

1 and 2 Corinthians: Two Letters to a Tough Church

NT224
LESSON 01 of 02

1 Corinthians: How the Body of Christ Must Function

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I. Introduction

In our last lesson we had just begun to introduce Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians, and we noted that the problem of factions, or divisions in the church was not only the first item that Paul had to address, but was one of the unifying features that accounted for this potpourri of problems that pervades the entire letter. As part of Paul's antidote to factionalism in chapters 1-4, we left off commenting that he focuses people's attention on the cross, the ultimate leveler against those who would put themselves forward by their own human credentials, seeking power or aggrandizement.

II. Division and Discipline (1:1-6:8)

He does, nevertheless, within these opening chapters, speak of a kind of wisdom, a maturity that he believes Christians should strive for—not the wisdom based on human philosophy and squabbings that the Corinthians were practicing, but a wisdom that comes from God that is, again, centered on the cross despite its foolishness by worldly standards.

A. Three Kinds of People

In the end of chapter 2 and on into chapter 3, in this context Paul introduces three kinds of individuals. He speaks of the natural person or the person without the Spirit; that is, the complete non-Christian. He speaks as well of the carnal Christian, and of the more spiritual Christian. One well-known international ministry has helpfully explained the difference among these three groups of people by imagining circles that stand for individual lives with a throne inside of that circle representing what takes place in the individual's life. In their diagrams, the ego, or self, is on the throne of the natural person or the non-Christian,

1 Cor. 1:18

*For the message of the cross
is foolishness to those who
are perishing, but to us who
are being saved it is the
power of God.*

Natural Christian



Carnal Christian





Altruistic Natural Person



Alternative Carnal Christian



and the cross is entirely outside of the circle. For the carnal Christian, the ego is still on the throne—even though the cross is inside of the circle; the person has made a profession of faith. But for the spiritual person it is the cross that is on the throne, with ego dethroned.

While these are helpful diagrams, I think to be fair to Paul we must say something more as well. There are non-Christians who are very altruistic and who have many things besides themselves in first place in their lives, but the point remains that it is not Christ and His cross. As for the carnal Christian, the danger we must be careful of not falling into is to assume that Paul in 1 Corinthians 3 refers to some kind of nominal Christianity whereby a person has made a profession of faith, however superficial, but for a long period of time, perhaps years on end, has shown no interest in spiritual things or any spiritual fruit. This is not the picture that is discussed in Corinth; rather these Christians are all very active. Part of their problem is that they are fighting themselves and climbing all over each other in order to exercise their spiritual gifts. No, the carnal Christian is one who does not have the cross consistently on the throne of their lives, not because of lack of interest, but because of their interest in trying to put themselves forward even in the context of Christian ministry.

B. Immorality Rebuked

As Paul proceeds in chapters 5 and 6 to the remaining issues addressed to him from the party of traveling people from Chloe's household, he has to address in turn a man who is living in incest with a woman who is simply described as "his father's wife." The unusual phraseology has suggested to most commentators that we are speaking here of a stepmother, a second wife of the father and perhaps one considerably younger than the father. Even Greco-Roman moral standards recognized that this was a flagrant sin, a flagrant breach of divine ethics, and so Paul is outraged that the Corinthian church is tolerating such a relationship.

One explanation for why they were permitting it is that the offending man may well have been one of the minority of well-to-do power brokers in the Corinthian church. We mentioned as we introduced the epistle in the last lesson that the minority of wealthy in the Corinthian church,

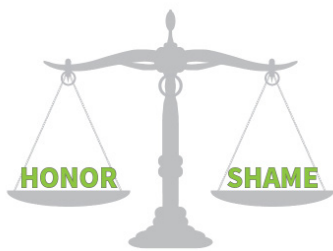
1 Cor. 5:1

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife.

1 Cor. 5:5

... hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.

Lawsuits



1 Cor. 6:19-20

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.

those who were used to wielding power in secular ways or in pagan religions prior to their conversion to Christ, may have continued to afflict the Corinthian church with some of those same forms of behavior and account for a large number of the otherwise diverse problems that Paul has to address in this letter.

