.
- Prophecy is for believers, not unbelievers.
- If unbelievers come into the church and tongues is occurring, they will say "are you out of your mind?"
- If unbelievers come into the church and prophecy is going on, they will be convicted of sin and worship God.
- Huh?

How does one make sense out of this?

Remember that this passage is part of a section in which Paul is attempting to settle an argument in Corinth. There is "my gift is better than your gift" bickering between the "prophets" and the "tongues speakers." Paul is trying very hard to make the point that prophecy is a more useful gift to the church.

In 1 Corinthians 14:21 (the previous verse) he had just quoted Isaiah 28:11:

In the Law it is written: "Through men of strange tongues and through the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people, but even then they will not listen to me," says the Lord.

It appears that 1 Corinthians 14:22, rather than being an assertion by Paul, was a question that had been posed by the "tongues speakers" in Corinth. Remember that the Greek text had no punctuation marks, so it is a matter of interpretation as to whether or not this was a statement or a question. Imagine that the section reads as follows and it might make more sense:

Isaiah said, "Through men of strange tongues and through the lips of foreigners I will speak to the people, but even then they will not listen to me," says the Lord.

You have taken this to mean, "Tongues are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is for believers, not for unbelievers."

What really happens, though? If the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, "God is really among you!"

The conclusion? Prophecy is more edifying than tongues for unbelievers, just as it is for believers. Prophecy is the all-around better gift.

I would hope that you would be uncomfortable with somebody like me adding to the words of Scripture, but the insertions might help you put the section in the context that was intended.

1 Corinthians 14:26-33 gives some perspective on what was happening in the church and why Paul needed to address this problem in the first place:

What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church. If anyone speaks in a tongue, two – or at the most three – should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God.

Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. For God is not a God of disorder but of peace.

We get the impression from reading this that there was chaos in the church in Corinth. Whenever anyone felt the urge to prophesy, to speak in tongues, or whatever, he would stand up and do so. There was no order to the service. The operation of the spiritual gifts needed to be brought under control so that there would be order in service. Otherwise they would be distracting rather than edifying to the church. Tongues should be withheld unless an interpreter is present. There should be nothing in the service that does not edify the church as a whole.

Notice that Paul did not forbid prophecy or tongues in church. He expected them to be a part of the service. He just wanted them to function in an orderly fashion.

He then moves to one other issue that seemed to be causing disruption in the church. Remember that a large percentage of the church membership was Jewish. In Judaism it was forbidden to teach women things of God. They were separated from the men in the synagogue and relegated to second-class status. These women were finding freedom in the church. We already encountered this in chapter 11. The women sat alongside the men in the service. We have already seen that they were allowed to prophesy and pray in the service (1 Corinthians 11:5). They were being instructed alongside their husbands. There was a problem, however. The women had some catching-up to do. Because they had been held back for so long, they did not have the foundational understanding of Judaism that their husbands had. Thus, from what we can tell, they were interrupting the service by asking their husband questions whenever they did not understand what was said. This added more distraction to an already-chaotic service. Paul was trying to bring order to the chaos. Thus he said in 1 Corinthians 14:33-35:

As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.

This cannot be taken as an absolute prohibition against women speaking in church. It would be impossible to reconcile that with 1 Corinthians 11, where Paul gives instruction to women on how they should pray and prophesy in church. It can be taken as an indication that women – and men for that matter – have no business interrupting a church service with chatter.

Thus Paul's conclusions on the matter of spiritual gifts are as follows:

- They are given for the common good – for the purpose of edifying the church.
- They all have their place and are administered by the same Holy Spirit.
- They should be practiced in an atmosphere of love.
- Some gifts are more useful to the church as a whole than others and those are the ones that should be practiced in the church meetings.
- All of this should happen in an orderly fashion because God is a God of order.

He concludes this discussion of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 14:39-40:

Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.

2.11 Resurrection of the Dead

1 Corinthians 15

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul addresses another problem in the Corinthian church. Apparently there was a faction in the church who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. This could be a group of converted Sadducees, the Jewish faction that did not believe in an afterlife.

Paul begins by making the point that the truth of a resurrection is a critical component of Christianity. Without that, nothing else makes sense. After laying that foundation, he gives a glimpse of the resurrection process.

In 1 Corinthians 15:1-2 Paul reminds the Corinthians that it is their belief in the Gospel message that saves them. If they do not hold firmly to that message then they are believing in vain. And what is the essence of that message? 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 says:

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

Central to the message of the faith is that Christ was raised from the dead and that the risen Christ appeared to the apostles – including Paul – and the other believers. If Jesus was raised from the dead, then resurrection is a fact and not a concept. On the other hand, if there is no resurrection, then Jesus cannot have been raised. If that is true, then the message of the Gospel is futile and Paul's preaching is a useless farce. We are still lost and drowning in our sin. Christians are to be pitied because they are resting on a false hope. On the contrary, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:20-23:

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.

We are people of hope because Jesus was indeed raised from the dead. Furthermore he is the firstfruits of resurrection. Others will follow. Just as Adam led all men into death, Jesus has shown the way out. He was raised and he will come back to raise those who belong to him.

1 Corinthians 15:29 is a bit of a curious verse:

Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for them?

What is "baptism for the dead?" Mormons practice this and cite this verse as justification for the practice. We understand baptism as an ordinance for believers, publicly testifying to their conversion. If that is the case, how could it apply to the dead? Is it possible to be converted after death?

The answer is "no." The idea of a post-death conversion runs contrary to all other teaching in the New Testament. That being the case, what was going on here? Who was undergoing baptism for the dead and what were they trying to accomplish?

Contextually, Paul is most likely referring to a contingent within the Corinthian church. More than likely, they were seeking the same benefit from the practice that Mormons today seek – a chance for the dearly departed to receive salvation beyond the grave. The practice would have been motivated out of love, superstition, and ignorance.

They seem to have been an isolated group. We have no record of any such practice anywhere else – Christian or pagan.

Unfortunately Paul makes this reference without any further explanation. He does not indicate whether he approves or disapproves of the practice. He just refers to these people as another group who believe in the resurrection. Remember that the point of this whole section is to show the hope that people get out of the idea of the resurrection of the dead.

So how are we to understand this reference?

