

"The Church of God at Corinth"

1 Cor. 1:1-9

As we will learn from our study of 1 Cor., the church at Corinth was a pretty big mess. (1) Allowed themselves to be shaped more by the world than by Christ. (2) Were experiencing disunity that manifested itself in many ways & was affecting their life as the church in every way. (3) Some were resisting Paul's attempts to call them back to a more Christ-like way.

A. They were NOT an "ideal" church.

B. But there is another side to this church that shouldn't be overlooked or ignored. Found in 1:1-9.

1. They were "the church of God." (v. 2)

A. In the NT the church is called by a variety of descriptive names ("church," "church of Christ," etc.). Here, "the church of God" – that is, they belonged to God.

B. The amazing thing here: even a messed-up church like Corinth is God's church! He doesn't cast us aside as His people b/c of our failures, any more than He did so with Israel.

2. They were "saints." (v. 2)

A. "Saints" is from the same Greek word as "holy," "sanctified," etc. The church is always to be God's holy people.

B. In our minds, "saint" might suggest someone w/out flaws, but not in the way Paul uses it.

C. Rather, we are sanctified already – we've been cleansed by Jesus' blood & set apart for God's service. Still, we are also "called" to be saints, b/c we are to spend our lives becoming what God wants us to be.

D. Like the Corinthians, none of us is there yet, but we're still His "saints."

3. Paul was thankful for them. (v. 4)

A. Not just b/c they were his "personal friends," but b/c of what God had done & was doing in them.

B. Especially, b/c they were recipients of God's grace. All believers are, once we accept Christ by obedient faith.

C. When that happens, we still have a long way to go, but much to be thankful for already.

4. They were not lacking in any spiritual gift. (Vs. 6-7)

A. Later, in chaps. 12-14, we learn what some of these gifts were, but they had all they needed.

B. The beauty of that is, it tells that God doesn't wait for us to reach perfection or a highly-developed spirituality in Order to bless us with His gifts. We always have what we need!

5. They would be kept strong & blameless, guiltless when Jesus comes again. (Vs. 8-9)

A. B/c of the continual cleansing by Jesus' blood, all guilt is removed & even this messed-up group would be sustained

by God's power.

B. Doesn't mean they didn't need to change & grow – that's the reason for the letter. It does mean they didn't have to Be perfect for God to sustain them.

Conclusion: The point is obvious: In spite of our failings, errors, & immaturity, in Christ we are always 'the church of God.' And as long as we belong to Him, He will sustain us.

It’s Not About You – Or Me!

1 Cor. 1:1-10

Primary reason 1 Cor. is so important for us today is that we share their fundamental problem: allowing their pagan environment to shape their attitudes & behavior. They struggled with being Christian in an unchristian world & so do we. One of their most serious problems was Disunity, which is the dominant theme of chaps. 1-4, but which also re-surfaces frequently in the letter (e.g., chaps. 11, 12-14, etc.).

A. A report had reached Paul via “Chloe’s people” (otherwise unknown) that the Cors. were caught up in the worldly

Desire for rank & status.

B. “Paul, Apollos, & Cephas” were various preachers who had influenced this church: Paul, by establishing it; Apollos, the eloquent Alexandrian Jew who preached there after Paul left; Cephas (Aramaic name for Peter) may never have visited Corinth, but as leader of the “Jerusalem apostles,” he was perhaps a favorite of the Jewish Christians at Corinth.

C. So what’s wrong with these rallying cries? Kevin Quast: They were “grading” these preachers by worldly standards of eloquence & human wisdom (note the 26 references to “wisdom” in 1:18-3:4). A shallow, human-centered way of evaluating their “heroes” by focusing on the messengers rather than on their message, & finding their own significance in who they preferred, rather than in the Christ who had saved them. (What is common to each rallying cry: “I”). Result: strife & disunity.

D. 1 Jn. 2:16 – “the boasting of what he has & does” – always characteristic of unchristian times – the thirst for status, power, & recognition at whatever cost, & the tendency to divide ourselves from one another under the delusion that we are superior to each other. Nothing could be more antithetical to the way taught by Jesus.

E. But the world presses further & further into the mire of self-exaltation & factionalism, & believers have to work

Hard to keep that attitude from infecting the church.

F. But how? Paul offers the solution, one that will work now just as it did then:

1. Evaluate everything in light of the Cross.

A. 1:13-16. Goes right to heart of the matter: the Corinthians’ self-focused factionalism detracts from the central role of the Cross.

B. 1:13-17. Apparently “who was baptized by whom” was a big issue. Paul is glad he baptized only a few. Not a put-down of the importance of baptism (see 12:13), but the irrelevance of who performs the act.

C. In 1:18-2:5, an eloquent statement of how God has revealed His wisdom – not through human wisdom or eloquence or worldly standards of greatness – but through the Cross.

D. The Cross is foolishness to non-believers, but to believers it reveals the power & wisdom of God. The salvation of the Corinthians themselves is an illustration of this (1:26-30). God can take what looks foolish & weak & demonstrate His Power through it, so there’s no room for human boasting. Paul didn’t try to overwhelm or impress the Corinthians with his eloquence, but simply preached the message of Christ crucified & let the gospel work its power.

E. Some implications of these words:

- (1) The message is vastly more important than the messenger. Phil. 1:15-18
- (2) Anyone can tell the message. Example: Moses said, "I'm not eloquent." Didn't matter, b/c God IS. We can all tell the story of the Cross.
- F. Keep the Cross where it belongs – at the center!

2. Exalt servanthood & not status.

- A. 3:1-9. Apparently the real factionalism centered around Paul & Apollos, although no indication they were in competition with one another.
- B. Paul has to put himself & Apollos in proper perspective: Both are merely servants. Each had his own role in the salvation of the Corinthians, but the glory belongs to God alone. All servants are the same; the "field" & "building" belong to God.
- C. Not surprising Paul had trouble getting this across to the Corinthians, since even Jesus had trouble getting it across to the 12. Still misunderstood today, as people arm themselves with religious titles & privileges & status.
- D. The answer to the question, "Who are you in the church?" should always be the same: "A servant."

3. Protect the body.

- A. 3:16-17 gives a powerful description of the church: God's "temple," b/c God's Spirit dwells in us. Note: "You" here is plural, talking about church as a whole; not same as in 6:19, where "your body" is singular.
- B. In ancient Israel, nothing more sacred than the Temple, b/c it was God's dwelling place among His people. Not to be defiled or destroyed.
- C. That position is now occupied by the church. We are God's holy temple, & He doesn't take lightly any action that threatens the welfare of His temple.
- D. The Corinthians needed to re-think their attitude: What would their worldliness & selfishness do to the unity of God's temple? A question we need to keep in mind as well: What will MY words, attitudes, & actions do to the unity of God's people?

Conclusion: Approximately 50 yrs. after Paul wrote 1 Cor., a Roman church leader named Clement wrote them also. His letter shows they were still having the same problems of strife & disunity that are addressed in 1 Cor. Still having a hard time being Christian in an unchristian world. Won't be easy today either, but a challenge we must continue to face by being certain it is Christ & not the world around us who shapes who we are.

Faithful Stewards

1 Cor. 4:1-5

In an effort to correct the Corinthians’ tendency to create divisions among themselves, Paul offers a different perspective of himself & Apollos: not “leaders of factions” but “servants” & “stewards.”

A. Servant – Greek *hyperetes* – literally, an “under-rower” on lowest level of a large ship. Lowest position aboard.

B. Steward = a foreman or manager. NIV: “someone who has been given a trust.” Example:

Nehemiah 1:11 – “cup-bearer to the king.”

1. “Steward” isn’t a word we use much, but it has a significant place in thinking what the Christian life is about.

A. The NT mentions some literal stewards: Lk. 8:3, Jn. 2:8, etc.

B. Jesus told parables in which the central figures were stewards (Lk. 12:42-48, 16:1-8). In these parables, being a “steward” symbolizes our service to Christ: are we faithful & wise in our use of what God has entrusted to us?

See Tit. 1:7, 1 Pet. 4:10

C. Inherent in the concept of stewardship are 2 distinctive ideas:

(1) While there is a sense in which all of us have a common stewardship (e.g., the gospel), there is also a sense in which each has a unique stewardship. See 1 Cor. 3:5-6

(2) Having a stewardship implies a future time of accountability. Example: Lk. 16 – the crisis comes when the steward is called to give account. So we each live knowing that there is a day coming when we will give account to God for what He has entrusted to us.

2. In 1 Cor. 6 Paul puts the judgment of his opponents at Corinth in proper perspective:

A. Vs. 1-2. Both he & Apollos are “stewards of the mysteries of God,” i.e., the gospel. Their responsibility was to proclaim it, & they must be trustworthy.

B. V. 3 – Still, they were NOT accountable to other people for it. “Human court” is literally “human day” – i.e., a human “day of judgment.” Others may or may not approve of how they fulfill their ministries, but that is of little consequence.

