

Study 22: Summary

Introduction

This study is intended to provide a reminder and a readable summary of the entire letter.

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Homework and preparation for next week:

- Read the notes as a review of the study.

Notes for study 22: Summary

Introduction (Introductory study)

The Corinthian letters provide us with an opportunity to look into a New Testament church as if the lid were taken off and we can look at what is happening inside. But the inside is not a pretty picture. In Corinth, the world has invaded the church.

Corinth was (and is) strategically placed at the top of the narrow peninsular that forms the lower part of Greece (the Peloponnese). Much trade passed through the city as a “short-cut” between the two seas. Small ships would be hauled across the peninsular, or freight would be transferred by land from one port to the other. During this task the sailors would have shore leave in Corinth, which greatly contributed to the vice and immorality in the city. Corinth had a reputation for corruption and immorality so that the phrase “to live like a Corinthian” meant to live a life of drunken and immoral debauchery. The city was prosperous because of the trade, and the rewards of that prosperity were spent on immorality.

It was the home of the Isthmian (Corinthian) Games, which were held every two years and ranked just below those of Olympia in importance. Paul makes reference to such in 1:9:24-27.

At the summit of the imposing mountain behind Corinth – Acrocorinth – was a temple of the Greek god Aphrodite – the goddess of love, which supported 1000 religious prostitutes. At the foot of the hill was the temple of Melicertes – the patron of seafarers. The sea-god Poseidon was especially honoured at the Isthmus Games.

At first glance it would seem that Corinth would not be fertile ground for the gospel. Yet God assures Paul “...*I have much people in this city...*” (Acts 18:10). He came to Corinth (the leading city in Greece at that time), after a disappointing time in Athens. With such a reputation, it is not surprising that Paul says “...*I came to you...in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling...*”

Background, Date, and Occasion of the letter

Paul’s visit to Corinth is recorded in Acts 18, (AD 52 – AD 53) where he joins up with Aquilla and Priscilla. They most likely were amongst the early converts there. He begins teaching in the synagogue and is then joined by Silas and Timothy who had come from Macedonia (Thessalonica and Berea). The Jews reject Paul, and he goes next door to the house of Justus. The Ruler of the Synagogue – Crispus – is converted along with “...*many of the Corinthians...*” (Acts 18:8). The Lord appears to Paul to reassure him, and he stays and works with the church for 18 months.

Later, Paul comes to Ephesus, and is kept informed of the things that were happening in Corinth. He writes the letter of stern condemnation after hearing about the problems and the things that were happening there. The culture at Corinth had permeated the church.

A short time after writing the letter, Paul makes another trip to Corinth in late AD 57 and stayed 3 months (Acts 20:2-3). On the journey back to Jerusalem, he writes the second letter to the Corinthians from Thessalonica or Philippi.

The date of the letter is quite late in the stay at Ephesus, in the early part of AD 57 during Paul’s third missionary journey.

He is quite specific about his information “...Chloe’s household have reported to me that...” (1:1:11), and also from Stephanus and others (1:16:17).

The Corinthians had written to Paul asking him some questions, which he methodically addresses in the letter. The occasion of the letter is therefore Paul’s response to the questions that the brethren had asked him.

A fundamental question is: *What happened after Paul left Corinth?* Paul certainly would not have put up with the nonsense whilst he was there – and he wouldn’t have *walked away* and left them in a mess to sort out. Those who had the spiritual gifts and were the elders and leaders in the

congregation had responsibilities in teaching and leadership. Paul had only been gone for a bit over 4 years when he wrote the letter – and he had already written a previous one.

Key introductory thoughts (Chapter 1)

The letter is addressed to *the church of God in Corinth, to those* who have been *sanctified and called to be holy* (1:1:2). Despite having been set apart they had not acted in this way. Even though they *called on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ* (1:1:2) they were not living the way that they ought. *His grace was given to them* (1:1:4), and Paul extended it further in his final greeting (1:16:23). They had *been enriched* (1:1:4) and *had knowledge* (both by teaching and from the miraculous gifts), but despite those gifts, they were not using them as they should. They were confused as to the second coming of the Lord, even though *they eagerly awaited it* (1:1:7) as Paul did (1:16:22). Jesus would *keep them strong and blameless to the end* (1:1:8) but to do this, they needed *to be on their guard, stand firm, be men of courage, and be strong* (1:16:13).