- There was most likely a small group of believers in Corinth who practiced baptism for the dead.
- They probably hoped that this vicarious baptism would bring a chance of salvation for a dead loved-one.
- There is nothing anywhere else in Scripture that would support the idea that a person can be saved after death.
- There is no indication that this practice happened in any other church nor does it seem to be a pagan practice of the time.
- Paul did not endorse the practice. He did not identify with it. Note that the majority of 1 Corinthians is written from the “I”, “we”, or “you” standpoint, but this particular verse is written in the “they” standpoint.
- Paul also did not condemn the practice. There were major issues in the Corinthian church. This whole letter has been striving to correct one wrong after another. More than likely Paul felt like this practice was not worth taking on at this time.

There are a number of anti-Mormon crusaders who would try somehow to bend this verse into a condemnation of baptism for the dead. It does not condemn it. It does not endorse it. The practice seems to have been a nit on the Corinthian church that Paul was not ready to pick.

If the verse is taken in context along with the verses that follow it may be understood. Paul is saying:

Those people baptize for the dead because they have hope in the resurrection. I live my life like I do – facing danger and death at times – because I have hope in the resurrection. The resurrection is a motivating force that causes us to press on. Without it we might as well adopt the hopeless attitude, “Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die.”

In 1 Corinthians 15:35, Paul transitions from a discussion of whether or not the resurrection is a reality to how it occurs. 1 Corinthians 15:35 says,

But someone may ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?”

This is a good question. Even today we wonder what it will be like when we are resurrected. The first thing that we know is that we will have a body. We will not live through eternity in a disembodied, spiritual state. What kind of body will we have, however? Will we have pimples and warts? Will some of us be fat or bald? Will we look anything like we look now? Will we recognize one another in our new bodies? I’d really like to know all of these things. Unfortunately Paul does not exactly answer these questions. What he does say in 1 Corinthians 15:36-50 is significant and revealing:

How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body. All flesh is not the same: Men have one kind of flesh, animals have another, birds another and fish another. There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendor of the heavenly bodies is one kind, and the splendor of the earthly bodies is another. The sun has one kind of splendor, the moon another and the stars another; and star differs from star in splendor.

So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.

If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. So it is written: "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit. The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual. The first man was of the dust of the earth, the second man from heaven. As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the man from heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven.

I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

We understand from this:

- Just as a seed must die and be buried before it can bring forth fruit, so must our current bodies die and be buried before they will bring forth the fruit of the resurrection body.
- The natural, perishable, buried in weakness and dishonor, will be raised as a spiritual, imperishable body, with power and glory.
- This transformation is necessary, because the perishable flesh and blood, designed for living in this fallen world, cannot inherit the Kingdom of God.
- As our current bodies have the nature of the "man of dust," Adam, so our spiritual bodies will have the nature of the "man from heaven," the resurrected Jesus.

That last conclusion is the only key that we have to answering some of the questions above. The only example that we have of how we will be after the resurrection is the resurrected Jesus. He had a body that was recognizable as a body of a man. At times people recognized him (Luke 24:31, John 20:16) and at other times they did not (Luke 24:13-30, John 20:14). He was able to enter rooms with locked doors (John 20:19). He ate (Luke 24:41-42). In his resurrection body, he bore the wounds that he received in his natural body (Luke 24:39, John 20:27). He had flesh and bones (Luke 24:39) although we understand them to have a different nature than we have now.

Does this answer all of our questions? No. But it does point us in a direction. We will have bodies similar in function but different in essence compared to what we have now. What will be the process through which we receive these bodies? Paul addresses this in 1 Corinthians 15:51-57:

Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed – in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."⁵

⁵ Isaiah 25:8

“Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?”⁶

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the section above, Paul is referring to the same event discussed in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11 and 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12. This is the event known as the rapture. The day will come when in an instant the dead in Christ will rise to their resurrection bodies. Then those believers who are still alive will be instantly changed, clothed in immortality. At that point, death will have no more power over them.

It is interesting that in this chapter Paul identifies Jesus as the “firstfruits” of those who have fallen asleep. He then notes that this change to the resurrection body will happen at the sound of a trumpet. Two of the festivals of Leviticus 23 are the Feast of Firstfruits and the Feast of Trumpets. On the Jewish calendar, the resurrection actually occurred on the Feast of Firstfruits – on the Sunday following Passover. Because of this, many assume that the rapture will occur at the Feast of Trumpets on the Jewish calendar. For a fuller discussion of this, see the section on Leviticus 23 in [Getting Into the Promised Land Without Falling Asleep in Leviticus](#).

This event is our reward. This is the hope that drives us forward. This knowledge feeds our thoughts and ambitions. It holds us to what is right and important. Paul does not want the believers in Corinth to be swayed from this hope. It is a crucial and central truth to the Christian message. Without it they have no reason to continue. He concludes this chapter with 1 Corinthians 15:58:

Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

2.12 Collection for the Church in Jerusalem

1 Corinthians 16:1-4

In Acts 11, a prophet named Agabus had predicted a famine all over the Roman world. As a result, the churches began contributing to the needs of the church in Jerusalem. This collection was important to Paul. He spent a great deal of time trying to convince the Jewish Christians that his Gentile converts were first-class citizens of the Kingdom. Having them contribute to the needs of the church in Jerusalem was not only the right thing to do, but it was important public relations as far as Paul was concerned. Thus he reminds the Corinthian church to be diligent in participating in this. 1 Corinthians 16:1-4 says:

Now about the collection for God’s people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made. Then, when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable for me to go also, they will accompany me.

The people were to bring their contributions “on the first day of every week,” which is an indication that the church had started meeting on Sunday rather than Saturday. They were to contribute an amount proportional to their income. Paul wanted this contribution to be in order so that he would not have to fuss at them about it when he came. Remember that he hoped to

⁶ This is a very rough translation of Hosea 13:14.

clear up a number of issues in writing this letter so that he would not have to spend his time with them in conflict when he came.

2.13 Conclusion

1 Corinthians 16:5-24

In the concluding part of the letter, Paul tells them that the Lord is rewarding his work in Ephesus (which is how we know the letter was written from Ephesus). He wants to come visit them but wants to do so when he can spend some time with them. He is sending Timothy and asks them to take good care of him when he comes.

He encourages them to be strong in their faith and to operate in love.

He concludes the letter, as he often does, with an epilogue written in his own handwriting. 1 Corinthians 16:21-24 says:

I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand.