C. V. 4 – Even our own assessment isn’t of final importance, only what God thinks matters.

D. V. 5 – So, the Corinthians shouldn’t “pronounce judgment before the time.”

Conclusion: What does this have to do with us? Much, since we are all stewards of the lives God has entrusted to us. As with Paul, we are required to be faithful, & we will give account. But ultimately we are answerable only to God. You may have detractors & critics of how you live your life & how you serve God. Learn from them, be corrected by them if need be, but remember that ultimately your accountability is between you & God. You aren’t required to please everybody – but you DO have to please Him!

Water in the Boat!

1 Cor. 5:1-13

Old saying: "It isn't a problem for a boat to be in the water, but it's a serious problem for water to be in the boat. Same with the church & the world. We're supposed to be "in the world," since we've been sent into all the world & that's the object of our ministry. But when the world gets into the church, we have a problem. It's clear from reading 1 Cor. that the water had gotten into the boat in a major way. One manifestation of this occurs in chap. 5: a specific case of sexual immorality.

1. Exposition of 1 Cor. 5:

A. What was going on? Vs. 1-2a. Paul was informed (1:11) of a shocking case of sexual immorality by a man in the church: He "has his father's wife." Most likely his step-mother, since Paul would surely have said "his mother" had that been the case. Since Paul later describes this as *porneia* (sexual immorality), we know he "had" her in a sexual sense. This constituted incest according to the OT, Greek, & Roman law – even if his father had died.

B. Some translations say such immorality "does not occur" among pagans. However, they should say it "isn't tolerated" among pagans, since the Greek says "is not, even among pagans," & it certainly occurred, else they wouldn't have had laws against it.

C. So the body of Christ at Corinth was putting up with a kind of immorality that even idol-worshippers would have found revolting!

D. But the larger problem was the church's attitude toward it: "you are arrogant." Literally, "puffed up." Immorality itself probably wasn't so surprising to Paul, but the church's attitude toward it was. They probably saw it as a sign of broad-mindedness & enlightenment.

E. What are they to do about it? (Vs. 2b-5). The offender is to be "removed from among" them. Paul has already given his judgment on the matter, & now the church must come together in agreement & take action. The specific action:

"deliver this man to Satan." Paul explains: "removed from among you" (v. 2b); the "leaven" analogy – leaven was removed before Passover as a sign of putting away sin; V. 11 – "not to associate" with him. I.e., he is to be put out of the church's fellowship & into the world where Satan rules.

F. But why? First, in hopes of saving his spirit (v. 5b). The hope is that he will repent & be saved. Second, to protect the church from his evil influence (vs. 6-8). Leaven permeates dough, & so does sin if left uncorrected.

G. "Does this apply only in cases of immorality?" No, since vs. 9-13 list other kinds of sin which also require such correction.

H. "Why doesn't Paul say what Jesus said in Matt. 18:15-18? The three steps?" In 1 Cor. 5, the whole church already knows the situation, so nothing to keep private. Plus, an emergency, since the man's example is already impacting the church in a negative way.

2. What does 1 Cor. 5 teach us about "Being Christian in an UnChristian World"?

A. 1st, that the church has to be realistic about sin & its power to invade & corrupt the church.

B. 2nd, that the church must place a premium on purity. Eph. 5:25-27.

C. 3rd, that the church has to care enough to correct. What kind of church sees a brother's spiritual house burning & sound the alarm? Nothing "loving" about that!

Conclusion: When water gets into a boat, you bail it out for the good of all on board. It's no different for the church.

Settled Out of Court

1 Cor. 6:1-8

One of the most cherished documents in our American cultural history is the 1st 10 amendments to the Constitution, popularly known as the "Bill of Rights." This document guarantees us such freedoms as freedom of religion, the right to keep & bear arms, freedom of speech, protection against unlawful search & seizure, & protects against cruel & unusual punishment while guaranteeing the right to a trial by jury. In recent decades, some have begun to call their specific demands "rights," thus seeking more validity for them, even though those supposed "rights" are w/out moral basis or social value.

A. The result: We hear more & more about "rights," but precious little about our responsibilities. Wouldn't it be nice if everyone would insist on doing their responsibilities rather than making up their list of "rights"?

B. Part of being Christian in an UnChristian world is knowing how to balance our desire for personal rights with the need

for responsibility to one another, b/c sometimes we simply can't have both.

1. A case in point: 1 Cor. 6:1-8.

A. Another example of the Corinthian church's tendency to let the world determine the beat to which they marched.

B. Problem is stated in v. 1: Christians were suing one another in pagan civil courts. Our own society seems obsessed

With lawsuits, & apparently ancient Corinth wasn't much different.

C. Paul's objection is that believers are airing their disputes with one another in the presence of unbelievers. Notice the insider/outsider language in these verses: "the unrighteous," "the world," "those who have no standing in the church," & "unbelievers." Insider: "brothers," "saints." Note the contrast in 6:1.

D. Paul makes 2 arguments against this practice:

(1) The saints will judge the world & will judge angels (vs. 2-3), so surely can settle their own squabbles.

(2) There should be people in their midst capable of settling such disputes (vs. 4-5).

E. The solution was one probably most didn't like: Give up your rights & be willing to be wronged rather than doing wrong. Vs. 7-8. Consistent with Jesus' teachings (Matt. 5:38-40).

F. Note: Paul isn't against the courts per se. In Acts he used the legal system for his own protection & to allow him to continue spreading the gospel. What he is against is the worldly practice of Christians suing Christians.

G. Not a "minor issue" for Paul: "Do you dare!" (v. 1). "I say this to your shame." (v. 5). "Do you not know?" (vs. 2-3) – 6 times total in this chapter. They should know - & they should be ashamed!

2. What principles does Paul establish in 6:1-8 to guide us in being Christian in an UnChristian world?

A. Principle #1: The preservation of Christian fellowship should always take precedence over the exercise of personal

rights. Note Paul's own practice: 9:1-7, 12b, 15, 19.

B. Principle #2: The church always has the capacity to handle its own disputes. They will occur, but should always be handled "in house." Even the humblest Christian would be a better judge of such matters than an unbeliever, b/c he will have the spiritual welfare of both parties at heart. Also, the church doesn't provide "ammunition" for its critics.

C. Principle #3: For good or ill, Christian conduct always has an impact on the non-Christian world. Paul is concerned not only for the church, but also for the effect on the church's reputation in the community. Titus 2:7-8, 1 Pet. 2:13-16, 3:13-17. Remember Jesus' words in Matt. 5:14-16.

Conclusion: As we live in a world consumed with its own interests & "rights," we need to be consumed by a determination to do right, toward 1 another first of all, but to all those around us as well.

Remembering Who – and Whose – We Are

1 Cor. 6:9-20

Incest wasn't the only form of immorality that was present in Corinth & which presented a temptation to Christians (1 Cor. 5). Another form was prostitution, which Paul addresses in 6:15-16 & which was a generally accepted practice in ancient Corinth. Paul addresses it specifically in 6 of his 13 letters, & alludes to it in others. To be Christian in an UnChristian world, the Corinthians had to know how to resist this temptation. So do we! One of the first & strongest lines of defense against sexual immorality is to know Who & Whose you are - & never forget it.

1. We are people who aren't deceived about the existence of moral absolutes & the consequences of ignoring them. (Vs. 9-10).

A. Note: "Don't you know?" & "Do not be deceived." Many try to persuade us that nothing is wrong absolutely & always, that everything is contingent on circumstances. Therefore no consequences to any form of behavior. Paul says, "Don't buy it!" Then lists several kinds of behavior that are always wrong.

B. Twice he states the consequences: "will not inherit the kingdom of God." Means Christians must have a completely different world view from "the unrighteous." We know some things are wrong & to be avoided. They say everything is OK, as long as you think it's OK.

C. One of the great moral tragedies of our time is that behavior that was once recognized as immoral & illegal is now being normalized & legalized. But changes in human laws don't change God's standards. What is "legal" can still be "immoral."

D. But let's not be hypocritical about it: it isn't only such things as homosexual behavior that Paul says are wrong; so is heterosexual immorality, greed, swindling, & drunkenness. Gives no hint that one form of immorality is "more sinful" than another.

E. If going to be Christian in an UnChristian world, we have to be people who aren't deceived: some things are just wrong!

2. We are people who have been set free from the immorality of this world. (V. 11)

A. "And such were some of YOU!"

B. But you were "washed, sanctified, & justified." Can come from anywhere morally speaking, but when immersed into Jesus' blood, all sins are "washed away" (Acts 22:16, Jn. 3:5, Tit. 3:3-7).

C. Notice the connection between being "washed," etc. & the Holy Spirit (6:11b). God's Spirit lives in us & gives us the power to overcome temptation & sin. Reminds us that followers of Jesus aren't "better than" others; we're just redeemed sinners.

3. We belong to Christ, & so are not at liberty to misuse our bodies. (Vs. 12-20)

A. Evident here & elsewhere in 1 Cor. that some were fond of justifying their behavior through slogans. Shown in quotation marks in ESV, NIV, RSV. These aren't Paul's words, but he's quoting the Corinthians.

B. Example: “All things are lawful.” I.e., “because of grace we’re not under law, so can do as we please.” Paul says lawfulness isn’t the whole story. Not all is “helpful,” & some “lawful” things can enslave us.