They needed to *continue in the fellowship* (1:1:9), and *submit to those who demonstrate the true characteristics and labour in the word* (1:16:16).

Immediately after the introduction, Paul begins addressing the issue of division. But he does it with a plea “...*I plead with you brethren...*” (1:1:10).

Factions had developed in the church. Some were aligning themselves with Paul, some with Apollos, some with Peter, and some with Christ. The factionalism (had it been allowed to continue) would have been the start of denominationalism. They were far from displaying a united front to the world. The factionalism had (most likely) become more important than anything else, and was occupying their time and energy. Any contacts that the church may have had through some of the members would quickly be “attacked” by the other factions as they tried to turn them away from the *wrong faction* to the *right one*. One doesn’t have to think very hard to work out what was going on. The end of this behaviour is that “...*the cross of Christ should be made of no effect...*” (1:1:17 NKJV).

They were professing themselves to be wise. It was directly in character with the *superior intelligence* that the worldly factions were extolling. Each one of the factions thought that they were displaying their own version of wisdom. They regarded those who did not agree with their views and positions as *foolish*. Paul contrasts the real fools – those outside of Christ – with those who have true wisdom.

The cause of the problem

Many of the brethren were involved in the digression. Some in the church were of a higher class, and were (probably) well educated, whilst some were poor. With the education, and the philosophical background to the city, a collision course was set. Those who considered themselves to be educated, jostled for position in the leadership of the congregation. They thought themselves to be wise. But true wisdom lies only in Christ, and not in the philosophies of men.

Paul’s approach when he first came to Corinth (Chapter 2)

Paul had been in *fear and trembling* (1:2:2). Despite his lack of oratory skills (compared to Apollos), or a perceived lack of wisdom (compared to the Greek philosophers), humility and the presentation of the central theme of the gospel - the cross of Christ. Were what was important

Worldly wisdom doesn’t amount to anything, and it will come to nothing. True wisdom requires maturity. The Corinthians had started on the journey, but they still had a long way to go. If they had truly understood *the message of the cross* (1:1:18) then they wouldn’t have had all of the problems and issues that Paul needs to deal with in the rest of the letter – let alone the division issues that he has already dealt with.

The mystery

The gospel is the mystery. In other ages it was not revealed to man (Eph 3:4-9; Col 1:26) and at that time, even the angels did not understand it and longed to see it (1 Pet 1:12). The mystery had been kept secret since before the world began (Rom 16:25), but it has now been revealed to us.

One could hardly conceive of a God who allowed His enemies to put Him to death. The Jews could never conceive of such a Messiah, but Jesus' characteristics were shown hidden in "*type*" in the Old Testament. It was shadowy and sketchy, but now is clearly revealed in the gospel.

The Jews foresaw the Messiah in two ways – the Kingly Messiah who would re-establish the kingdom under David, and the Priestly Messiah. The two pictures of the Messiah could not be reconciled. The Hebrew writer explains Melchisedek for us, and we can clearly see how Jesus brought the Kingdom and the Priesthood together in Himself. If the Jews had understood this, they would never have crucified Jesus (1:2:8).

The Holy Spirit's revelation

The Holy Spirit reveals the mystery. The church at Corinth had an abundance of miraculous gifts, and of necessity, the action of the Holy Spirit (HS) in the Corinthian letter must be considered in the light of the explicit manifestation that was given to those who had the gifts. The gifts are the first and most obvious revelation of the HS confirming God's revelation.

The HS guided the writers of the New Testament. They did not write their own words, but the words that God had revealed to them. When we read the things that were written by the inspired apostles and prophets, we can know the things of God that have been revealed by the HS.

When we are baptised into Christ, we are given the HS who then dwells in us, and He (the HS) interacts with our spirit, and helps our understanding. However the *natural* man – the "*unspiritual*" person doesn't understand these things. He regards them as foolish (1:2:14).