If anyone does not love the Lord – a curse be on him. Come, O Lord!

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you.

My love to all of you in Christ Jesus. Amen.

3. Second Corinthians

3.1 Greetings

2 Corinthians 1:1-7

The letter is from Paul and Timothy and is addressed to “the church of God in Corinth, together with all the saints throughout Achaia” (2 Corinthians 1:1).

2 Corinthians 1:3-7 says:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

Note that in these five verses, the word “comfort” (or some form of that word) appears nine times. Comfort is a prominent theme in the book. After the tongue-lashing that Paul gave the church in 1 Corinthians and in another letter which no longer exists (a theme which also continues to a degree in 2 Corinthians), they would welcome some comfort. Furthermore, after all the grief that Paul has suffered at the hands of some of the people in the church, he would welcome comfort as well. Comfort is something that we all seek. This passage gives us insight as to the source and purpose of comfort:

- God is the source of all comfort.
- God comforted Paul so that he might in turn comfort others who were experiencing trouble.
- Just as the sufferings of Christ overflow to our lives, so does the comfort of Christ.
- The distress that Paul endured was for the sake of the comfort and salvation of his spiritual children.
- Comfort produces patient endurance of sufferings.

There is good news here. Comfort is for those who are suffering. Knowledge that the comfort will come will allow us to patiently endure suffering. God never promised that the suffering would go away. He equips us to endure it. The maturity that we get from this process allows us to turn around and be instruments of comfort to others who are suffering. Paul fulfilled that for the Corinthians.

Paul’s previous correspondence must have produced a great deal of agitation among the people in Corinth. That was the intent. Like a misbehaving child, they needed to be spanked. After a parent spans a child, however, hopefully the next step is to hold the child and give comfort. That is what Paul would like to do in 2 Corinthians.

3.2 Paul's Failure to Visit Corinth

2 Corinthians 1:8-2:4

Unfortunately the "Corinthian child" is still misbehaving to a degree. There are certain issues still that Paul must address in this letter. The first one is addressed in this section.

In 1 Corinthians 4:19-21, 1 Corinthians 11:34, and 1 Corinthians 16:2-9, Paul told the Corinthians that he planned to come visit them. Because of other commitments, he had not yet gone to them. Apparently some in the church were accusing him of being wishy-washy or insincere in saying that he wanted to see them. He addressed that accusation in this section. 2 Corinthians 1:8-10 says:

We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us.

Paul led a very difficult life. He went from imprisonment to stoning to escaping plots on his life. He had every right to despair, "even of life." Through it all, however, he learned to rely upon God for sustenance. The God who can raise the dead can also sustain the living. This is in line with the "comfort" section above. As Paul was comforted by God through these hardships, he learned to patiently endure.

Paul was not looking for pity from the Corinthians. He wanted them to understand what "a day in the life of Paul" was like. He did not have the freedom to "hop a bus" to Corinth whenever he felt like visiting them. His agenda and priorities were set by God and he submitted fully. He had indeed wanted to come visit them. It simply had not yet been possible.

Paul continued by saying that he had been completely open and honest in expressing his desire to visit them. This desire was born out of a confidence that they would reconcile their differences and spend time together rejoicing in the things that the Lord has done. He said in 2 Corinthians 1:15-2:4:

Because I was confident of this, I planned to visit you first so that you might benefit twice. I planned to visit you on my way to Macedonia and to come back to you from Macedonia, and then to have you send me on my way to Judea. When I planned this, did I do it lightly? Or do I make my plans in a worldly manner so that in the same breath I say, "Yes, yes" and "No, no"?

But as surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not "Yes" and "No." For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by me and Silas and Timothy, was not "Yes" and "No," but in him it has always been "Yes." For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. And so through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God. Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

I call God as my witness that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth. Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm. So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you. For if I grieve you, who is left to make me glad but you whom I have grieved? I wrote as I did so that when I came I should not be distressed by those who ought to make me rejoice. I had confidence in all of you, that you would all share my joy. For I wrote you out of great distress

and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you.

The introduction to the Corinthian correspondence gave a probably chronology for Paul's interaction with the Corinthian church. In his first visit he founded the church. His second visit followed the writing of 1 Corinthians, in which he experienced a great deal of conflict with the Corinthians. He had written a harsh letter ("out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears") following the second visit, a letter which is no longer preserved. He did not want to visit a third time until problems there were beginning to turn around. His desire was for reconciliation. He hoped to spend their time together in harmony and thus he avoided a painful visit.

It grieved Paul to have his authority and integrity challenged by those who were his spiritual children. How much more fruitful his time could have been if he had been able to spend it doing something other than defending himself. He simply could have turned his back on them and avoided any further contact with them, but that would have caused him more grief than having them accusing him of things. Thus he took time to answer their charges.

3.3 Forgiveness for the Offender

2 Corinthians 2:5-11

2 Corinthians 2:5-11 says:

If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you, to some extent – not to put it too severely. The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. The reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven – if there was anything to forgive – I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.

One can only speculate as to the identity of the offender mentioned in this passage. Somebody in the church has committed some sort of offense for which he was disciplined. Paul is saying that it is time to forgive and comfort the person and begin the process of restoring him to fellowship.

Some assume that the person in this passage is the same one in 1 Corinthians 5:1-5 – the sexual offender. There are many similarities. Indeed Paul had instructed the church to submit that person to discipline. That could be the identity of the person in this passage.

Taking the passage in context, however one might reach a different conclusion. Paul has been struggling with disruptive leadership in the church. There have been men in the Corinthian church challenging Paul's authority and leading other people to do the same. He addressed this in 1 Corinthians. Then, as best we can tell, he challenged it personally in a visit to Corinth and then again in another letter. Since writing the last letter, Titus had gone to Corinth and had come back reporting that things were getting better in Corinth. This means that either the rebellious men had repented on their own or the church had removed them from any position of influence – perhaps completely from the fellowship. More than likely the latter occurred. It seems that the man or men mentioned in the above passage were those who had openly challenged Paul's leadership. At Paul's urging, the church had brought some form of discipline against them. We see from the passage that the men were in sorrow over it. Paul believed that they were ready to

submit and to cease wreaking havoc in the church. Thus he urges the church to forgive them and restore them to fellowship.