C. Example: “Food for the stomach. . . .” I.e., sex is just like food; our bodies are meant for it, so can’t be wrong. Paul says the parallel isn’t valid: the body isn’t meant for immorality, but for the Lord.

D. Paul goes behind the sloganeering: V. 15 – Our bodies are “members of Christ” – to join them in unholy acts such as prostitution is an abomination: “Never!” Vs. 16-17: There’s something about a sexual encounter, no matter how casual, that “binds” 2 people forever. Not “married,” but there is a connection they’ll never fully escape. When people “hook up,” they claim “no one gets hurt.” How do you know that!?

E. So, “flee from immorality” (v. 18). Why? B/c it affects you to the core of your being in a way nothing else does.

F. Also, our bodies are “temples of the Holy Spirit.” So can’t use them for unholy purposes. We were bought with a high price, so only one thing to do: “Glorify God in your body.”

G. Truth is, our bodies are of extreme importance, b/c they’re where we live. Some ancient Greeks (& apparently some of the Corinthians) said “bodies don’t matter.” It’s only the spirit/soul that counts. But Paul points out, “Your body affects your spirit - & also God’s Spirit – so everything you do with it matters.

Conclusion: Sexual temptation is everywhere. It’s naïve to think Christians aren’t affected by it & don’t at times succumb to it. The only way to be a Christian in a sex-saturated world is to (1) acknowledge the difference between right & wrong, the & consequences of each; (2) remember you’ve been washed, sanctified, & justified, & immorality can’t be a part of your life; (3) remember that you belong to Christ – body & spirit – 24x7. No exceptions!

Christian Marriage in an UnChristian World (1)

1 Cor. 7:1-16

In Gen. 2:18 God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone," so He created & sanctified the marriage relationship for the benefit & enjoyment of His highest created beings.

A. But some in the church at Corinth didn't have that biblical background & understanding of marriage. B/c of their pagan culture, plus their over-inflated concept of their spirituality, they took a negative stance toward human sexuality in general & toward marriage in particular. (Note: The opposite problem from that expressed in chap. 6).

B. So they wrote to Paul & asked about it. The phrase "Now concerning" in 7:1 marks a turning-point in the letter, as Paul begins to address issues the church had written to him about. See 7:25, 8:1, 12:1, 16:1.

C. So what were their questions? Based on Paul's replies, seems to have been 3 primary ones:

- (1) Should Christians get married?
- (2) If Christians are already married, should they abstain from sex?
- (3) Should Christians ever seek to divorce, & if so, under what circumstances?

D. All of these are still important questions for believers today.

1. First, we need to clarify that Paul wasn't negative toward marriage, as often claimed.

A. Part of the problem comes from a misunderstanding of 7:1: "It is well (or, good) for a man not to touch a woman (or, get married)." With vs. 8-9 added in, Paul sounds pretty negative toward marriage in general.

B. But, these aren't Paul's words, & once we see that, the rest of the chapter makes more sense. V. 1 is an example of

Another Corinthian slogan used by them to justify their thinking & behavior. (See 3:4, 6:12-13, 8:1 & 4, 10:23.) Note the quotation marks in ESV, NRSV, etc.

C. So Paul quotes what the Corinthians were saying, only in order to refute it in v. 2. It isn't his own view. For that, see

Eph. 5:21-33, 1 Tim. 3 & Titus 1 (insists that elders & deacons "must" be married), & 1 Tim. 5:14, where he insists that younger widows should marry.

D. So Paul isn't negative toward marriage, but some Corinthians seem to have been advocating a kind of "sexual fasting," which, if followed, could potentially endanger marriages.

E. Paul responds with a more balanced & more Christian view, one shaped by Scripture & by God's intentions rather than by the Corinthians' pagan environment (or by our own!).

F. In our own context, we need desperately to hear what Paul says, as one who speaks "by the Spirit of God" (v. 40).

2. What does Paul say about marriage in vs. 1-16?

A. First, that marriage has a vital role in Christian holiness. The problem with the Corinthians' view is it ignores one of the vital functions of marriage: as an antidote to immorality. This isn't the only

function of marriage, but it's an important one. Rather than the unrestrained *porneia* which dominated in Corinth, "each man should have his own wife & each woman her own husband."

(1) Note: There's no question that in Paul's mind marriage is between one man & one woman. Why? B/c God made it clear throughout the OT that "when God saw it was not good for the man to be alone," He created a woman – not another man! Likewise, the prohibitions against same-sex relationships in Lev. 18 & elsewhere are equally clear: There is no biblical teaching which lends any support to same-sex marriages.

(2) If marriage is an antidote to immorality, to reject it is to open oneself up to temptation (6:9-10).

B. Second, that sex plays a vital role in Christian marriage (vs. 3-5). In order for marriage to function as a safeguard

Against immorality, husbands & wives must not refuse one another sexually.

(1) Why would they? At Corinth, perhaps as an expression of "super-spirituality" that was "above carnal things."

(2) Today, could be any number of reasons, but whatever the motive Paul says it's wrong. Literally, "Do not *defraud* one another." He does allow one exception: (a) by agreement, not unilaterally; (b) for a season, not permanently;

(c) to devote yourself to prayer, not just b/c "you don't feel like it."

(3) Important to note that Paul places equal privilege & responsibility on both husband & wife. Other ancient writers would have been shocked at the idea that "the husband does not rule over his own body." So in vs. 10-11 re divorce.

(4) Note the seriousness of this: "lest Satan tempt you through lack of self-control." For Paul, to deny one another sexually is to give Satan a foothold in the destruction of your marriage.

C. Third, as important as marriage is, it's not for everyone. (Vs. 6-7) Paul isn't "commanding" marriage, b/c not all have the gift to be married & not all have the gift to live singly. Paul preferred the single life, & it isn't hard to see why, since as "apostle to the Gentiles" he was always on the go & his life in danger. Hardly fair to any woman.

(1) Also, Paul saw some advantages to the single life, since marriage automatically takes your concerns in a certain direction & imposes limitations on how you can serve the Lord.

(2) The goal: to achieve "undivided devotion to the Lord" – and that can happen either as single or married, so (vs. 17-24) no need to change one's marriage status for spiritual reasons.

(3) "Each has his own special gift from God." Some will serve better married; others, as singles. But the ultimate goal is serving the Lord.

Conclusion: Our devotion to Christ should be such that everything about our lives – even whether or not to marry – will be seen through the lens of how we can best serve the Lord.

“Being Christian in an UnChristian World”

James T. South

Christian Marriage in an UnChristian World (2)

1 Cor. 7:10-16

After more than 40 years of preaching, you might think that no topic would make me uneasy, but this one does. Not b/c I don't know what Scripture says about it or b/c I'm afraid to speak the truth, but b/c I know this topic touches all of us deeply & it always hurts. People who have experienced divorce have been hurt already, & I don't enjoy adding to that pain by bringing up this subject. Causing pain isn't my purpose, nor is it my desire to pass judgment on anyone – only to say what Scripture says.

A. This is a topic that we can't ignore, b/c it IS so painful, & b/c it's so destructive of human happiness, & sometimes even of our relationship with God.

B. Two extremes we need to avoid in handling this topic:

(1) Easy acceptance. As the UnChristian world becomes indifferent to the sanctity of marriage, we dare not, as the church of Christ, share in that indifference, or add to it by refusing to acknowledge what Scripture says.

(2) Lack of forgiveness. Far too often the church has sat in judgment on the divorced & treated the whole subject as though divorce were the “unpardonable sin.” Some even refuse to baptize divorced people! God help us if we have so badly misunderstood the gospel that we suggest to people that they are beyond hope.

C. So we turn to 1 Cor. 7 to see what Paul said about divorce. The Corinthians had evidently asked him (7:1) 2 questions, both of which are addressed in vs. 10-16:

1. Question A: “Is divorce permissible for Christians?”

A. V. 10 – “To the married” = 2 Christians married to each other, since vs. 12-16 deal with a Christian married to a non-believer.

B. Paul's basic rule: No divorce for Christian couples.

C. Note: “I give charge” – means to pass on a command. Very authoritative term.

(1) “No I but the Lord” shows Paul basing his instructions on a specific instruction given by Jesus. Compare to v. 12: “I say, not the Lord,” showing he isn't quoting Jesus.

(2) Paul knew what Jesus had said in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:31-32), which went against the usual Jewish Interpretation that only men could divorce, & that it was both easy & common. Their main issue was the giving of a legal certificate. Jesus says, “Just don't do it!”

(3) Matt. 19:3-9. In response to the question of divorce “for any cause” (i.e., any reason at all), Jesus says, “Go back to Gen. 2:24 & the original intent of marriage.” “Be joined to” = “cleave to” (permanent bond). “One flesh” – can't separate flesh from flesh w/out injury to both. Someone has compared divorce to a shoot-out between conjoined twins: there can be no winners.

D. So Paul isn't saying anything new, only what Jesus had already said.

E. In vs. 3-5, both husband & wife have an = responsibility to preserve their marriage. Paul uses 3 terms for ending a marriage, though this is obscured in some translations: “divorce,” “separate from,”

& “depart.” We should probably think of all 3 as synonyms. Paul isn’t so much concerned about the “legal” terminology as he is the effective action.