Paul commands that this man be handed over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh (1 Corinthians 5:5). It is not clear whether that means a literal death of some sort—somehow he believes that this man will be judged and die physically—or perhaps slightly more likely, if “flesh” is being used here, as Paul frequently does, to refer to the sinful nature. In this reading, he would be excommunicated, but on the hopes that such drastic action would cause the man to repent of his sin; thus the flesh would be put to death in this case. In 2 Corinthians, Paul will refer back to a man who has been punished by the Corinthian church who has repented and who now should be forgiven. We cannot be sure that this is the same individual, but of course if it is then this second interpretation is to be preferred because the man could not have physically died.

C. Lawsuits

The next issue that Paul proceeds to involves lawsuits. In the ancient world, this was almost entirely something that rich people did to other rich people, and not so much to get richer as to gain greater honor or to shame their opponents in a culture of honor and shame. Again, Paul will have no tolerance for Christians suing other Christians. It would be good in our modern litigious societies if more Christians read and obeyed this chapter out of Paul’s teaching as well.

III. Sanctity of the Body (6:9-7:40)

The final issue in the first part of 1 Corinthians that is addressed comes at the end of chapter 6, and that is a warning against sexual immorality more generally, and against prostitution in particular. We recall from the previous lesson how rampant prostitution was at the seafaring town of Corinth. Here Paul says that sexual immorality is a unique sin against one’s own body, and he might have added against the body of the individual with which the person is sinning. The intimacy that sexual relation-

“Yes, but . . .”

1 Cor. 6:12

“Everything is permissible for me” - but not everything is beneficial. “Everything is permissible for me” - but I will not be mastered by anything.

“TOUCH”

is being used as a euphemism for sexual intercourse.

ships communicate is to be reserved only for those with whom one is prepared to spend a lifetime in monogamous, heterosexual marriage. And Paul refers back, as Jesus had earlier, to God’s original intention for marriage in Genesis 2—the one-flesh, unique intimacy of a man and a woman.

A. Sexual Immorality

Paul also begins a rhetorical strategy towards the end of chapter 6 in dealing with the problem of sexual immorality that he will repeat several times in the coming chapters. It is what some commentators have called his “yes, but” logic. When there is a problem, when there is an opposing philosophy that Paul has to combat, he tries to find, if possible, ways to affirm at least part of what the erring Christians are doing or proposing. But, he then goes on to qualify it in a way that is consistent with Christian ethics. “Everything is permissible to me,” he acknowledges; and some modern translations actually put that statement of 1 Corinthians 6 into quotations, suggesting that it was a Corinthian slogan. Given Paul’s expression of a law-free Gospel, there is a sense in which everything is permissible, but everything is not beneficial. The Christian life is not without its ethical or moral standards even if it does not follow the letter of the 613 Old Testament laws. This “yes, but” logic or strategy becomes all the more crucial to observe when we turn to the second half of Paul’s letter, as he responds to questions that have been put to him in writing from a letter from the Corinthian church.

B. Marriage Issues

The first of these issues, discussed in some length, occupies the entirety of 1 Corinthians 7, and it has to deal with issues of marriage, or of not getting married, or of divorce and remarriage, and the like. A correct interpretation of this chapter depends on recognizing 7:1 as just such a Corinthian slogan: “It is good for a man not to touch a woman.” “Touch” is being used here, as often was in the Greek language, as a euphemism for sexual intercourse: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.” This is not Paul speaking, as Origen, the oldest known commentator on the Corinthian epistles recognized already around the year 200, but a slogan that reflects that more ascetic party, growing out of the dualism, the world-

The Corinthian ascetic party was promoting celibacy as the Christian ideal.

Paul on Marriage in 1 Corinthians 7

1. To married ascetics: Do not deny each other sexually **BIG IDEA** (vv. 1-7)
 2. To the widows: Remarry rather than lust (vv. 8-9)
 3. To the married: Don't divorce (vv. 10-16)
 4. Preliminary summary (vv. 17-24)
 5. To the unmarried: Marriage is no sin (vv. 25-38)
 6. Conclusion: Marriage is a lifelong commitment (vv. 39-40)
- Avoid the extreme of total abstinence from sex as the key to Christian maturity.**

or material-denying nature of the Corinthian philosophy. People at Corinth, as we know have been described from various second-century writings, were going around promoting celibacy, the complete abstention from sexual relations throughout one's entire life, as the Christian ideal.