That should be the model for church discipline. It is necessary at times. Its purpose should be redemptive, however. God's heart is always for reconciliation. Thus when a person reaches a point of sorrow and repentance, the church should be quicker to forgive and reconcile than it was to discipline. The church should stand ready to reaffirm its love for an offender. That does not mean that the person must be restored to a place of leadership and influence. He must be restored to fellowship, however. Failure to forgive plays into the schemes of Satan. He would like nothing better than to destroy the life of the offender – a process which has already begun. If the church does not close the loop and restore the person, it is giving Satan his wish.

3.4 The Glory of God's Ministry

2 Corinthians 2:12-4:6

There is an awkward break in the flow of the letter. It appears that everything from 2 Corinthians 2:14-7:4 is a break in the train of thought, an interlude. If this section were removed, the text would flow very freely. 2 Corinthians 2:12-13 followed by 2 Corinthians 7:5-7 reads:

Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me. I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said good-by to them and went on to Macedonia...

For when we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn – conflicts on the outside, fears within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever.

Everything in-between is important, but its insertion makes the text hard to follow. This sort of jumping around in the thought process has caused some scholars to doubt that 2 Corinthians was originally a single letter. They suggest that it may have been multiple letters, later combined into a single text. A better explanation might be that the lack of organization is a product of the emotional state of the author. Remember that Paul had suffered great emotional stress as a result of the situation in Corinth. He had sent Titus to them carrying a very stern letter of rebuke. He was anxiously awaiting Titus' return so that he could find out whether the people responded to the rebuke or rejected him altogether. That was why he had no peace of mind in Troas, as indicated in the above text. This is why he had no rest and was harassed at every turn. Titus came bringing a good report. This would have been like a shower in the desert for Paul. It would have brought tremendous relief and release of emotions. 2 Corinthians was written as part of this release. It was not a carefully crafted treatise; it was an emotional rush.

In 2 Corinthians 2:14-4:6, Paul discusses the glory of the ministry of Christ. He compares it to the glory of the ministry of Moses. In this section, Paul is excited about the ministry that he is allowed to have and at the same time he feels the need to continue defending himself to the Corinthians.

2 Corinthians 2:14-16 says:

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task?

Corinth was home to athletic events that are the precursor to the Olympic Games. Paul was certainly referring to the imagery of these pageants when he said that God “leads us in a triumphal procession in Christ.” Paul perceives that wherever he goes, God is leading him in a victor’s parade, bidding “whosoever will” to join the procession.

Wherever they go they spread the “fragrance of the knowledge of him.” It is interesting that he says this fragrance is the smell of death to some and the smell of life to others. The Gospel is a flame. Some will be refined and some will be destroyed.

2 Corinthians 2:17-3:3 resume Paul’s attitude of self-defense:

Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

The question “Are we beginning to commend ourselves again?” is asked somewhat sarcastically. The fact is that Paul should not have to defend himself to the Corinthians. They should be out defending him – their spiritual father – to the rest of the world. Paul should need no letter of recommendation to the Corinthians. They should be his letter of recommendation to others. Their very existence is a seal of Paul’s work.

The imagery of the Spirit being written on the tablets of human hearts comes from Jeremiah 31:31-33:

“The time is coming,” declares the Lord,
“when I will make a new covenant
with the house of Israel
and with the house of Judah.

It will not be like the covenant
I made with their forefathers
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they broke my covenant,
though I was a husband to them,”
declares the Lord.

“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel
after that time,” declares the Lord.
“I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.
I will be their God,
and they will be my people.

Paul has been God’s writing instrument, used to write the new covenant on the hearts of the Corinthian people. To him it has been a great honor to be used this way.

Paul has also conducted his ministry in an honorable way. He has not done it for financial gain. He has a confidence and a competence that come from God. He has been granted the grace to minister to others the Spirit, which gives life.

Paul then contrasts the glory of the old covenant with the new. The Jeremiah passage above contrasted the old covenant with the new. The old covenant was written on tablets of stone. The end result was that it brought death. The new covenant is written on human hearts and it brings life.

Moses was the messenger that brought the old covenant. Moses was an intermediary between the people and God. He would enter God's presence at Mount Sinai or in the Tent of Meeting and he would receive God's message for the people. Then he would come before the people and deliver the message. Whenever he came away from the presence of God his face would be aglow. Exodus 34:29-35 describes this phenomenon:

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them; so Aaron and all the leaders of the community came back to him, and he spoke to them. Afterward all the Israelites came near him, and he gave them all the commands the Lord had given him on Mount Sinai.

When Moses finished speaking to them, he put a veil over his face. But whenever he entered the Lord's presence to speak with him, he removed the veil until he came out. And when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, they saw that his face was radiant. Then Moses would put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak with the Lord.

Paul refers to this in 2 Corinthians 3:7-18:

Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!

Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it while the radiance was fading away. But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

The Old Testament mentions the fact that Moses wore the veil, but it does not really say why. Paul says that it was because he did not want the Israelites to see the radiance of God fading away. This says something of the glory of the old covenant. The old covenant was external. It was written on tablets of stone. There was glory in it because it was the Word of God. Coming into the presence of God via the old covenant brought radiance, but it was a radiance that faded.

Paul said in Romans 7:10, "I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death." The end result of the old covenant was conviction and death.

The new covenant is written on hearts, however. It is not external; it indwells believers. Thus the glory and radiance that it brings does not fade. It is a dynamic, vital Spirit. The old covenant brought condemnation but the new brings righteousness.

To this day, the old covenant remains behind a veil to the Jews. For those who turn to the glory of the new covenant, the veil is removed. The glory of the Lord shines on us at all times. We have the privilege of reflecting that glory. Over time and through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, we are transformed by that radiance into the image of Jesus.

This is the ministry to which Paul has been called. Nothing will discourage him from that. No amount of criticism from the Corinthians will dissuade him. He ministers this truth in a forthright manner. His one goal is to preach the truth and light of Jesus to a world in darkness. He will not be swayed from that calling.

3.5 Treasures in Jars of Clay

2 Corinthians 4:7-18

When Paul considered that God used him to convey the glory of the Gospel to the world, he likens it to a treasure in a clay jar. God has always worked that way. David was a young boy when he defeated Goliath. Gideon was a quivering coward when God called him to lead the army against the Midianites. Even Jesus "had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not." (Isaiah 53:2-3) God has always chosen the frail and the ordinary as vessels to deliver the extraordinary. He does this so that the glory of the giver rather than the glory of the vessel may be revealed.