F. In Jewish society, only men could initiate divorce; reason Matt. 5 & 19 speak only of the husband’s action. But in the Hellenistic society in which Paul lived & worked, women could do so also, so Paul speaks to both. Not “his” or “her” responsibility, but “our” responsibility.

G. V. 11 – But sometimes it does happen. Could be several reasons a couple might decide they simply can’t live together, & Paul makes allowances for that. If so, there are 2 options for the Christian couple: (1) Remain single –

i.e., this isn’t a license for re-marriage.

(2) Be reconciled. Leaves open the possibility that they may change their minds & not give up on their marriage.

H. One of our great failures in the church = not placing enough emphasis on forgiveness & reconciliation & too much on “getting divorced scripturally.”

I. One way Paul’s teaching differs from Jesus: Doesn’t discuss the “exception clause” of Matt. 19:9 & 5:32. Many suggestions offered, but not clear why he doesn’t. The exception shows that God recognizes that there are some circumstances where divorce becomes inevitable, but it doesn’t mean it’s “required” in all cases of adultery.

J. General rule: Don’t get a divorce if you can anything else.

2. Question B: “Should a Christian married to a non-believer seek a divorce?”

A. Vs. 12 & 13 show that “to the rest” = to believers married to non-Christians. Why would this come up?

B. Probably related to the “super-spiritual” mentality of some at Corinth. Idea is, being “fully holy” only if not married to a non-believer (or, not married at all).

C. Paul’s answer is unequivocal: “No!” If the unbeliever is willing to live with a believer, then don’t seek to end the marriage. Such circumstances must have happened often in 1st Century. Still do: a married couple, only one becomes a Christian. May not create problems with the non-believer, but sometimes the non-believer isn’t willing

to live with a believer. Believer can’t give up the faith, so if unbeliever insists on ending it, not much the Christian can do: “Not bound.” Not enslaved to a hopeless situation. “God has called us to peace.”

D. Two reasons for believers not to end the marriage:

(1) Presence of a believer in the home “consecrates” the entire family by exerting a Godly influence. Doesn’t mean the unbeliever is saved by the believer’s faith, but the Godly influence may lead to salvation.

(2) Likewise, a Godly influence on the children. May end of marriage ends.

E. Note: V. 16 could be taken either positively or negatively (in both Eng. & Grk.), & there is some truth in both: “Don’t end the marriage, b/c it may result in the conversion of your spouse.” “Don’t try to preserve the marriage at all costs, b/c the conversion may never happen.”

Conclusion: If you’re married, do all you can do to stay that way. Work at it!

"Being Christian in an UnChristian World"

James T. South

Christian Marriage in an UnChristian World (3)

1 Cor. 7:32-40

A new book came out in 2010 entitled *Marry Him: The Case for Settling for Mr. Good Enough*. In it Lori Gottlieb advises women to stop looking for "Mr. Right" & settle for "Mr. Good Enough." After all, the main goal is to be married & have kids; happiness & fulfillment - & even love - are irrelevant, she says. "Marriage isn't a passion-fest. It's more like a partnership formed to run a very small, mundane, & often non-profit business." Not surprising: Ms. Gottlieb is divorced.

A. Book caused a lot of stir, but it's a reminder that there are all kinds of reasons people get married: love, sex, financial security, expectations of family & friends, companionship, children, etc.

B. According to Paul, Christians have an added reason (if they choose to marry): to help us be Christian in an UnChristian world, & to help us get to heaven.

C. Other than the decision to follow Christ, there is no other decision which so affects the quality of our spiritual life like the decision of whom to marry. Your choice of a spouse can either help you be a Christian in this world, or hinder you.

D. I'm speaking primarily to those not yet married. Remember, Paul says it isn't essential to be married; that decision is

Between you & God. Also, I'm not criticizing the marital decisions people have already made. No point in that, & it's up to you to make the best of your marriage, to whomever, with God's help.

E. I simply want to "secure your undivided devotion to the Lord" (literally, "undistracted" – v. 35) & to encourage those who aren't yet married to make the best, most spiritually-minded decision about marriage you can make: to marry another believer. Why?

1. First, b/c Scripture teaches that you should.

A. 1 Cor. 7:5 – assumes a believer-to-believer marriage, since both interested in prayer.

B. 7:39 – More explicitly, widows are to marry "only in the Lord" – i.e., only to another believer. If true for widows, why not for all?

C. 9:5 – Paul had a right to "lead about a sister as wife" (NIV – "a believing wife"). Not just "a wife."

D. 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1. "Unequally yoked" may not be specifically about marriage, but it certainly isn't excluded. Note v. 14a & 7:1 – goal = to "make holiness perfect."

E. 1 Cor. 7:35 – "undistracted devotion" – How can you be fully committed to the Lord & become "one flesh" with someone who isn't!? Bound to be a distraction.

2. Second, b/c you have a prior commitment to live up to.

A. 1 Cor. 6:19-20. "Glorifying God with our bodies" must include marriage.

B. Matt. 6:33 – We are to "put the kingdom 1st" – how, if marry someone with no interest in the kingdom?

C. Not all non-believers are alike: some are hostile to the faith; others only indifferent. Some believe something, but aren't truly committed to Christ. Some practice other non-Christian religions; others are vaguely "Christian" but not rooted in Scripture.

D. When you think about whom to marry, it needs to be someone whose commitment is the same as your own.

Otherwise, you'll be "unequally yoked." So, not just "someone who believes in God," but who has the same faith you have & the same spiritual goals. Otherwise, you'll end up being pulled in 2 directions, & that isn't God's will for you.

3. Third, b/c of the uncertainty of the outcome if you marry a non-believer.

A. There are 4 things that can happen if you marry a non-believer, & 3 of them are bad: (1) Your spouse will be converted. Far from guaranteed, & Scripture never teaches us to use marriage as a means of evangelism. (2) The non-believer may convert you. You might think, "Never," but remember: It happened to Solomon (1 Ki. 11:1-8). (3) You will tire of the struggle & give up practicing your faith & fall away from Christ. (4) You will persevere, always having to work around the reality that your spouse doesn't share that which is supposed to be the most important things in life to you.

B. Reality: Expect to live with the same person you marry. Too many want to marry a frog but live with a prince. If your prospective spouse drinks, parties, uses pornography, is rude & inconsiderate, a slob, over-spends, lies, uses profanity, etc., that's probably what you'll end up living with all your life.

C. Thinking you'll change the non-believer is extremely risky & it isn't fair to him/her.

D. One of the chief causes of marital conflict is religious differences, along with money, sex, & in-laws. Religion may not seem that important before marriage, but later (as when children come along) it can become huge. Don't put your marriage at risk from the very start!

4. Fourth, b/c of the effect on your children.

A. Remember: When you choose a spouse, you're choosing your children's other parent.

B. What happens if your husband/wife expresses hostility or disdain toward what you're trying to teach your children about God? Or, even indifference? Hard to explain to a 3-4 year-old why Daddy/Mommy doesn't go to church, when you say it's one of the most important things in the world.

C. Listen: It's hard enough to lead your kids to Christ in today's UnChristian World, when BOTH parents are working at it! If it's really important to you, why handicap yourself with an unbelieving mate!?

5. Fifth, b/c of the impact on your own spiritual life.

A. If you're serious about being a Christian in an UnChristian World, you need a life-partner who's going to help you do that – not one who's going to hinder you.

B. Many believers go to church by themselves, pray by themselves, study Scripture by themselves, & serve by themselves b/c they chose a husband or wife who won't participate in their faith. I applaud their perseverance, but have to wonder how much more fulfilling their service to Christ would be if they had married a believer, or else remained single.

C. Too often: “Why didn’t someone tell me this before I got married?” To those unmarried, someone IS, & I hope
You’re listening.

6. Question: “What if I’m already married to an unbeliever?”

A. First, honor your commitment to the best of your ability. God expects you to keep your vows.

B. Second, live out your commitment to Christ as fully as possible. Make sure your life reflects your faith by being a

Godly example. Compromising won’t work! It only shows the non-believer you’re not serious about your faith.

C. Third, pray for your unbelieving spouse. God can do amazing things, & it’s up to Him to change them, if they’re willing to be changed.

Conclusion: Remember the Goal: Your undivided devotion to the Lord.

Considering One Another in an UnChristian World

1 Cor. 8:1-13, 10:31-11:1

Acts 17:16 reports that Paul saw that the city of Athens was "full of idols." First-Century Corinth was likely no different. Idolatry & polytheism were everywhere in the ancient world, permeating every aspect of both public & private life. Jews & Christians were considered peculiar b/c they worshiped only one God, & Christians were often accused of atheism b/c of their rejection of society's many "gods."

A. Naturally, this was not only the source of much opposition against Christianity, but it also created problems w/in it.

B. One problem = a question the Corinthians had written Paul about: "Now concerning food offered to idols." Question arose b/c foods (especially meats) from pagan sacrifices inevitably made their way to the public markets. There they might be purchased by Christians who didn't know their source. Also, Christians might be invited into pagan homes, & if they were served meat, it most likely would have been sacrificed to an idol. Many public events took place in temples, where sacrificed foods would be served.