Paul compares knowing the mind of God and knowing the mind of another man. We can't know the mind of anyone else unless the other person reveals it to us. Likewise, we can't know the mind of God unless it is revealed to us – and the Corinthians received that revelation by the HS through the miraculous gifts, and we receive it through the scripture (Eph 3:4).

When we are spiritual, and have our hearts and minds tuned to God, only then can we understand the things that God has revealed. When we do, "*...we have the mind of Christ...*" (1:2:16)

Maturity in Christ (Chapter 3)

The Corinthians had not gone on to maturity, and were still babes in Christ. On the surface, we might say that they hadn't grown to the maturity that they should have. We need to remember that Paul had spent 18 months there with them – and wouldn't have left them *in a mess* (in fact the mess that they were now in). Further, he had left them with the miraculous gifts that should have allowed them to grow and mature. In the 4 years since Paul had left, things had gone from bad to worse. Paul said "*...I fed you with milk...*" (past tense) as he refers to the time when he was there.

The divisions amongst the Corinthians was just one sign of their immaturity, and Paul brings them right back to that in 1:3:4 "*...when you say 'I am of Paul' or 'I am of Apollos'...*" it is showing their immaturity. It is further encompassed in their behaviour that they ought to have grown beyond as mature christians.

Christ is the centre, and the others (including himself) are merely servants (ministers) "*...through whom you believed...*" (1:3:5). As such, everyone had a part to play, "*...I (Paul) planted, Apollos watered...*" Most importantly "*...it is God who gives the increase...*" (1:3:6). Everyone is just a servant of Jesus. We are tools that He uses to accomplish His will. We have the responsibility to teach and to make disciples (Mt 28:18-20), but we cannot be held accountable for their obedience – that is a matter between them and God. Likewise as they grow as christians, it is a matter of their heart – and how much it is tuned in to God.

When people obey the gospel, and grow as Christians it is not because of what *we* have done (that we should be proud). We should thank God, for He alone provides the nourishment.

The next example is of a building. Every building has a foundation. It supports the structure that is placed upon it and enables it to withstand the battering from winds and storms. Jesus is the foundation for our lives (1:3:11). Unless we build on Him as the foundation, then we will fail when we are tested with the storms of life. Having the foundation is one thing, and having the right building on it is another. Paul's argument isn't on the building, but rather on the builder. The only thing that should be important is how we build our lives on the foundation of Christ!

In a third example, Paul likens us to a temple. It was the place where the gods dwelled, and the Temple in Jerusalem was where the Shikinah (God's presence) dwelt. Rather than the Shikinah presence of God, we now have God Himself in the person of the Holy Spirit. He doesn't come and live in physical Temples, but He comes and lives in us "*...you are the temple of God and the Spirit of God dwells in you...*" (1:3:16). Like the earlier examples, we need to build on the right foundation – Jesus Christ, and we need to build a building (us = our lives) that is a suitable dwelling place for God Himself.

Discussion on Stewardship (Chapter 4)

Leaders are to be considered "*...as servants of Christ...*" Christ is the head, and neither he (Paul), nor Apollos, nor any of the other apostles, nor any other minister has any position of relevance. God revealed to the apostles the things that he wanted man to know (Jn 14:25-26; 16:12-15) and the apostles have fulfilled their duty in revealing these things to us. They did not "make up" their theology, nor were they like the Greek philosophers who had taken on the task of discovering or inventing truth, but as Christ's ministers (servants) they have merely delivered the message.

The stewards responsibility is to administer the things that have been provided. But "*...it is required in stewards that a man be found faithful...*" (1:4:2). If the apostles faithfully passed on to us all that God had revealed to them, then nothing more could be asked of them.

A clarification of the issues

Paul clarifies the issue of division in the congregation, which was not over those *outside* of the congregation, but of those *within* the congregation. Apollos, Paul, and Peter were merely illustrative of the issue which was "*...figuratively transferred to (Paul) and Apollos...*" (1:4:6).

The real issue was that they were "*...puffed up ...one against the other...*" most likely because of the coveting that some had about their gifts.

So, Paul applies the example of himself and the other apostles – as servants and stewards – as to how the Corinthians ought to behave. Everyone should follow their examples, as stewards and "*...not to go beyond what is written...*" (1:4:6).