In 2 Corinthians 4:8-10 Paul says:

We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.

Paul's life was hard. His physical existence brought about decay to his earthly dwelling. By all rights, he should have been dead long ago, based on the number of stonings, beatings, imprisonments, etc. that he has endured. Death had no hold on him, however, because he surrendered his life to Jesus long ago. His surrender and submission allowed the life of Jesus to be revealed through him. Ultimately he realized that all of this would bring about physical death, but that did not intimidate him. He knew that the same God that raised Jesus from the dead would raise him as well. Thus he could carry on with the work that he had been given, not having to worry about the outcome. He had taken his eyes off of the temporary and had fixed his eyes on the eternal.

3.6 The Earthly Tent and the Heavenly Dwelling

2 Corinthians 5:1-10

In 2 Corinthians 5:1-10, Paul briefly discusses what happens to an individual at the time that he dies. This passage has raised some questions relative to what happens to us between the time

that we die and that moment when “we will all be changed – in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.” (1 Corinthians 15:51-52). It is a good question. What is the existence of a believer between the time of his death and the day of the rapture?

2 Corinthians 5:1-5 says:

Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

Paul shifts metaphors in this section, at once talking about earthly tents vs. heavenly dwellings and also about being clothed vs. being naked. The metaphors are mixed, however. He indicates that we are currently clothed with an earthly tent. The day will come when that earthly tent will be destroyed. The day will also come when we will be clothed with a heavenly dwelling – a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Paul also refers to a stage when we are naked, which implies that we are clothed with neither dwelling. What is the implication of this?

Some have interpreted this to mean that the time between physical death and the rapture is spent in a spiritual, disembodied state. They say that during this time we still have communion with God, facilitated by the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us “as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come,” which they interpret to mean as a guarantee of our future glorified bodies. At the time of the rapture we receive our glorified bodies – the heavenly dwelling.

This is certainly a possible interpretation of this passage. I would hesitate to be dogmatic about it. The fact is that the Bible does not give us much information about that interim state. It is probably because we do not really need to know.

The fact is that we do have the Spirit now as a deposit guaranteeing that God will deliver eternity to us. He paid for it with the life of his Son and now gives us his very Spirit to assure us that he will deliver it. He cares for us very much.

Whether or not this passage tells us exactly what happens when we die, we can share the emotions that Paul expresses in the passage. We are uncomfortable with the thought of being unclothed – i.e. dying. It is a frightening thought, even for a staunch believer. At the same time, we long for the day when we will receive our heavenly dwellings. It is the hope which drives us forward to face each new day. It was the hope that motivated Paul to go on with his work, in spite of the beating that his “clay jar” endured every day.

In 2 Corinthians 5:9-10 he says:

So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

Here or there, our objective should be to please him. Furthermore, we should be sobered in this existence by the knowledge that a day of judgment awaits us. In the discussion on 1 Corinthians 3, we discussed the idea of rewards in heaven. That is reinforced by this passage. There will

come a time when the chaff will be burned away and we will be rewarded for what remains. Then it will be too late to do anything about it. It warrants some planning now.

3.7 The Ministry of Reconciliation

2 Corinthians 5:11-21

Paul knows that death is the great divider. It concerns him greatly. He is not concerned for himself because he has assurance that he has been reconciled to God. He has a compelling love for others, however, and is greatly concerned for the lost. It grieves him to know that many will be cut off eternally from God by death. This love and concern that Paul has comes from God and motivates his life's work. He wants the Corinthians to understand this. If any should level charges against Paul he expects his followers in Corinth to be able to defend him, knowing that this is what his life is all about.

He says in 2 Corinthians 5:14-21:

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

The wages of sin is death, and Jesus has suffered that death on behalf of all of us. That is what Paul means when he says "one died for all, and therefore all died." Since he died for us, we are to live for him. Our lives should be transformed. We should be new creations. The life that we once lived – a worldly existence – should be replaced by new life in the Spirit.

This is nothing that we initiated. God did it for us. God initiated the reconciliation process by sending Jesus. Now he gives us the ministry of reconciliation. We have the privilege of being instruments of reconciling the world to God. God has appointed us as ambassadors to the world. An ambassador is one who is authorized to speak and act on behalf of the one he represents. We have been given authority to speak and act on behalf of God. It is really a very awesome thought. Furthermore we have been given the power of God through the Holy Spirit, living in us. The very same Holy Spirit that empowered Jesus to walk on water and raise the dead now empowers us for the task of being ambassadors of reconciliation. We have been given the power and the authority to carry out the task. It is now up to us to carry a simple message to the world: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Jesus, the one and only man without sin, took on the sin of the world and carried it into death. In that transaction, he freed us from the grip of sin so that we might become righteous before God. Therefore we offer the appeal of God's heart: "Be reconciled to God."

3.8 Appeal for Unity

2 Corinthians 6:1-13

Paul reached out for unity once more. He declared the purity of his ministry. He said that he had done nothing that would give anyone legitimate grounds for criticism. He always acted in a way that the cause of Christ would be honored. Part of that is making sure that his own ministry is never discredited, because that would bring shame on the cause of Christ. Some today would do well to remember that.

2 Corinthians 6:3-13 elaborates on this in detail:

We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. As a fair exchange – I speak as to my children – open wide your hearts also.

2 Corinthians is an extremely personal letter of Paul. This is the second and not the last time that he gives a list of hardships that he has endured for the sake of the Gospel (see 2 Corinthians 1:8-10 and 2 Corinthians 11:23-29). This is not like Paul. Remember, however, that this letter was written out of frustration that some in Corinth were making accusations about Paul's integrity and his motives. The letter was written in self-defense. He felt that he was on trial and had to justify his ministry. He does not do the things that he does because it is great fun, a good way to see the world, or a lucrative way to make quick money. In fact it is a painful and miserable life, physically speaking. He endured it all with joy, however, because he had his eyes fixed on eternity rather than the sorrows of the day.

Beatings, imprisonments, sleepless nights, hunger, etc. did not afflict Paul. Rejection by the Corinthians, however, tore at the innermost part of his being. He had opened his life and his heart to the Corinthians and pleaded with them to return the love.