C. Question: Was it harmful in some way for a Christian to eat meat tainted by its association with idolatry? Could the uncleanness of the idol be passed on by eating the meat? Or, was it "just meat"? Evidently there were 2 factions at Corinth, one which said "no" to sacrificed meats, while the other said, "it's not a problem; it's just meat."

D. Paul spends 3 chapters addressing this question (8-10). See also Rom. 14:1-15:13 for a similar discussion. We might wonder, why so much concern over such a seemingly minor question? One reason: it's potential for causing division was enormous. It struck very deeply at the core of the church's unity. Some were insisting on their right to eat such foods, regardless of the effect on their brothers & sisters. And the "regardless" is the problem.

E. We shouldn't dismiss this question too lightly as irrelevant to our situation, since Christians today often differ over questions such as the use of alcohol, participation in war, birth control, & even Bible translations! The un-Christian way to approach these is simply to dismiss those who disagree with us as either hopelessly in the dark or flagrantly w/out regard for right & wrong.

F. Paul wanted the Corinthians - & God wants us - to behave differently as Christians in an UnChristian world, to consider one another & the impact our actions have on each other. So, he says we should. . . .

1. Act out of love, not just knowledge.

A. 8:1a - another Corinthian slogan, & 8:1b = Paul's reply. Remember the over-emphasis on human wisdom that Paul identifies as an underlying problem in chaps. 1-4. Paul agrees that "an idol has no real existence" (vs. 5-6).

B. But the problem is stated in 8:7 - "Not all possess this knowledge." Some former pagans still associated sacrificed meats with "the gods." Food is just food, Paul agrees, but if someone thinks of its association with idolatry, he may be persuaded to do it himself, & thus revert to idolatry & be destroyed as a result (v. 12).

C. The Point: What you & I "know" (or think we know) isn't the main concern. LOVE is the main concern. Doing what's

best for my brother/sister & not just what I think is okay. “Knowledge puffs up”; if that’s our emphasis, conceit will be the result. But “love builds up.”

D. Before going any further, important to establish what this text is & isn’t about:

(1) It IS about influencing someone in a way that causes them to sin & possibly be lost (vs. 10-12).

(2) It ISN’T about every hand-up that a believer might have. Some take 10:32 to mean, “anything I disagree with, you can’t do.” Some enjoy taking the role of the perennial “weaker brother” whose needs must always be catered to.

Nothing here justifies that.

E. But when the potential for serious spiritual harm exists, love must take precedence over knowledge.

2. Stress service, not rights.

A. V. 13 – Paul’s own determination to act out of love.

B. Chap. 9 often isn’t seen as part of this discussion, but it’s actually essential to it. Paul talks about his own rights as an apostle – rights he hasn’t exerted. See 9:1-7, 12-23. Instead of insisting on rights, Paul offered himself as a servant (vs. 19-22).

C. As long as we emphasize our rights, we won’t truly be servants. Once we are truly serving (God & others), we’ll place less emphasis on our rights.

3. Aim for purity, not participation.

A. Probably one reason some Corinthians insisted on their rights was in order to participate more fully in their culture.

Refusing idol meats could mean social isolation from non-believers. And if believers become isolated, how can we be “salt & light” to those around us?

B. But participation can be taken too far. 8:10 suggests some participated in feasts at “an idol’s temple” - & Paul says that’s just too much! One problem with it is influence on weaker Christians (8:10), but another is unwitting fellowship with demonic spirits (10:14-22). The “gods” may not be real, but the demonic powers associated with them are!

C. There are some places & some activities where a Christian just doesn’t belong.

4. Give glory to God, not offense to others.

A. Paul’s summary in 10:31 is, “Whatever your decision, do it to God’s glory.” Paul agrees with the eaters, but the

Bigger question is, will I by my choice & the exercise of my freedom in Christ bring honor to God by building up the body of Christ? Not, “is it legal?” but “is it right?”

B. That rules out some decisions. You can’t be a drunkard or adulterer “to the glory of God.” But this principle presses us to look more closely at all of our actions.

C. 10:32-11:1. “Give no offense to Jews or Greeks” – i.e., unnecessarily. Some will always be offended by truth about

Christ. But, in our personal choices & conduct, we should be careful not to give offense. Like Paul, not putting our

Our wants, goals, interests, first, but those of others, especially to keep open the door to the gospel & to salvation.

Conclusion: 11:1 – We are to imitate Paul as he imitated Jesus - & Jesus gave up ALL of His rights out of consideration for others. What we're called on to do for one another & for others. Not knowledge, rights, & participation leading to offense, but love leading to service leading to purity leading to God's glory. That's the Christian way in an UnChristian world.

“Being Christian in an UnChristian World”

James T. South

Christian Worship in an UnChristian World (1)

1 Cor. 11:17-34

The Scripture reading for today contains the earliest written account of the institution of the Lord’s Supper. Now listen to the earliest account from a non-Christian, Pliny, the Roman governor of Bithynia, writing about AD 111: “They affirmed, however, the whole of their guilt, or their error was, that they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to do any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then to reassemble to partake of food – but food of an ordinary kind.”

A. It’s obvious that Pliny had some valid info about Christian worship, but also that he didn’t fully understand what he had been told. Not too surprising for a pagan governor.

B. But sometimes Christians don’t understand what we do in worship & why we do it either. Maybe it becomes somewhat routine, & we just don’t think about it. Or perhaps we absorb ideas about our worship that come more from tradition than from Scripture.

C. This is especially true re the heart of Christian worship: the Lord’s Supper (also called “communion,” which means “fellowship” – 10:16). Early Christians sometimes called it the “Eucharist,” from a Greek verb for “giving thanks.”

D. As we live in an unchristian world, this central act of worship takes on tremendous importance, & we need to be sure that we understand what we are doing & why it is important.

E. 1 Cor. 11:17-34 is a good reminder that Christian Worship:

1. Is not self-focused.

A. It is first of all Christ-focused, and secondly, body-focused.

B. The problem at Corinth:

(1) Vs. 17-19 show that factions/disunity was once again a problem in this church, even in their worship. Based on Paul’s criticism of their worship, the divisions in worship seem to have been socio-economic in nature: haves & have-nots.

(2) V. 20 contains a strong condemnation of their worship. Shows they didn’t realize what they were doing.

(3) Vs. 21-22, 33-34. Greco-Roman society was extremely stratified, which posed a constant challenge to have everyone – Jew/Greek, slave/free, rich/poor – united in one body. Such divisions would become especially obvious at meals, including the Lord’s Supper, which at this time was observed as part of a full meal. 2 possible scenarios are reflected in these texts:

a. The rich arrived early, brought the food, went ahead with their meal. The poor, arriving later & unable to bring anything for the meal, were left with little or nothing.

b. The seating arrangement in a house church may have meant the wealthier, more influential members ate in the dining room & had the best (& most) food & drink. The poor were in the outer courtyard & got little or nothing, at most, the leftovers.

c. Possibly a combination of both scenarios.

C. Either way, their observance of the supper showed a complete lack of consideration for each other, to the point that their worship was negated by it.

D. Paul's Response:

(1) Vs. 23-26. The meal was to be done "in remembrance of me." I.e., it wasn't about the food & drink, but an acknowledgement of what Christ has done on the cross, the new covenant created by His death, & the certainty of His coming again.

(2) Vs. 27-32. But it was also about acknowledging one another. In v. 27, "unworthy manner" has nothing to do with our being "unworthy," b/c none of us is worthy of Jesus' death. Rather, it's about their failure to consider one another as they ate. Likewise, in v. 28 the self-examination isn't about whether or not we should participate, but how we are participate: are we doing so in full fellowship with Christ & with one another? (Not either/or, but both/ and.) "Discerning the body" isn't "having a mental picture of Jesus on the cross." Rather, it is recognizing that we ARE the body of Christ as we eat & drink together. How do we know this?

a. If Paul had meant discerning Jesus' body (physical body), he probably would have said "body & blood," as in v. 27.

b. In context, the problem at Corinth wasn't what were the Corinthians thinking/meditating about, but how they were treating one another.

c. The LS discussion leads into a discussion of spiritual gifts (chap. 12), in vs. 12-14, "body" clearly = the church.

(3) Paul's point comes in v. 34: It's not just "a meal," not about the food & drink. Rather, it's about being the blood-bought body of Christ, called together by His sacrifice on our behalf. And before that cross, we are all equal, & our worship should show that as we eat & drink, we do so in communion with one another, as well as with our Lord.

E. That's the very opposite of self-focused worship.

2. It IS a joint proclamation.

A. One reason Christian worship is so vital in a non-Christian world is it is an opportunity to "proclaim the Lord's death until He comes" (v. 26).

B. "Proclaim" = one of the usual NT words for preaching the gospel. Ever wish you could preach? Well, you can, each Lord's Day, by assembling for worship with other believers & eating the LS together.

C. But what are we proclaiming?

(1) "The Lord's death" – what He's done to save us.