Not everyone had the same gift (1:12:7-11), and there were some who had (*undoubtedly*) not received any miraculous gifts. They were arguing about who's gift was better, and jostling for positions of power as a result. The superiority of the gifts was due to the grace of God who gave it, rather than anything that the receiver had done in receiving the gifts! In contrast, the Corinthians were boasting and rejoicing in what they saw as their superior position.

The Labour of the apostles

Rather a position to be desired, the apostles were men condemned to death. Of the 14 apostles (the original 12 plus Matthias to replace Judas, and Paul who (in essence) replaced James, the only one to die a natural death was John. The Jews continually harassed Paul, and time and again they sought to put him to death. The apostles were "*...displayed as a spectacle to the world...*" (1:4:9). The apostles *rightly* had a position of honour, yet with that position came disregard – a spectacle along the lines of a condemned criminal brought into an arena to be made a public gazing stock and put to death. On a physical basis, the apostles had nothing to boast about. They

were “...hungry, thirsty, poorly clothed, beaten, homeless...laboured with their own hands...reviled...persecuted... defamed...made as the filth of the world...” (1:4:10-13).

Paul is sending Timothy who will ensure that things are put in order. Timothy will remind them of what Paul teaches, which is always consistent “...as I teach everywhere in every church...” (1:4:17). They are not optional, and are to be applied consistently.

Paul’s view of the crime (Chapter 5)

Paul is quite confrontational as he brings out the issue.

1. It was a moral issue. There was a right and a wrong here! Morality (immorality) issues cannot be tolerated in the church.
2. It was common knowledge. Not only in the church, but also in the community, and the *reputation* of the church would suffer as a result.
3. Even the worldly Gentiles would not accept such a predicament.
4. They were proud and boasting about it. It is enough that we commit sin, but we should *never* boast about it

This is another example of the world having invaded the church. But more than just the immorality around them in the city invading the church, they had taken it to new heights!

The treatment for the crime

Rather than treating it as a crime and punishment, it is a problem requiring treatment. The real issue is this:

One cannot continue a life characterised by sin, and still be a member of God’s church. You have to make a choice. Either you are with God, and numbered with the Christians, or you are with Satan. The act of dis-fellowshipping is to force the decision.

Such immorality (and particularly the tolerance of it) will spread throughout the church if it is not stopped “...purge out the leaven...a little leaven infects the whole lump...” (1:5:6-7). We must cut off our social contact with such a person. Not even so much as to eat with them. They are to be treated as an *unclean* person, but we are still to regard them as a brother (2 Thess 3:14-15).

Not associating with sexually immoral people does not mean avoiding interactions (and eating) with people from outside the church. He was “...certainly not talking about the immoral people from outside of the church...” if that were the case, “...then you would have to go outside of the world...” (1:5:10). When the world invades the church, then things need to be corrected.

The Law of Moses was laden with purification rites, which were to show the Jews as a distinctive and sanctified people. They were commanded to remove all of the leaven from their houses and their land before the feast of Passover. They systematically and thoroughly purged their houses so that they were clean. The message is that as a community of Christians, we are to be clean from sin in just the same way as the Jews would be free from leaven at Passover time.

Litigation (Chapter 6)

Brethren were taking one another to court, rather than trying to resolve the issues between them. This is not to say that brethren should never go to court to resolve an issue, but in Corinth, the brethren were taking one another to court over “...the smallest matters...” (1:6:2).

Not every civil lawsuit (even against another brother) is unjust. Paul used the law to defend himself on several occasions (Acts 16:37-39; 18:12 → ; 25:16). Our western society has become litigious. People are suing others for what appears to be minor and trivial issues. There has even been successful lawsuits made by thieves against the owners of the houses that they were burgling at the time! In a society where someone is out to get whatever they can out of the other person, regardless of the cost to that person, then society has gone mad. That appears to be what had happened at Corinth, and it was brethren taking action against other brethren.

This is not what God wants us to do, if we have truly embraced the sufferings of the Christ, who in the midst of the humility and suffering on the cross said “...Father forgive them for they do not

know what they are doing...” (Lk 23:34). His compassion towards others was so complete that He willingly gave up His just life for those (us) who had committed wrong against Him. So, how could we who have been made right (justified) – have been bought – by the blood of Christ, take action against others who have also been bought – out of selfish motives?

