

New Testament Survey for Beginners: Part 7 – 1 Corinthians

Situated for its ready access to the rest of the world for travel and trade, the ancient city of Corinth was an important centre for commerce. Many who lived there were wealthy and living in a manner which too often goes with that. “To live as a Corinthian” was an expression that referred to their wicked lifestyle and carefree immorality. Today, only the ruins of the city remain.

When Paul first went to Corinth, which he did on his second missionary journey, he was alone. When he started the church there, he did so, understandably, “in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling” (2:3). Receiving great encouragement from the Lord, however, he stayed eighteen months as the pastor and teacher of this new work, and saw many converted under his ministry. There were others who preached there after him, including Apollos and Peter, but after a long vacancy this congregation began to break into factions and exhibit too many of the traits of the world around them.

Paul learned of these troubles from the household of Chloe, and later from a few members of that church who clearly hoped that the apostle would step in and do something about them. Paul could not leave Ephesus at that time, though, so he wrote this letter to the church instead. It is not at all like his letter to the Romans, a systematic theology to address vital matters of the faith, but has more to do with Christian conduct when confronted with the ways of the world. One commentator described it as “the doctrine of the cross in its social application.”

The letter of 1 Corinthians addresses ten issues in the church, and if I am to cover each one I need to get started on them. (1) There was the problem of party strife (1:10-3:23). Some in the church claimed to be of Paul, others of Apollos, and still others of Cephas (Peter). That brought division and friction among them. But did these men of God not all preach the same gospel of Christ and Him crucified? If so, then let those who follow them glory in the Lord Jesus Christ Himself whom they preached, not in His servants. It is in looking to the Lord – and making their boast of Him, not of men – that any fellowship of believers keeps the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Chapter 4 goes on to describe how these stewards of the mysteries of grace should be regarded and emulated.

(2) There was a case of incest – specifically, a man had taken his father’s wife – something that even the world is inclined to forbid (chapter 5). Surprisingly, this behaviour was just accepted in the church at Corinth; at least, no one was doing anything to stop it. It called for this man’s excommunication from the church, which is spoken of as delivering such a sinner to Satan, establishing that he is still of the world and that, as long as he continues in that lifestyle, he has no part in Christ. Excommunication in such cases has the double advantage of drawing the sinner back from his wicked ways, should the Lord be pleased to use it to that end, and of discouraging others from falling into the same deadly trap.

(3) Excommunication is about taking a sinner to a church court, but there was the problem in the Corinthian church of some members taking other members to a secular court as if those who had no spiritual discernment were somehow wise enough to make better judgments (6:1-11). Of course, we see something similar to that today, do we not? A Christian will go to a secular counsellor to settle his problems – or to a ‘Christian counsellor’ if that is what he claims by the shingle on his door – instead of seeking out a discerning and reputable believer who might actually be able to help him. In the case of taking someone to a secular court, Paul argues that it is sometimes the thing to do just to accept that we have been cheated, and even that is better than our cheating one another.

(4) There was other sexual immorality besides incest (6:12-20). Having previously mentioned fornicators, adulterers, homosexuals and sodomites, Paul goes on to drive home that, for the Christian, one’s body is not to serve sexual immorality at all, but to serve only the Lord. It is not simply the spirit which is to be kept pure, after all, but the body as well. If one joins his body with that of another in any way that is contrary to the law of God, contrary to the biblical rules for marriage, that is not serving the Lord but is altogether displeasing to Him. Let the Christian, therefore, flee every kind of sexual immorality, recognizing that his body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, that he is not his own but has been bought at a price. Think about this very carefully, believer. Is it not a powerful and convincing argument? Everyone is subject to the Lord in that He is our Creator; He is the one who has brought us and all things into being. The Christian, though, is more intimately connected to the Lord and should feel even more responsible to Him in that He is his Redeemer; He has purchased him with His own precious blood!