3.9 Do Not Be Yoked Together With Unbelievers

2 Corinthians 6:14-7:4

2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1 seems to make a sharp detour in the logic patch that we have been following. Remember that we have already said that 2 Corinthians is not a well-crafted treatise but an emotional outburst. It contains many twists and turns and is frankly hard to follow.

This particular section has seemed so out of place to certain scholars that they have concluded that this is a separate letter that was inserted into the middle of 2 Corinthians at some point in time. Some have suggested that this might be all or part of the text of the letter mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5:9. I would suggest that the section fits very well in context and gives a glimpse of the root cause of the problems in Corinth. 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1 says:

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people."

"Therefore come out from them
and be separate,
says the Lord.
Touch no unclean thing,
and I will receive you."

"I will be a Father to you,
and you will be my sons and daughters,
says the Lord Almighty."

Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.

Remember that Paul had opponents in the church. The implication here is that some of these opponents, who had established themselves in the church, were not believers at all. The church had yoked itself with unbelievers. Righteousness and wickedness were attempting to commingle and it does not work. Those who did not belong to Christ were influencing the affairs of the church and wreaking havoc in the process.

Paul's admonition was to separate from these unbelievers. Purify the church by separating from these contaminants.

It is common for people take the verse "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers" to be a prohibition against marriage between a believer and an unbeliever. It is probably better for a believer not to marry an unbeliever, but that does not seem to be an accurate interpretation of this particular verse. This particular verse is for the corporate body. At the end of this section Paul asks for the believers and unbelievers to separate. We know that Paul does not call for the dissolution of marriages between believers and unbelievers (see 1 Corinthians 7:12-16). What he is calling for is purification of the church.

Does this mean that unbelievers should not be allowed in the church? No. How else would they ever become believers? They have no business occupying leadership positions in the church, however. They should not be put into positions of influence. That is what had happened in Corinth. Paul is calling on the church to "clean house" and to remove any unbelievers from any position of leadership.

He continued in 2 Corinthians 7:2-4 to appeal for the Corinthians to embrace Paul in love and to put down any further accusations against his ministry. He loved them and would give his very life for them, but he wanted to see the love returned.

3.10 Reunion with Titus

2 Corinthians 7:5-15

As mentioned earlier, 2 Corinthians 7:5 picks up right where 2 Corinthians 2:13 left off. Everything in-between was a detour in thought, as is so characteristic of this book.

Prior to the writing of 2 Corinthians, Paul had sent the church a very severe letter, taking them to task for allowing the challenges to his leadership to go on openly in the church. He had sent Titus as a messenger to carry the letter to them. He anxiously waited for Titus to return and tell him how the letter had been received. In 2 Corinthians 2, Paul had mentioned that he had no rest because Titus had not yet returned. His soul was in anguish, hoping that the Corinthians would respond to his message but fearing that they might not. The story resumes in 2 Corinthians 7:5-7:

For when we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn – conflicts on the outside, fears within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever.

Titus had gone to Corinth. He had given them Paul's letter. They had received Titus and had received Paul's instruction. Paul's words obviously brought about repentance and sorrow in them. They had expressed a longing to see Paul, which brought him great encouragement. The fact that Titus was there longer than Paul expected is a sign that he was received hospitably and was able to minister among them. Otherwise he would have returned quickly.

We must realize two things. First of all, Paul really needed this encouragement. He was quite low over the situation in Corinth. It was taking all of his emotional energy. Second, things were better in Corinth, but they were not completely well. If everything was fine, Paul would not still be on the defense in 2 Corinthians. Before Titus' visit, the challenge to Paul in Corinth was open, tolerated, and perhaps even accepted by a large number of people in the church. Now the challenge is still there, but it no longer has the following of the masses. Paul has managed to reduce it to an unpopular minority. His goal is to eliminate it altogether.

Paul tells them that he knows the letter was harsh and that it hurt them. He was sorry that it had to be that way. Still, the sorrow that they felt brought them to repentance, which brought them out of harm's way. Thus it was a good thing. 2 Corinthians 7:10-11 says:

Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter.

In general sorrow is a negative thing. Sorrow over sin is good however. It leads to repentance, which leads to salvation. In the end it is without regret. This cannot be said of worldly sorrow. Godly sorrow gets our attention and motivates us to reform from the things that brought about the sorrow.

There is a fine line between sorrow and condemnation. Romans 8:1 says, "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." We are not supposed to labor under condemnation and guilt. Guilt would tell us that we are not worthy to relate to God. It becomes a barrier to reconciliation. Its source is Satan, who would like to see us cut off from God. Jesus died so that our guilt might die.

Godly sorrow is a different matter. Godly sorrow is what we should feel when we realize that our behavior is breaking God's heart. This is what we should feel when we realize that our selfish choices are disrupting our relationship with God, who wants to relate to us so badly that he sacrificed his son to provide the reconciliation. That reconciliation that Jesus bought for us with

his sacrifice is being pushed out of reach by our sin. The result of godly sorrow should be to turn from the sin and back towards the relationship.

Paul's severe letter was written to bring about godly sorrow, which in turn would bring restoration to their relationship. It has begun to accomplish its purpose. For that he was truly grateful. He was also grateful to them for the warm reception that they gave Titus. Paul and Titus were both very encouraged by the news from Corinth.

3.11 Generosity in Giving

2 Corinthians 8-9

2 Corinthians 8-9 makes another sharp turn in thought. Paul now directs his attention to the collection for the church in Jerusalem. Acts 11:28-30 is the background for this:

One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

Paul had been working with the churches that he founded to collect money to assist the members of the church in Jerusalem, who were hit especially hard by the famine. In 1 Corinthians 16:1-4, Paul had given instruction to the church at Corinth about this collection. It is the subject of chapter 8 and 9.

Realize that this famine impacted the entire Roman world. Everyone was affected. It seems to have been more of a hardship on the church in Judea than in other places, but everyone was touched by the famine.⁷ Paul was not asking people to give out of their excess to support Judea. He was asking them to give sacrificially in their own time of need.

Some of the churches were doing this. He mentions the churches in Macedonia, which is in the northern part of Greece and would have included Berea, Thessalonica, and Philippi. 2 Corinthians 8:1-4 says:

And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.