The situation Paul describes is not dissimilar to the issue in the previous chapter.

- There was a problem in the congregation (sexual immorality in 5, litigation in 6)
- It was happening in the open (everyone knew in 5, it was before the courts in 6)
- The underlying cause (both chapters) was their heart not aligned to God

Christians will judge the world (1:6:2), and angels (1:6:3) and that therefore are well qualified to judge in such trivial issues as the matters being litigated here.

The place of expediency

The Greek culture focussed on satisfaction and gratification in whatever way, time, and manner the individual found convenient. Eating food is not wrong in and of itself. But it becomes wrong when we abuse it and let it control us. Sex is not wrong in and of itself, but it too becomes wrong when we take it out of the context that God has put it in (ie the marriage relationship).

The principle of expediency applies to many things that we do in our lives (and to the organisation and worship of the church).

Sexual immorality

In chapter 5, part of chapter 6, and all of chapter 7, Paul discusses sex and marriage. As we noted, Corinth was a city built around vice and sexual immorality. Temple prostitution was rife, and the sailors who had shore leave in Corinth took great advantage of their stay in Corinth.

With such sexual practices going on around them, the immorality of the world was bound to invade the church. Some of the brethren were sure to stray, if they hadn't already. Some of them had behaved this way in the past, for Paul says of them “...*such were some of you...*” (1:6:11)

Sexual immorality is not an expedient issue. It is wrong in and of itself. Rather than be joined (sexually) to prostitutes, we have been joined to the Lord (1:6:16-17). Sexual immorality is not a sin that we bring on others, but rather a sin that we inflict on our own bodies (1:6:18). We have been bought with a price (the blood sacrifice of Jesus), and therefore we should glorify God in every thing that we do (1:6:20).

Meeting the needs of our husband / wife (Chapter 7)

We all need things to sustain life – air – food – water – money – a job – and importantly love and affection. The husband and wife are made for each other, and to help each other. And they are to meet the sexual needs of the other. The place for that fulfilment is in the marriage relationship. To avoid turning to a sinful relationship to meet our sexual needs, Paul says that we should each have our own husband / wife.

There are times when we need to seek solitude, and stop having sex for a time. This might be a time when we want to devote ourselves to God for a while. It could also be whilst the husband is away from home working, or teaching and preaching (perhaps for several months). Paul says that we are to make sure when the time is over that you reconstitute your sexual relationship again, lest you get caught into a period where you are unable to control your sexual desires. Paul speaks expressly that this is a CONCESSION, not a COMMAND. Throughout this passage, Paul makes a VERY CLEAR distinction on what is commanded, and what is his judgement (which he has the permission of God to say).

Should we remain unmarried?

Paul was not married (although he had the right to be), and it is evident (from this chapter) that he thought he could consequently give himself to the Lord in a greater capacity by remaining single.

Certainly having a wife would have restricted his travels, and would have weighed heavy on his mind as he faced the persecutions, stoning, shipwrecks, and jails.

He discusses separation because of “incompatibility”. He doesn’t define what “incompatibility” is, but on the list is everything except adultery (the one exception that Jesus gave). The list would include domestic violence, constant arguing, we just don’t get along any more, we’ve drifted apart, and “because she burns the toast”.

Approaching entering a marriage

Paul says that it is preferable to remain in the (married or unmarried) state in which we became christians. And not just the marriage state either – don’t be concerned about your physical state of freedom or bondage – christianity is for everyone! However, we cannot take this part of the passage out of context with any other scripture (and especially the same passage, where Paul gives us instructions in verse 2!

Paul is saying that it is good and desirable for people to remain celibate if they can. However if they cannot contain their sexual urges, then they should get married. *EVERY* person has the right to be married. (The only real issue is *WHO* do they have the right to be married to!)