Once we understand that this is the way the chapter starts, then all of Paul's comments make good sense and fall into place. He discusses, in turn, a variety of categories of individuals and their marital status, and in each case tries to find a way to affirm, in part, what the pro-celibacy faction in Corinth is stating. There are circumstances in which it is very appropriate to refrain from sexual relations. But Paul refuses to make this an absolute, and so there is always a "yes, but"—there is always a qualifying logic. For those already married, where the chapter begins, clearly abstinence is the exception rather than the rule. For those who are unmarried or widowed, a life of celibacy—a life of choosing to be single or remain single—is much more viable, in as much as Paul himself notes that at this point in time he, too, is single. Those, however, who are married who might be contemplating divorce must not do so, except for the one situation that we mentioned already in the context of Jesus' discussion of this topic in the Sermon on the Mount, when an unbelieving partner wishes to leave.

Those who are contemplating marriage, or perhaps engaged but not yet married, have the freedom to remain single, but Paul stresses against the pro-celibacy faction that it is no sin if they marry. The key in guiding decisions in a number of these contexts comes in 7:32-35: What will enable Christian men and women to have the greatest wholehearted service for their Lord? Some Christians can say with complete honesty and integrity that marriage and having a family makes them better suited for Christian ministry in tandem, or team fashion. Others, perhaps, are unduly distracted by competing allegiances. Interestingly, this criterion for whether someone should get married or not is not one often discussed in Christian circles, but it does seem to be the key to Paul's discussion in this chapter.

1 Cor. 7:35

I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.



Paul's Teaching on Eating Meat Sacrificed to Idols:

1. It is no sin at all.
2. The stronger should refrain for the sake of the weaker.
3. In the absence of the weaker, one is free to eat.

IV. Limitations of Christian Liberty (8:1-11:1)

In chapters 8-10 of 1 Corinthians, Paul moves to yet another topic, which at first glance seems very remote from many modern, at least Western, contexts, though in other parts of the world it is still quite an acute concern. That is the issue of eating food, meat in particular, that has been sacrificed to idols. In the Corinthian marketplace, or agora, it was very common for meat to have some kind of label acknowledging the fact that a prayer had been said over this piece of food dedicated to one of the Greek gods or goddesses, often in a ceremony that took place in the temple precincts in the hill overlooking Corinth.

A. No Sin at All

Is eating such food in some fashion compromising Christian values? Paul makes three points throughout his teaching on this theme in chapters 8-10. The first is that it is in fact, no sin at all. There is nothing inherently unspiritual or sinful, or any way in which food is actually changed just because someone has prayed a prayer to some foreign deity over it. On the other hand, Paul balances this comment out by noticing that many in Corinth are what he calls weaker brothers, those whose conscience is offended and worse still, who may be forced to or led to commit something that is, in fact, actually sinful if they indulge in this practice that otherwise appears to be morally neutral. Paul says, therefore, for the sake of these weaker brothers (and sisters, we should add today), that when such a person is present and might have their conscience defiled or be led into sin, then the more mature or stronger Christian brother or sister should refrain. Interestingly, however, when the chapter closes with Paul's summary statements in 10:23-11:1, he makes a third point that in essence tips the scales in favor of the first point over the second, all other things being equal: Unless there is specific reason to believe that such a person is present who would be harmed by the questionable behavior, the Christian is free to eat. Paul is very concerned, as we have seen him elsewhere, that nothing turn the Christian relationship of freedom in Christ into one of legalism.

1 Cor. 9:22

To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.

1 Cor. 9:20-21

To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law.