Paul is using a bit of child psychology here – “Oh, Johnny, look how good Billy is doing!” The object, of course, is that Billy will be spurred to do as good as or better than Johnny. Paul wanted the Corinthian church to step up to the plate and contribute just as the other churches were doing. He continues the strategy in 2 Corinthians 8:7:

But just as you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us – see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

⁷ More than likely there were social structures in other places where people could turn for help. In Judea, however, there was active persecution against the church. They probably had nobody to whom they could turn in their need. Thus assistance by the church outside of Judea would have been vital to their well-being.

It is my belief that some churches today have done a disservice in teaching about giving. It is common to hear churches instruct their people that they are supposed to “tithes,” with an understanding that “tithing” means giving one tenth of your before-tax income as an undesignated gift to the church. After your tithe, you are free to give offerings to other causes if so desire.

This does resemble the pattern in the Old Testament, when we lived under a covenant written on tablets of stone. We now live under a covenant that is written on our hearts, however. The pattern for Spirit-led giving is “They gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability.”

I believe in giving. I know that God rewards giving. I believe it should be an act of obedience, submission, and worship, led by the Holy Spirit rather than a payroll deduction. Unfortunately, too many people have never really been taught how to rely on the Holy Spirit for direction. In some ways, they are living under the old covenant, seeking law that is written on stone. If that is the case, then ten percent is the model that they will find. The tithe is a foundation. It is a basic minimum. Tithing still carries with it the rewards and promises given in Malachi 3:8-12. A person living under the new covenant should look to the model in 2 Corinthians 8-9, however and be a full-fledged Spirit-filled giver.

In 2 Corinthians 8:8, Paul tells the church that giving to this cause is not a command, but a test of their love. He reminds them that Jesus, who had everything, emptied himself and became poor for their sakes. His poverty made them rich, spiritually speaking.

Paul is sending Titus, along with two other unnamed men to collect the gift. Paul does not intend to handle the money personally. He has already suffered from false accusations and criticisms from people at Corinth. For that reason, it is better than he let somebody else handle the money, so that people would not say that he is using it for personal gain. Paul shows great wisdom in not putting himself in a position to be criticized for something that he did not do. Even today the wisest thing that a pastor can do with regards to the church’s finances is to let someone else (a group of elders, people unrelated to the pastor) handle the money. Even if everything is on the up-and-up, a pastor who handles the church finances personally is setting himself up for a fall.

Paul tells the Corinthians that he has been boasting about their generous gift to the other church and he does not want his boasting to prove false. Thus he encourages them to get the gift together so that when Titus it will be ready. He says in 2 Corinthians 9:6-7:

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

This idea is in line with the parable of the talents. If you faithfully administer the things that God gives you, then God will give you more to administer. This is not a prosperity gospel, which tends to be self-oriented. The moment that this turns inward it collapses. This is an attitude gospel. The one who sows sparingly is the one who does so reluctantly or under compulsion. The one who sows generously is the cheerful giver. God wants the cheerful giver. That person will be rewarded. This same idea is reflected in 2 Corinthians 9:10-11:

Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

Again, if you faithfully administer the resources that God gives you then he will give you more resources to administer. Generosity towards God's people is an expression of thanksgiving to God himself. People will praise God because his people are obedient in this matter. It all brings glory to him and to his church.

There are two inescapable truths that permeate every chapter and every verse of the Bible:

- God cares how we relate to him.
- God cares how we relate to one another.

This is the skeleton of the Bible and everything else – even the Gospel message itself – is “meat on these bones.” Giving to the needs of others in the church satisfies God in both of these areas. It is motivated out of love for each other and out of obedience and submission to him. It brings glory to him and to his church. It is a good thing.

3.12 Paul's Self-Defense

2 Corinthians 10

In chapter 10, Paul turns back to self-defense against his critics. One can discern from 2 Corinthians 10:1 that people have accused Paul of being all smoke and no spine. He is willing to challenge them via mail but cannot stand up to them in person. He says in 2 Corinthians 2:1-6:

By the meekness and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you – I, Paul, who am “timid” when face to face with you, but “bold” when away! I beg you that when I come I may not have to be as bold as I expect to be toward some people who think that we live by the standards of this world. For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. And we will be ready to punish every act of disobedience, once your obedience is complete.

As Paul has stated, he does not want to have to spend his time with them in conflict. He is not afraid to confront his opponents but it is certainly not how he would prefer to spend his time. Furthermore, Paul is waging a completely different battle than they are. They are struggling in the flesh, to satisfy their egos. He is struggling for the spirit. They are waging a childish and worldly battle and he is engaged in a spiritual war. He will prevail because he has better weapons.

In 2 Corinthians 10:5, Paul gives the secret to successful spiritual warfare:

We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

For most of us, the battle is waged in the mind. Spiritual warfare is primarily a struggle for control of our thoughts and attitudes. It all begins very naturally. Each of us has multiple entry points for unholy thoughts – the eyes, the ears, the mouth, the nose, etc. As we interact with the world, our senses will be confronted with temptation. Unholy thoughts can come from within as well. At times our idle minds begin processing old trash that we have never quite managed to empty. Ideas transition from our senses or our subconscious into our conscious minds. Then the struggle begins. What we do with those thoughts determines who wins the battle. If we allow them to roam, feed them and nurture them, then our ideas defeat us. Alternately we can take them captive and make them obedient to Christ.

“But I cannot control what I think” may be a great excuse, but it is also a lie. You can control what you think. That is the point of 2 Corinthians 10:5. It requires great discipline and quick response. When an unholy thought enters your mind, you do not have very long to act. If you tarry then the battle will be over and you will have lost.

In the context of the passage, Paul’s opponents in Corinth are trying to pull him into a fleshly struggle for leadership. They want a fight. Paul is a fighter by nature. That is apparent from many of his writings. In the flesh, he would really like to tear into these people and put them in their place. He is unwilling to approach this matter on a fleshly basis, however. When the urge to come fight in the flesh, he takes these thoughts captive and submits to Jesus. After all, the battle is his.

His self-defense continues in 2 Corinthians 10:7-18. Men in Corinth were boasting that they were superior to Paul. Paul really does not want to be drawn into this sort of a boasting contest, but really does not seem to have a choice. He says in 2 Corinthians 10:12:

We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise.

The men in Corinth are bragging on things they have done in the flesh. Paul says that the only things worth bragging about are the things God has done. Citing Jeremiah 9:24, 2 Corinthians 10:17-18 says:

But, “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.” For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.