(5) Paul moves on now to address specific questions that have been put to him, and he begins by saying that the way to avoid sexual immorality is for men and women to get married, but they must also commit to each other in doing so (chapter 7). If someone is married to an unbeliever, let those two remain as they are unless the unbeliever is determined to leave. Even if only one parent is a believer, it is still a covenant home and God is pleased to bless the children for the sake of that one believer. Paul writes of “the present distress,” indicating severe persecution, and he emphasizes that in such times it is better to remain in one’s present state, even if single, though it is not wrong to get married. We are called to serve the Lord, and we should seek to do that without distraction. If a widow wishes to remarry, she is free to do so, but only to marry another believer.

(6) Next, Paul addresses the matter of things offered to idols (8:1-11:1). Some could eat meat offered to idols with a clear conscience, others could not. The real issue here is not to offend another believer, and, if there is ever any possibility of offending, it is better not to eat it. The apostle points to himself as an example of self-denial. He has every right to be paid for his ministry to others, yet he chooses to be self-employed in order to silence the charge that he is in ministry only for the money. His aim is to become all things to all men, that he might by all means save some. He makes reference to Old Testament examples for whom this was not always the case. They not only ate meat offered to idols, but often further engaged themselves in the idolatry itself, and so provoked the anger of God.

(7) Paul speaks to the matter of women in public worship (11:2-16). Some would tell us that this is about women wearing hats in church. No, it is not that, nor is it really even about their wearing veils, though veils are referred to in this passage, and they were the customary accessory Corinthian women wore as head coverings in public, as the apostle well knew having lived there himself. These verses are about male headship (v.3), the fact that men and women are created equal but are given different, complementary functions. Let us then celebrate this God-given difference everywhere we go, including our public assemblies for worship, and let us do so both in appearance and in behaviour. Let a woman look like a woman, according standards of modesty (1 Timothy 2:9,10) and local custom (hence, veils for women in Corinth), and let a man look like a man. Moreover, women should not lead in public worship if men are present but submit to the man’s headship over them (14:34,35; 1 Timothy 2:11-14).

(8) The subject of the Lord's Supper is taken up (11:17-34). In Corinth the Supper was preceded by what was known as a love feast, but in practice it was not that, and, as a result, the Supper, too, was not what it was intended to be. The love feast in Corinth demonstrated no care or concern for one another, and the Supper was not done in remembrance of Christ's redemptive work or in anticipation of His return. It is right here that the form for the Supper is found and beautifully set forth in its Christ-centred simplicity (vv. 23-26). But, as Paul points out, to partake of the elements profitably – the bread representing the body of Christ, and the wine representing His shed blood – it is first necessary to examine oneself and prepare for the blessing to be received. A failure to do that left many in the Corinthian church sick and others dead.

(9) Spiritual gifts are also addressed (chapters 12-14). There are many different spiritual gifts, Paul points out – some miraculous, others natural – all distributed by God Himself to the members of His Church, the body of Christ, and each is to be exercised for the edification of all the other members. All these gifts, however, mean nothing apart from a faith which works through love. Let us pursue love, therefore, and with that the gift of being able to share the gospel of Christ to others with understanding. To those who spoke in tongues (as some did in apostolic times), they should also pray to interpret the tongue, and, for that same reason, to share a word about Christ with understanding. It is only where there is understanding that one may be converted, and that one so converted may grow in grace and in the knowledge of Christ.

(10) Lastly, there is the resurrection of both Christ and His people (chapter 15). There were some in the Corinthian church who thought they could believe in the resurrection of Christ without also believing in a general resurrection of the dead at some future time. Paul argues that, if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ Himself is not raised, in which case our preaching and faith are vain. The fact that Christ has been raised, however, and was repeatedly seen in His resurrected body, verifies that the hope of the Christian is real, that his body will be raised with Christ's now glorified body, and it will be clear on that day that death has been swallowed up in His victory!

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