B. Voluntary Refrain

In between his explicit discussion of the issue of food sacrificed to idols in these three chapters, Paul discusses analogous questions where the same kind of principles of Christian liberty and voluntary refrain come into play. The issue of whether or not one should accept money for ministry occupies a good part of chapter 9. And in 9:19-23 Paul enunciates the principles that motivate his logic throughout this discussion. It is that famous paragraph in which he explains how he tries to be all things to all people, in the hopes that he might save some. Of course, Paul is not saying that he would contravene specific moral absolutes or scriptural prohibitions just for the sake of winning people to Christ. But on any potentially morally neutral matter, where Scripture is not explicit and it is not clear that something is inherently good or evil in and of itself, Paul will bend over backwards to accommodate culture and practices and customs of non-Christian people so as not to put any unnecessary obstacles in front of their becoming believers. He has already stressed how much an obstacle the cross itself is, and the whole message of accepting its foolishness—someone else dying for the sins and for the penalty that we deserve to pay for those sins. No need to put additional obstacles in front of this. It would be good if Christians throughout the world today took this principle more into mind.

It is important to note also the type of person that is not considered a weaker brother in these three chapters. It is the person that one writer has somewhat amusingly dubbed the professional weaker brother. This is the person who constantly objects to everything new or unusual in Christian circles—not because they would be tempted to follow the practice, by any stretch of the imagination—just because they are inherently conservative and legalistic and don't like anything that challenges tradition. This is not the weaker brother who is tempted to be led into sin, and interestingly it is much more like the legalists that throughout Paul's ministry he consistently forthrightly condemns. Ironically, we often bend over backwards to kowtow to such people in our circles, while not reaching out in creative ways to non-Christians, seeing how many ways we can relate to them without actually sinning. Paul, significantly, calls us to reverse that procedure.

1 Cor. 11:4-5

Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head . . .

Paul did not want hair or headcoverings to send misleading signals concerning sexual or religious faithfulness.



V. Conduct in Worship (11:2-14:40)

In chapters 11-14, Paul then proceeds to discuss a series of topics that deal with conduct in Christian worship.

A. Head Covering

The first of these has to do with head coverings on men and women in the city of Corinth, in the church there, 11:2-16. All of the historical background of this practice is not entirely clear. For one thing, we are not even sure what it is that Paul is referring to when he talks about men praying with their heads uncovered and women praying (and in each case also prophesying) with their heads covered. It may be a veil, or it may simply refer to a covering of long hair.

Hairstyles and head coverings sent a variety of religious and sexual signals in the ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman world. There is one very important scriptural precedent which makes it very unlikely that Paul believed he was giving here timeless, absolute teaching for all people in all places. As a Jew steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures, he would have known about the prohibition against the Nazirite in Old Testament times ever cutting his hair—Samson being the most famous, though somewhat wayward, example of this Nazirite. Therefore, to say that it is always disgraceful for a man to have long hair would contradict explicit scriptural teaching. When Paul, in verse 14, therefore, appeals to “nature” for the practices he is commanding here, he is probably using nature in the established Greek sense of long and well-established custom of that particular day or culture.

Paul did not want hair or head coverings to send misleading signals concerning someone’s sexual or religious faithfulness. In cultures where head coverings do not send these signals, Christians should feel free not to follow the letter of Paul’s teaching, but perhaps to ask the question: Are there other ways in which, in their culture, they can demonstrate or can avoid sending the wrong signals concerning their sexual or religious fidelity?

B. The Lord’s Supper

The latter half of chapter 11, beginning with verse 17, then proceeds to the topic of the Lord's Supper. This is to be partaken of with concern for those in the congregation who are less well off. "Partaking unworthily" in verse 27 is defined by the verses that precede it—those who go ahead and eat and drink too much without concern for their fellow brother or sister in this early Christian love feast. Again, all kinds of applications of this passage have come up throughout Christian history that have lost sight of this original context. The only ones that Paul is asking to refrain from the Lord's Supper in the initial context is those who are not concerned for the poor in their midst. That could revolutionize our application of who did or did not take the Lord's Supper if we were to take that teaching seriously.