3.13 The Fool’s Speech

2 Corinthians 11:1-12:13

Paul has set up the Corinthians to realize how foolish this boasting is. Then in 2 Corinthians 11:1-12:13 he lowers his shotgun and fires both barrels. This section is known as “The Fool’s Speech.” If Paul is forced into being a bragging fool, he goes for it with gusto.

In the prologue of the speech, we can see some other charges that have obviously been leveled against Paul. In 2 Corinthians 11:6 he answers the charge that he is not a polished speaker. In 2 Corinthians 11:7-12 he answers the charge that he cannot be a good leader because he does not even receive pay for his work.

More than his concern over these false charges, Paul is concerned about the influence that this vocal minority is having on the church. He says that he promised the church to Christ as his bride and he intends to present her as a pure and undefiled virgin. These men are defiling the bride of Christ. They preach a distorted gospel and the people in Corinth listen. They present themselves as “super apostles” (2 Corinthians 10:5) and the people in Corinth have accepted them as such. He unmask them in 2 Corinthians 11:13-15:

For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.

Then Paul answers their boasting. 2 Corinthians 11:16-12:6 says:

I repeat: Let no one take me for a fool. But if you do, then receive me just as you would a fool, so that I may do a little boasting. In this self-confident boasting I am not talking as the Lord would, but as a fool. Since many are boasting in the way the world does, I too will boast. You gladly put up with fools since you are so wise! In fact, you even put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or pushes himself forward or slaps you in the face. To my shame I admit that we were too weak for that!

What anyone else dares to boast about – I am speaking as a fool – I also dare to boast about. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?

If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying. In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands.

I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know – God knows. And I know that this man – whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows – was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say.

Paul's sarcasm is dripping from this passage. He starts by saying, "Boasting is foolish and you guys love fools so here comes mine. You put up with people who enslave you, push you around, and slap you in the face. I am ashamed because I am too weak to put up with that." Then he begins to go one-for-one with his opponents, who have given the Corinthian church a list of reasons why they are superior to Paul. Paul says, "What are their qualifications? Are they Jews? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am better. What have they endured for Jesus? I have been imprisoned, beaten, shipwrecked, ..." The fact is that few people in history can stack their credentials against Paul. The truly foolish thing about all of this is that he should have to be brought into such a contest in the first place.

In 2 Corinthians 12:1-6, quoted above, he talks about a "man in Christ ... who was caught up to the third heaven." This reference is a bit cryptic. Paul seems to be talking about himself. We can infer from this that fourteen years before the writing of 2 Corinthians God gave him a glimpse of heaven. Perhaps in a vision, God allowed Paul to experience paradise.

Paul continues in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10:

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

There has been a great deal of speculation as to the nature of Paul's "thorn in the flesh." One of the more plausible explanations is that it may have been an eye problem of some sort. This is implied in Galatians 4:12-16:

I plead with you, brothers, become like me, for I became like you. You have done me no wrong. As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you. Even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself. What has happened to all your joy? I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me. Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?

It is also implied in Galatians 6:11:

See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!

We know that Paul's eyes were impacted on the road to Damascus. He may have had a lingering problem associated with this. We are not really sure. Whatever the problem was, it seems to have been a chronic physical problem for Paul. He prayed three times to have it taken away but God left him in that state to keep him "from becoming conceited." We know from reading Paul that he was a high-strung and headstrong person. It might have been easy for him to begin thinking that he was self-sufficient. God wanted Paul to have a certain amount of physical dependency.

That is important for us to remember. We pray for healing from illnesses but sometimes they do not come. There are going to be times when God says, "no." We may not understand why. We can take comfort in the fact that God's "no" was accompanied by, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Sometimes his gracious choice is to be with us through our problems rather than to remove us from our problems.

Paul is finished with his boasting. Hopefully this is the last time he will have to answer these kinds of charges. He concludes this sharp section with 2 Corinthians 12:11-13:

I have made a fool of myself, but you drove me to it. I ought to have been commended by you, for I am not in the least inferior to the "super-apostles," even though I am nothing. The things that mark an apostle – signs, wonders and miracles – were done among you with great perseverance. How were you inferior to the other churches, except that I was never a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!

3.14 Paul's Plans to Visit Corinth

2 Corinthians 12:14-13:10

In 2 Corinthians 12:14-13:10, Paul tells the Corinthians of his intention to visit them a third time. The section has the tone of a warning. The desire of Paul's heart is that the church will have

cleaned up its act before he gets there. When he comes, he promises to discipline anyone who is still out of line. There is no more time for tolerance and patience. Too much damage has been done and no more will be allowed. He warns them that all need to examine themselves to ensure that Christ is active in their lives. They need to be found in innocence when he comes. Again, he does not want to spend time with them in conflict, but he will if it is required. He says in 2 Corinthians 13:9-10:

... Our prayer is for your perfection. This is why I write these things when I am absent, that when I come I may not have to be harsh in my use of authority – the authority the Lord gave me for building you up, not for tearing you down.

3.15 Conclusion

2 Corinthians 13:11-14

After a long and emotionally exhausting letter, Paul closes with a very brief conclusion. It is common for him to close with a beautiful benediction, praying God's peace and blessings upon them, etc. This one has more the feel of "Sincerely, Paul." He says in 2 Corinthians 13:11-14:

Finally, brothers, good-by. Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.

Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints send their greetings.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

This letter is an enigma. Why was it preserved? It is painful reading, even embarrassing. It is a wounded response to a viscous and ungodly attack. It is a twisting and winding trail of thought that is hard to follow. What was it about this letter that motivated the church to canonize into Scripture?

The fact is that internal problems in the church are a real phenomenon. They still exist. The responsibility to discipline and at times restore order in a church has never gone away. Hopefully few churches will ever get into the same level of conflict as the church at Corinth, but we need a biblical reference telling us how to handle problems when they arise. This book also preserves for us other important truths. These include:

- God comforts us in suffering. This comfort produces in us patient endurance.
- The church is to be a place of discipline, but also a place of forgiveness and restoration.
- The glory of the old covenant faded. The glory of the new covenant does not fade away because it lives in us through the Holy Spirit.
- God allows us to participate in a ministry of reconciliation.
- God rewards cheerful givers.

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