(2) "Until He comes" – that the grand saga of salvation isn't finished yet. That Jesus died, but is risen & coming again. The very heart of our faith.

(3) That's why the LS isn't just a time for quiet reflection & meditation. It's definitely not a weekly funeral for Jesus!

It's an active celebration of what God has done & will do yet.

D. How does the LS proclaim this?

(1) Verbally, through the Scriptures & songs that re-tell the story & proclaim its meaning.

(2) Symbolically, in the act itself, showing we believe the gospel story, & self-identifying with Jesus regardless of the denials of an unbelieving world.

(3) Not just "ritual" or a "required act" but our active proclamation, as the body of Christ, that we believe in who Jesus is & what He has done & what He will yet do on our behalf.

E. Who are we proclaiming this to?

(1) Unbelievers, whether present or not, b/c our actions are a perpetual testimony to what we believe.

(2) One another, as a constant encouragement in our faith & reminder of who (& Whose) we are.

(3) Our children: the symbolic acts of the LS make a deep impression on young children & are an important part of handing on our faith to them.

Conclusion/Implications:

A. You should never miss an opportunity to meet with fellow believers, to build one another up, & to proclaim your faith to all the world.

B. Our worship should be characterized by reverent joy. We are recalling the most sacred truths ever given, & we are rejoicing over all that God has done & will do.

C. No one is a passive participant in worship. We are all believers, so we are all active proclaimers of the Word, & should eat the LS with this in mind.

“Being Christian in an UnChristian World”

James T. South

Christian Worship in an UnChristian World (2)

1 Cor. 12:4-13, 12:27-13:13, 14:26-40

Corinth must have been an interesting place to attend worship, even if it wasn't a very uplifting one: There was a general state of disunity, some were giving one another evil looks b/c of lawsuits between them, the church might be led in prayer by a man who was living sexually with his step-mother, you might overhear a heated disagreement over marriage or eating food offered to idols or which preacher various individuals preferred, some would be overeating & possibly even drunk right in the worship assembly.

A. On top of all that, 1 Cor. 12-14 reveals that their worship meetings could be rowdy b/c of a competitive desire to show off their various spiritual gifts.

B. 1:7 – Paul said the church was “not lacking in any spiritual gift,” & this is reflected in 12:8-10 & 27-28.

C. Some gifts – especially tongues – were being used as an ego trip in the assembly, which led to the de-valuing of those with “lesser” (less showy) gifts. Competition among speakers led to chaos with several talking at the same time - & some in languages that no one (including the speakers) understood.

D. If we wonder how/why this could happen in a church, we need only remember the pagan background of most Corinthian Christians.

(1) Often involved rituals & ceremonies in which people believed they moved by various “gods” or “spirits,” leading to all kinds of outbursts of ecstatic utterances & spiritual frenzy.

(2) Reflected in 12:1-3. “However you may have been moved.” I.e., they never quite knew what spiritual forces were at work. But they had ALL been led astray.

(3) Apparently had allowed that background to infiltrate their Christian worship so that it became as chaotic & unintelligible as their pagan worship had been.

E. Paul's Response comes in chaps. 12-14. These 3 are closely related, but each has its own theme re the meaning of worship.

1. Chapter 12: “One Body”

A. Carrying over from chap. 11 (LS discussion) Paul reminds them that their worship isn't so much about the “experience” of the individual believer as about the building up of the church as a whole.

B. Starts with the recognition that every member is important & none is to be disregarded.

(1) Vs. 12-16. Analogy of our physical bodies. Many parts, but all inseparably connected, so that what affects one affects all. (Example: Which part of your body would you voluntarily give up?) We grieve over hair loss, & that doesn't even hurt!

(2) No part of the body is “dispensable.” Rather, all are necessary & important to the body's functioning. We're all gifted in some way(s), & all gifts are needed.

C. Even more evident b/c of fact that the gifts are “gifts.” Given by the Holy Spirit to whomever He wills for the good of the whole body (vs. 4-7). Since gifts from the Spirit, nothing to boast about. All gifts are for the good of the body, so not for a “personal high.”

D. The gifts aren't all the same, but all ARE important. There is a great variety w/in the church's unity.

2. Chapter 13: "The Most Excellent Way"

A. Last sentence of chap. 12 is a lead-in to chap. 13 & subject of love.

B. Chap. 13 is so beautiful, so poetic that we usually think of it standing alone, apart from its context (weddings, greeting cards, embroidery, etc.).

(1) True enough by itself, but not what Paul intended. Rather, love is presented as the antidote to prideful use of spiritual gifts.

(2) It's the "most excellent way of all" (literally). Point isn't "love in contrast to gifts," b/c they come from the Spirit, but w/out love, the even the gifts become competitive & destructive (vs. 1-3).

(3) Note: Paul doesn't call love the "highest gift." Actually not a "gift" at all, but part of the "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal. 5:22). Love = the atmosphere in which all gifts must be exercised. Otherwise, worthless.

C. Vs. 4-7. Beautiful description of what love is. Often noted that this is an apt description of Jesus, the embodiment of love. Also, if taken in reverse, a description of the church at Corinth, b/d describes how they behaved toward one another.

D. Vs. 8-13. Faith, Hope, & Love are in a category by themselves b/c will outlast all of the gifts. "Greatest" = love.

(1) Lots of discussion of the meaning of "that which is perfect." Some say 2nd Coming, others say heaven, others the completion of the writing of Scripture, etc.

(2) That discussion will go on, but Paul's point is clear: the gifts are valuable only for a limited time, but "love never fails."

E. Rather than focusing on their gifts, the Cors. needed to major in love. Everyone can do that, & everyone ought to.

3. Chapter 14: "Decently & in Order"

A. Paul does 2 things in this chapter:

(1) Shows superiority of prophecy over tongues. "Prophecy" = inspired teaching given so all can understand. "Tongues" could be the same teaching, but in a Spirit-inspired language not understood by all. Therefore tongues are useless unless accompanied by an equally inspired interpretation (vs. 1-5).

(2) Lays down "rules" for decent & orderly worship (v. 40). As a corrective to the chaos created by the Cors.' desire to show off their various gifts.

B. What were Paul's "rules of order"?

(1) Everything must be done to build up the church, not to boost the ego of the individual worshiper (v. 26b). If we learn nothing else from these chaps., we must learn that worship isn't a solitary enterprise, but a corporate exercise in praising God & building each other up. There is a place for private devotions, but the worship assembly isn't that place.

(2) Two or three speakers at the most (v. 27).

(3) Tongues must be interpreted, or stay silent; otherwise, no real point (vs. 28).

(4) Same rule for prophets: 2 or 3 at most, one at a time. "God isn't a God of confusion, but of peace" (vs. 29-33).

I.e., Christian worship isn't to be ecstatic or chaotic, like the pagan variety some Cors. were used to.

(5) Women are to remain silent (vs. 33b-36).

C. Summary: All to be done "decently & in order" (vs. 37-40). Note: Doesn't mean worship is "dead-pan." Doesn't rule out joy & enthusiasm, just disorder & confusion.

Conclusion: Implications for Today:

A. Worship is never about pleasing ourselves, but about pleasing God & building up the body of Christ. This has gotten badly skewed in recent years, with emphasis on worship styles & choices of formats, as if we can't be expected to all worship in the same way together. Very opposite of what Paul says. We are not "worship consumers" who "shop" for what pleases us. Our goal should be to please & honor God.

B. Worship has both an emotional & a cognitive dimension. Enthusiasm & joy are always appropriate, but we can't check our brains at the door & carry on worship thoughtlessly. Excludes both chaos & thoughtless ritualism.

C. Building 1 another up is everyone's responsibility. Hebrews 10:24-25.

D. Love isn't so much about how we feel toward one another as doing the best we can for each other. It's about behavior, not sentiment – an active concern for one another & for the good of the church as a whole.

"One Body" – "The Most Excellent Way" – "Decently & in Order" – that's Christian worship in an UnChristian world.

“Being Christian in an UnChristian World”

James T. South

Using God’s Gifts in an UnChristian World

1 Cor. 12:4-11, 13:8-13, Rom. 12:3-8

Unbelief takes many forms. In addition to atheism & agnosticism, there is deism. Deists believe there is a supreme being, whose existence is arrived at through reason alone & not through revelation. So, they say, God created the world, but is now uninvolved in His creation & not does not reveal Himself to humans. No scriptures, prophecy miracles, or answered prayers.

A. But the world view of the Bible is Theistic, not Deistic, b/c the Bible reveals a God who is deeply in love with His creation & who in various ways intervenes in it for the good of His creatures.

B. No question that Paul (& all early Christians) believed in that God, one continually involved in the lives of His people.

C. Helps explain why the proper use of spiritual gifts was such a major concern of the church at Cor. (chaps. 12, 13, 14).

Basic premise is that God gives gifts to His people, & these need to be used in a way that accomplishes His purposes not those of the gifted.