C. Spiritual Gifts

Chapters 12-14 proceed to a unified discussion of spiritual gifts and the problems that were being caused in Corinth because of people's insensitive use of those gifts. Of many teachings that are important in these chapters we may enumerate seven. In 12:7, Paul stresses that every Christian has at least one spiritual gift. The implication is we should seek to discover them and use them faithfully. In 12:11, he stresses that not all have the same gift—the Spirit decides who gets what. This should alert us to ever elevating any particular gift as something that all Christians should have as a mark of salvation or even Christian maturity. Third, in verses 12-26, with the famous metaphor of the body and the interdependence of its parts, Paul stresses how all gifts are important and all are necessary. None can be demeaned, even the less visible ones. Fourthly, the famous chapter on love, chapter 13, beautiful though it is in and of itself, is set in the context of Paul's discussion of spiritual gifts to make the point that all the gifts in the world, without love, without the selfless use of those gifts in service of others, is worthless.

Next, chapter 14 discusses the two particularly troubling gifts in the Corinthian context, and often still today, of prophecy and tongues. And the main point of this chapter is to prefer prophecy, the public proclamation of God's Word, to tongues, because it alone is immediately intelligible without interpretation. Nevertheless, it is important here

1 Cor. 14:27-28

If anyone speaks in a tongue, two-or at the most three-should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God.

1 Cor. 14:33-34

As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says.



to note that Paul does not rule out speaking in tongues, even while he does give specific criteria for how they are to be exercised decently and in order. Those two principles together could go a long way to solving most controversies about tongues in the church today.

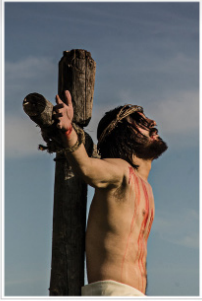
In this context, too, in verses 33-38 Paul gives the puzzling commands that women are to be silent and not to speak in the church. There have been a variety of interpretations of this verse, but the one that cannot be correct is that Paul is commanding them to absolute silence throughout the entire Christian assembly. After all, back in 11:5, he has already permitted them to pray and to prophesy (today we might say to preach, to proclaim God's Word in public). Probably there are specific circumstances relating to the disruption of uneducated or immature Christian women in the church at Corinth, or perhaps there are specific contexts, maybe related to the very spiritual gifts in question—speaking in tongues, or interpreting tongues, or something of that nature—that Paul has in mind.

VI. Resurrection of the Dead and Conclusion (15:1-16:24)

The final major theological topic that Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians occupies all of chapter 15—a very important teaching passage on the resurrection of Jesus.

A. Resurrection of Christ

He makes, in essence, three points throughout this chapter: First of all, stressing the historicity or factuality of the Resurrection by itemizing all of the witnesses to whom Jesus appeared; second, stressing how essential it is to our hope of salvation, how the very foundation of Christian faith hangs on this doctrine. If Christ be not raised, we are of all people most to be pitied, Paul says, because it means we have no hope of life after death. The rest of the chapter, then, indicates not only that Jesus' death and resurrection is the firstfruits of our coming resurrection to life eternal in bodily form, perfected and glorified, but also the nature of that resurrection body—continuous with our old humanity, but also perfected, and therefore discontinuous.



B. Collection for Needy

Chapter 16 introduces briefly an issue Paul will discuss in much greater length in 2 Corinthians, namely, a collection of money he is beginning to organize for needy Christians in Judea. And then the letter concludes with closing greetings.

VII. Theology

If we summarize the theology of 1 Corinthians throughout this potpourri of problems, we come back again to the theme with which Paul began in chapter 2. The cross, the crucified Messiah, the one who should make us so humble because of what He did that we did not deserve, for our sake, is the center of Christian preaching and proclamation. The cross alone, of course, is meaningless without the Resurrection, and so it is interesting to see how Paul frames this epistle—the second chapter and the second to the last chapter dealing in detail with the Crucifixion and the Resurrection specifically. If Christians will focus on these two doctrines, then issues of Christian behavior will begin to fall into place. As they will consider what is best for others, they will follow that beautiful poem of love of chapter 13 and begin to put it into practice in numerous, concrete situations.