Marriage will bring difficulties, but we should try as hard as we can to live our life to Christ in the fullest sense (just as we would if we did not have a wife to distract us from Christ). Life is short. Just make sure that you put Christ in the first place in your lives, and don’t be distracted by the things of the world and our possessions. When we are single, we don’t have the distraction of wives and families, and sometimes that is easier. A wife and family certainly would have been a distraction for Paul in his life of ministry and service. But it isn’t always that way. A wife (or a husband for that matter) is a helper, and should help the other in their service for God. The important message here is that we need to keep things in perspective, and keep our service to God clearly focussed as our first responsibility.

Those in a “Platonic relationship”, – people who are engaged or “engaged to be engaged” so to speak, may have been involved for years. If “her biological clock is ticking”, and so far, they have both served God in the fullest capacity without the family distractions that he has just spoken about above, they are totally free to marry.

Food offered to idols (Chapter 8)

Corinth was filled with temples to pagan gods, and it was inevitable that meat that had been offered as a sacrifice to these idols would enter the market place. So, the Corinthians are presented with a practical problem, and one compounded by the decree sent out from the apostles in Jerusalem that they should “...*abstain from things offered to idols...*” (Acts 15:29; 21:25).

The Corinthians had correctly asserted that their knowledge of God and the gospel meant that idols are nothing, and therefore the meat offered to idols was nothing. Their line of argument was carefully constructed so that they might obtain a positive answer from Paul. There is nothing wrong with the meat, and Paul leads them on a journey in answering their question. The first part of the journey concerns the nature of the idols. Idols are nothing. In contrast, as christians, we know that there is only one real God – the true and living God – the God of Abraham – Jehovah.

So, the idols can’t do anything to the food that has been offered to them, and consequently there is absolutely nothing wrong with the meat. But that isn’t the end of the problem. Not everyone has such a fundamental understanding of the situation (1:8:7). Some people *think* that there is something wrong with eating the meat that has been offered to idols, even though there really is nothing wrong with it.

This comes to the heart of the problem – that even though eating meat is not wrong in and of itself, if we *think* it is wrong to do it then we offend our conscience by eating – and therefore that alone makes it wrong. Paul says that by eating under such circumstances, “...*their conscience, being weak, is defiled...*” (1:8:7).

We should abstain from eating meat which would cause a weaker brother to stumble. The key thing is that we make sure that our actions do not lead *weaker* brethren to stumble (1:8:9). We must not underestimate the power of our actions and of the examples that we set for others “...Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble...” (1:8:13 NKJV)

Paul’s appeal to his apostleship (Chapter 9)

Everywhere Paul went, his apostleship was challenged. The Judaisers made the claim that Paul wasn’t a real apostle, as he wasn’t one of the twelve. The evidence of Paul’s apostleship may have been weak amongst some brethren, but that should not have been the case in Corinth. Paul had been involved in the beginning of the church there, had spent 18 months working with them on the second journey (Acts 18:11), and then for another 3 months on the third journey (Acts 20:3). The confirmation of Paul’s work as an apostle was the miraculous spiritual gifts (2:12:12). In a tongue-in-cheek way, Paul is saying, “If you are questioning my apostleship, just think about the miraculous gifts. I wonder how you got them...?”

The support of workers

Paul establishes that the workers in the gospel should be supported by it, although he chose not to accept it, and on several occasions worked to support himself (Acts 18:3 –specifically in Corinth). He shows by his example that whilst it was right and proper to accept support for the work that he was doing amongst the churches, it was just as right and proper to not accept support. His reason for doing this was because he did not want anyone to say about him that he was only in it for the money “...I would rather die than have my reason for boasting taken away...” (1:9:15). The only thing that he wanted to boast about was his work in preaching the gospel, and no one could say that his motives were not with the gospel and that alone. In fact “...I feel compelled to do so; I should be utterly miserable if I failed to preach it...” (1:9:16 JB Phillips).