D. Having seen that the gifts are given by the Spirit & not for human pride (12), that love is more important than the gifts & the atmosphere in which they are to be used (13), & that everything about Christian worship is to be for the edification of the church & there should be decent & orderly (14), we now need to address 3 important questions about sp’l. gifts:

1. What is a spiritual gift?

A. Definition: An ability given by the Holy Spirit (hence, “spiritual”) that is beyond what an individual would otherwise normally possess (“gift”), given to be used for building up the church & for confirming the truthfulness of God’s word.

(1) In some cases, much same as prophecy, an ability the person wouldn’t have had at all.

(2) In others, it might be the enhancement of a “natural” ability: teaching, administration, etc., to fill a particular role in the church.

(3) In others it might be the opportunity to use one’s abilities for the good of others. Example: The Good Samaritan – helped the wounded man b/c he was there when needed, not b/c he had medical training or a gift of healing.

B. Note: All spiritual gifts are given by God’s Spirit, but not all are “miraculous” in nature. Usual def. of “miracle” = an amazing event, explainable only by God’s intervention.

(1) “Miraculous” & “non-miraculous” are our distinctions. Not made in Scripture.

(2) Most gifts listed in 1 Cor. 12 were what we would term “miraculous”: prophecy, miracles, healing, tongues, interpretation of tongues, etc.

(3) However, Rom. 12:3-8 & 1 Pet. 4:7-11 list several that are “non-mir.” yet still described as “gifts.”

(4) Main point in all 3 texts: All are gifted in some way. Includes you, whether you think so or not. We should all use our gifts to serve God & one another. NOT our privilege to hold them back.

2. What were the gifts in 1 Cor. 12? (Note: Not always clear!)

A. “Utterance of wisdom & utterance of knowledge” – Same thing, or 2 different gifts? Possibly gifts especially for

leaders?

B. "Faith" – A special measure of faith in time of need? Again, for leaders or for all? Those facing persecution?

C. "Healing" – Not just normal answer to prayer, but the power to heal, like Jesus & the apostles.

D. "Miracles" – Apparently abilities other than healing. Acts 5:12. No further specification.

E. "Prophecy" – Literally, to "speak forth" a message from God. Not so much "prediction" as giving inspired teaching.

Must have been of great importance in early churches.

F. "Ability to distinguish between spirits" – 1 Jn. 4:1 says "test the spirits." In a time when most believed in working of spirits, both good & bad, perhaps the ability to tell which was which.

G. "Various kinds of tongues" – Acts 2:4-11.

(1) In Acts 2, "tongues" used interchangeably with "languages" (*dialektos*, source of our English word "dialect"). Obviously the ability to speak in a language w/out actually learning it.

(2) Some say these were "ecstatic" or "unknown" tongues (based in KJV insertion of word "unknown" – note the italics). Neither Acts nor Paul ever call them this. Based on 1 Cor. 14:10-12, it seems the gift at Cor. = same as in Acts 2.

(3) Some say tongues = a "prayer language" for communicating with God (14:1-2, 28). Paul doesn't say that. Rather, he points out the major drawback of tongues in Chr. worship: not understood, except by God - & that isn't the point. Besides, doesn't God understand ALL languages??

(4) Best to conclude that tongues at Cor. = same gift as in Acts 2, 10, & 19, since nothing ever suggests we should understand them differently.

(5) Also, not a "sign of salvation," since P. makes it clear that not all believers spoke in tongues. (Such a claim would undo all that P. was trying to accomplish by setting this one gift apart. See 12:30, where answer is, "NO.")

H. "Interpretation of tongues" – inspired (not "learned") ability to translate what was spoken in a tongue. On Pentecost, not necessary, since they were hearing in their own languages. At Cor., was necessary, so 14:27-28 says if no interpreter, don't do it. Note: 14:3 – tongue-speakers didn't necessarily know what they were saying.

I. Note: We don't fully understand what P. meant by all of these, but the Cors. did & that = what was important.

3. Do these gifts still exist today?

A. Will try to answer as clearly & honestly as I can, but 1st, some clarifications:

(1) This isn't a question of what God can/can't do. Can do anything He wants, whenever He wants. Question is what God WILL to do? Example: Creation in 6 days. Could have been 6 seconds! So, we can't just assume that whatever God willed to do then, He wills to do now.

(2) Question isn't about answered prayer. Beyond question that God answers prayers today, as always. How is His business. Must be careful not to limit His working (Deism again!), & not to claim He does things He really doesn't do. Still does amazing things in answer to prayer, & it's wrong to say He doesn't.

(3) I have no desire to question the sincerity or integrity of those who disagree with my conclusions. Some very devout Bible-believers are on both sides of this question. But the question is "What does the Bible say & what does history show?"

B. Part of the answer to this question is "Yes." Some gifts obviously are still present: service, mercy, giving, administration, exhorting, etc. Still from the Spirit, & still important to & for the church.

C. But some of the gifts seem to have been intended only for the earliest days of the church, then were no longer

needed, although exactly when they ceased isn't clear. Reasons for this conclusion (mine):

(1) Paul says some gifts (prophecy, tongues, knowledge, etc.) would at some point cease (13:8-10). Question = When?? Some say "the perfect" = the 2nd coming, heaven, eternity. Gifts no longer needed then. Leaves open possibility (but not the certainty) that gifts could continue until the end. Others say "the perfect" = the completion of revealing of God's will through the NT. Paul does seem to emphasize revelatory gifts as those that would cease (vs. 8-10). However, no proof that gifts ceased as soon as the final words of Revelation were written. Either way, the gifts are NOT permanent.

(2) The purpose of the miraculous revelatory gifts has been fulfilled. Heb. 2:1-4 gives important statement re the function of gifts – to bear witness to, confirm the preaching of the gospel. Gifts were never an end in themselves; rather, served as testimony to truthfulness of the message (Acts 2:1-4, 11). Note that on Pentecost the meaning of the gift of tongues had to be explained. Note past tense in Heb. 2:3-4. Suggests purpose already fulfilled in apostolic era; says nothing about their continuation. (Example: Exodus 4:1-5, Moses & serpent. Purpose was fulfilled, "serpent power" didn't continue.)

(3) Early Christian writers say the gifts did cease (although the evidence is somewhat spotty). Even some (not all) charismatic scholars acknowledge that gifts disappeared by late 3rd Century at least.

a. John Chrysostom (late 4th Cent.) acknowledged difficulty of understanding the same part of 1 Cor. we're looking at, b/c "the obscurity is produced by our ignorance of the facts referred to & by their cessation, being such as then used to occur but now no longer take place."

b. Eusebius (c. A.D. 320) – refers to miracles as though they no longer occurred.

c. Muratorian Fragment (A.D. 170) says the number of the prophets is complete, suggesting prophecy was no longer an active gift.

d. Montanus (late 2nd Century) was declared a heretic by other Christians b/c he claimed the gift of prophecy.

e. So the historical evidence suggests that Paul's statement in 1 Cor. 13:10 was fulfilled sooner rather than later.

(For the quotations, see Ashby Camp, *Feet Firmly Planted*, Ktisis Publishing, 1999.)

(4) If the gifts are still present, why are they not beyond doubt, as they were in the NT? Jesus' enemies never questioned the reality of His miracles, only His source of power. In rest of NT, there seems to have been little or no question of their validity. Not so today.

(5) If the gifts are still present, why aren't they ALL still present? Most charismatics claim only tongues, prophecy, etc.

Jesus & apostles were able to raise the dead.

(6) The assumption that the Bible is "filled with miracles" therefore miracles were expected to continue is a false one.

Reality is, "The miracles cluster at significant moments of revelation & crisis in the history of God's saving deeds"

(Everett Ferguson). Examples: Creation, Exodus & Wilderness, Ministries of Elijah & Elisha during crisis of Baal worship, Ministry of Jesus, & the Early Church. Again, the purpose of miracles was primarily to point to God's saving activity & to confirm His word. Now that Jesus has come, church has been established, Scriptures fully revealed, no need for these gifts (though there is a need for the more "ordinary" ones).

D. Question: Will there be a recurrence of miraculous gifts just before the end?

(1) Obviously, I don't know, & neither does anyone else.

(2) Not impossible, but remember that Jesus said “no one knows” the time of His coming. If people point to supposed miracles as evidence that “the end is near,” they’re off base.

(3) God will do whatever He chooses, but we need to be careful we neither discount His freedom & power, nor make false claims in His name.

Conclusion: We serve a great & all-powerful God, whose will is going to be done, regardless of what we think. Our opinions about these questions count for very little. The important thing is, are using the gifts that Scripture says He has placed within each of us? And, are we using them in the way we are taught in Scripture – whole-heartedly & w/out reservation, for the glory of God & the building up of His church? “As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace” (1 Pet. 4:10).

“Being Christian in an UnChristian World”

James T. South

Because He Lives

1 Cor. 15:1-20

Have you ever wondered what it would have been like to hear Paul preach? He says in 1 Cor. 2:1-5 that when he first preached in Corinth, it was with much “fear & trembling” & that his speech & message were “not in plausible words of wisdom,” which has led many to conclude that he probably wasn’t a very impressive or powerful speaker.

A. I doubt that was the case, b/c he goes on to say that his message WAS “in demonstration of the Spirit & of power.”

Maybe it wasn’t “polished,” but “not polished” doesn’t mean “not powerful.”

B. Whatever his style, one thing we can be certain of: its content. 1 Cor. 15:1-11 outlines the gospel as Paul preached it, the one by which they had been saved, IF they held it fast. The contents: Jesus’ death, burial, resurrection, & post-resurrection appearances. A simple, but powerful, message that had brought salvation to the Cors.

1. But there was a problem among the believers at Cor. – V. 12 – Some were claiming “that there is NO resurrection of the dead.”

A. From what Paul goes on to say, seems they weren’t denying (overtly, at least) that Jesus had been raised; rather, that believers would be raised.

B. Why would they say such a thing? 3 possibilities:

(1) Had absorbed the skepticism of their culture about such things. See Acts 17:32

(2) Had been influenced by the prevailing philosophy of the times, which said that matter was evil & spirit was good.

So, the goal was for the spirit to be set free from the body. Why resurrect your jail cell?

(3) They thought far too much of themselves spiritually. According to 4:8, some believed they had “already arrived” spiritually, already everything they possibly could be. (Unlike Paul – 4:9ff). Possibly interpreted “resurrection” to mean, not the raising of their bodies when Jesus comes, but their spiritual awakening, a transformation into super-spiritual beings that had already occurred. (See 2 Tim. 2:16-18)

C. Whatever the exact reason(s), 2 things are certain:

(1) Paul was astonished that they didn’t see the implications of their denial, so he points these out in 15:13-19.

(2) The Cors. had clearly allowed the unchristian world around them to shape their beliefs, rather than holding fast to what Paul had preached. Result: They had, w/out realizing it, gutted the gospel of its meaning & power.

2. What were these implications they had failed to realize? (Vs. 13-19)

A. V. 13 – If no resurrection, then Christ was not raised. A blatant denial of the gospel.

B. V. 14 – Both Paul’s preaching & their faith became pointless. Resurrection becomes just a myth with no basis in reality - & a myth can’t save anyone.

C. Vs. 15-16 – Paul & others have lied about God, b/c they have claimed something that isn’t true.

D. V. 17 – The Corinthians are wasting their time being Christians, & they are still dead in sin.

E. V. 18 – The Christian dead are merely dead, like everyone else. No hope. This life, with all of its pain & disappointment, is all there is.

F. V. 19 – If this life is all there is, ALL believers are a bunch of pathetic failures – especially Paul, who had endured so much on behalf of the gospel.

G. Pretty bleak & sad, but the Cors. need to know the full implications when they say, “there is no resurrection of the dead.”

3. But then we come to v. 20: “But in fact Christ HAS been raised from the dead” - & that single fact changes everything!

A. Note: “Firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.” I.e., b/c He both died & rose, there’s more to come: ALL of the dead in Christ will rise. 1 Thess. 4:13-18.

B. In fact, b/c Jesus is alive, we can go back through vs. 13-19 & undo all of the consequences listed there:

(1) Paul’s preaching & the Cors’. faith is NOT “in vain.”

(2) Paul did NOT misrepresent God.

(3) Christian faith is NOT useless.

(4) Those who have died in hope have NOT perished, but are alive in the presence of God. Phil. 1:23

(5) We are NOT to be pitied for living our lives in hope; rather, it is the hopeless mass of unbelievers who are to be pitied, b/c they face the certainty of the grave w. no hope beyond it.

C. The bottom line of the resurrection is this:

(1) Is there reason to believe it? YES. Vs. 3-8. Many witnesses, & an otherwise unexplained empty tomb.

(2) Our only hope in the face of death is LIFE - & that’s what the resurrection is all about: newness of life through God’s Spirit now & the promise that even our physical bodies will be raised. Not “something like life” or “partial life” or “sort of life” – but life in all its fullness. That’s the gospel!

Conclusion: The Cors. were in danger of giving up all of that, b/c they were being influenced more by their environment than by their faith. Note v. 2: “If you hold it fast, unless you believed in vain.” Don’t let that happen to you. Don’t give up your faith & your hope. You can share in both Christ’s death & resurrection by being baptized into Him. Do it now!

"Being Christian in an UnChristian World"

James T. South

Christian Giving in an UnChristian World

1 Cor. 16:1-4, 2 Cor. 8:1-8

In our study of 1 Cor. we have heard Paul giving guidance, instructions, & rebuke on a host of problems, all centered about the church's tendency to allow itself to be shaped more by the world around them than by the Cross.

A. By contrast, the last major topic gets only 4 vs. (16:1-4), & no rebuke!

B. "Now concerning" in 1 Cor. signals Paul's response to a question about which the Cors. had written (starting in 7:1). In this case the topic is giving. Perhaps the church had asked about the specifics of how the giving "for the saints" should be done, b/c that's what Paul discusses.

C. Might seem out of place in this "letter of problems," but isn't really, b/c if there's any way Christians need to be different from the un-Christian world, it's in our attitude toward money & possessions.

D. The tragedy is, this often isn't the case. When it comes to money, we tend to reflect the values & attitudes of our culture, unless we make a concentrated effort NOT to.

E. Can sympathize with the view of Mark Twain: "I am opposed to millionaires, but it would be dangerous to offer me the position." And Woody Allen: "Money is better than poverty, if only for financial reasons." And the philosopher Voltaire said, "When it is a matter of money, everybody is of the same religion." This pin-points the problem, b/c the Bible says that covetousness is idolatry.

F. Paul saw giving as an antidote to such an attitude, & he taught it often to churches he established (v. 1 – "as I directed the churches of Galatian, so you also are to do.").

G. So, let's look first at Paul's instructions about giving, then their purpose.

1. Paul's Instructions:

A. V. 1 – "The contribution for the saints." What does that mean?

(1) Acts 11:27-30 gives the background. "Days of Claudius" = A.D. 41-54; several ancient writers mention this famine; Judea was especially hard hit.

(2) Raising funds among the churches for relief became a major concern for a significant portion of Paul's life.

Acts 24:17, Gal. 2:10, Rom. 15:25-27, 2 Cor. 8:1ff.

B. He gives specific guidelines for the church at Corinth:

(1) "On the 1st day of every week." Although not specified, suggests at worship, otherwise the "day" wouldn't matter. "Store up" probably isn't at home for the same reason. No time reference would be needed.

(2) "Each of you" – not a responsibility only of some, but of all.

(3) "As he may prosper" – Doesn't mean "if he is prosperous"; see 2 Cor. 8:2 – Macedonians gave out of extreme poverty. Rather, means "in proportion to what he has." Will be more for some, less for others.

(4) "So that. . . when I come." Paul wanted this to be voluntary, not a shake-down.

(5) Vs. 3-4. Promises the funds would be accounted for completely.

C. Paul's words continue to serve as guidelines for Christian giving today – partly b/c we don't have a great deal of other specific info. He suggests Christian giving should be:

- (1) Regular
- (2) Personal
- (3) Proportional
- (4) Free-will (2 Cor. 9:6-7)

2. The Purpose & Importance of Paul's Instructions:

A. As a means of demonstrating the love of Christ to anyone who needs it. Jesus was noted for His compassion (Lk. 7:13). His followers should be as well. Reflects the grace we have received for all of our needs. We are to reflect Christ's love in tangible ways. Note 2 Cor. 8:8-9 – "the GRACE". To fail to help is to repudiate the sacrifice Jesus made for us. 1 Jn. 3:16-18. If you've never been motivated to give to help others, the problem isn't financial, but spiritual – a lack of appreciation of what God has done for you in Christ.

B. Helps us keep material things in perspective. Example: A man I met in a hospital waiting room. Worked for a wealthy Canadian investor. When I asked him what his employer did, he answered, "He's an accumulator." True of many Christians, even if on a smaller scale. Goal is to get & keep all we can. Jesus once told a parable about a man like that - & called him a fool! He is the epitome of the perspective of the unbelieving world – Money = Happiness & Security. Giving money away is an effective way of checking that worldly impulse, b/c it's a continual, week-by-week reminder of what is of greatest importance, & we need that in a world whose values are not God-shaped.

That's why Paul said, "every week" vs. just "once in a while"; a constant exercise in keeping material impulses under control. John Wesley: "When I have money, I get rid of it quickly, lest it find a way into my heart." Dan Millman: "Money is neither my god nor my devil. It is a form of energy that tends to make us more of who we already are., whether it's greedy or loving." How we use it makes the difference.

C. Example of use of money for higher purposes: Rom. 15:26-27, 30-31. Paul saw the contribution for the saints as a means of creating greater unity between Jews & Gentiles; thus his concern for its acceptance: would the Jews be willing to receive help from Gentile churches? 2 Cor. 9:11-14. Money can become a powerful force for glorifying God & cementing relationships between Jews & Gentiles, but only if it's given!

Conclusion: There's more to Paul's brief statement that perhaps meets the eye. Giving provides an opportunity to demonstrate in a very concrete way where our lives are truly focused & what's really of 1st importance. "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." (Note: NOT the reverse!) And that will make us different from the unbelieving world around us, b/c it reminds us week-by-week that our lives aren't about getting & having "stuff," but about knowing & loving God, & demonstrating that love to others in very tangible ways.