The key is in Paul’s approach as a servant. He was mirroring the life and example of Christ. Paul fully realised the enormity of the responsibility that lay on his shoulders, and he was not lax in discharging it. He could say “...from Jerusalem to Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ, and I have made it my aim to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build on another man’s foundation...” (Rom 15:19-20)

“...I do all of this for the gospel’s sake, that I may be a partaker of it with you...” (1:9:23 NKJV)

The example of the athlete

The Corinthian (Isthmian) games were held every second year, and ranked closely behind the Olympics as one of the great sporting events of the time. The Corinthians would be fully aware of the examples that Paul is to bring. His own life was characterised by the type of discipline that the athletes exhibited. The examples of a runner, and a boxer. In the end, what does the prize mean? Today, you get a medal, a picture and your name in the history books. In Corinth, you got a laurel wreath that would soon decay. None of the history books (that I am aware of) bear the names of the winners of any of the events.

In contrast, in the christian race, there is not one winner, but everyone wins the prize, and the prize is awaiting us in heaven that will not fade away nor corrupt, and our names are written in the book of life! How great is our reward by comparison! Why would anyone bother with the vanity of the athletics, when we could put our efforts into spiritual directions?

We should run the race of our lives in exactly the same dedication and discipline that the elite athlete brings to his sport. “...so run that you might obtain the prize...” (1:9:24). There are consequences to this behaviour “...lest after I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified...” (1:9:27 NKJV)

The clear implication is that our behaviour can cause us to be lost. This does not fly in the face of the eternal security of the believer – because no one can take it away from us. Only we can let it

go. And if we do let it go, then there are eternal consequences. Paul very well understood that message, and demonstrated to the Corinthians (and us!) how we “...ought to behave ourselves in the church...” (1 Tim 3:15)

The example of the forefathers (Chapter 10)

Israel is presented as an example of the lack of self-restraint, and several examples illustrate the point. There is a strong parallel between Israel leaving the land of Egypt and our walk with God. All of the Israelites went through the transition out of Egypt (sin) and they all began the journey, but only a few (two) of them ever completed it.

The people rebelled against God 10 times, but He was still patient with them. After the 10th time, God said that that is enough. The people were sorry, but it was too late. “...with most of them God was not well pleased, and they fell in the wilderness...” (1:10:5)

Their lack of faith and obedience to God caused them to fall. The things that happened to them in the wilderness should serve as examples to us. The people became engaged in Lust, Idolatry, Immorality, Tempting Christ, and Murmuring.

These things reflect our humanity. We are all subject to the same human failings, and we all fall in sin in one way or another. The reason that they were written down was for our learning, so that we might see their examples and determine not to do the things that they did! As we are confronted by sin, we always have a choice – a way to escape the sin is always there. When we resist sin, Satan will flee from us (Js 4:7), and by withstanding the temptations, we grow spiritually. But, the consequences are that we will be tempted by more difficult circumstances.

The Communion

Just as being involved in idolatry means having fellowship, participation, sharing, communication, and communion with the idols (and those that worship them), so we are called into fellowship with God through Jesus Christ (1 Jn 1:3). We cannot be in fellowship with both. Since we are Christians, we have chosen Jesus. That means that we must not engage with the works of the flesh (Gal 5:19-25).

The head covering (Chapter 11)

The culture in Corinth – a Roman colony – was more Roman than Greek. The church in Corinth was not predominantly Jewish, so, it is most unlikely that the head covering issue in the church in Corinth was brought from the Jews, but rather from the pagan world. Therefore the culture in the church was more influenced by the Romans, who placed a higher emphasis on “correct” clothing than the Jews or the Greeks. The cultural head covering in Corinth was a veil. The men would often wear the veil of their robe pulled up over their head, so that only their face was visible. Likewise the women would wear a veil covering their entire head except their faces.

Paul discusses the issues around order (doing things in an orderly manner, as well as hierarchy) in the church. Whatever conclusion we reach on the wearing of a head covering, Paul’s instruction on order cannot be ignored. God (the Father) is the head, and Christ is subject to Him. Every man is likewise subject to Christ, and every woman (wife) is likewise subject to the man (her husband). The woman is to be *in subjection to* the man in exactly the same way that Christ *is in subjection to* God. Paul discusses a woman *praying or prophesying* (1:11:5). He does not say when *others* are praying or prophesying, but when THEY are praying or prophesying. In the NT church, there were some women who had miraculous gifts (Acts 21:9). Apparently, they were exercising their gifts in the assembly, and insisting on their right to over-rule the men (1:14:34).

The issue of the head covering then, was important to demonstrate the woman’s subjection to a man. Women with short-back-and-sides or a man with shoulder length hair (or longer) was not the natural thing in Roman, Greek, or Jewish societies, and those that had them would be regarded with shame. A woman’s long hair has been given to her –as her shining glory – as her head covering. What the woman has on her head is not “power” - *dynamis*, but *exousia* –

“authority” However it is not “authority” *per se* that she has, but rather a *symbol of that authority* (NASB), or *sign of the authority* (NIV).

There is *clearly not* the same cultural significance today in western society that there was with the head covering in the Corinthian society. The head covering was clearly an issue on the Corinthian society *outside of the church* and as such was a part of the culture. In western society, the head covering is not part of our culture, however those on society show their submission by their respectful actions, speech, and behaviour. To be consistent, a woman in western society who wore a head covering as a sign of submission in worship, should wear the head covering at all times – as submission to husbands is not confined to worship. In fact, Muslim women generally carry out the practice, albeit not for the reasons Paul has given here.

Specifically on the head covering issue, the wearing of hats (by both women and men) brings with it no symbolism in western society, unlike the culture at Corinth. If we asked 1000 people walking down the street why a particular woman was wearing a hat, the comments would range from sun protection, to fashion, or “I dunno” or “who cares!”. It would be extremely doubtful than any response would relate to a cultural issue, and none would say that it was to show that she is under the authority of her husband.

To conclude the matter, in the church today in western society, we respect the *reason* behind Paul’s teaching – that of proper and appropriate practice in worship, and respect for order and submission. The custom and culture of the Corinthian church has to be recognised for what it is.

The Lord’s Supper

Paul regarded the Lord’s Supper as a “serious” issue. The way in which they were coming together to observe the supper called for condemnation not commendation, as it was divisive. The factionalism was so established, and the lines drawn so strongly, that the cliques that were established in the church were inhibiting the sharing of the Lord’s Supper together in a proper manner. Instead of coming together to partake of the supper, they were coming together to share a common meal. Paul tells them to eat at home.

If the assembly at Corinth was held in the home of one of the members (which is highly likely), then the layout of the house may well have contributed to the problems. The “have’s” were not waiting for the “have not’s” to arrive, nor sharing their food with them. They were only concerned about “...*his own supper...*” rather than coming together in remembrance of the Lord. This stands in plain contrast to the fellowship and sharing of the church at the beginning in Jerusalem (Acts 2:46; 4:32-34). We have here another example of the culture of the world having invaded the church in Corinth. The assembly was characterised by worldly rather than Godly actions. Some were left hungry, whilst others overindulged.

An unworthy manner

The Corinthians had turned the Lord’s supper into something that Jesus (or Paul) had not authorised. They showed a lack of respect for the Supper, and also the same lack of respect for their brothers and sisters. So, Paul tells them that to eat and drink the elements of the supper (I hesitate to use the description *partake of the supper*, as it implies that what they would be doing was in remembrance of the Lord) in such a manner was sacrosanct to putting the Lord to death.

The Corinthians were (physically) suffering as a result of their gluttonous behaviour. Many were weak and sick, and many slept (probably through the assembly resulting from overeating). Paul most likely has physical consequences in mind here rather than *sleep* as a metaphor for *death*.

Paul closes with the important statement that we need to “...*wait for one another...*” We need to look out for our brothers and sisters in Christ, and share the Supper together with them. The Corinthians had turned it into a totally selfish activity, where some of the individuals regarded themselves as the only important people.

Spiritual Gifts (Chapter 12)

Spiritual gifts were extant in the early church. In its infancy, the early church received instruction directly from the apostles (Acts 2:42; 6:2). The problem arose with the diaspora (the dispersion), when the Christians fled, probably back to their homelands (Acts 8:1,4; 11:19; 2:5,9-11). At once, they were no longer able to be under the direct teaching of the apostles. They certainly would have retained some of the things that they had learned and had been taught, but the problems arise when new things come up. At almost exactly the same time as the diaspora we find that miraculous spiritual gifts begin to be extended to the church.

Many of the Corinthians had come from a polytheistic background. Although the gifts are different, and have different manifestations, they have all come from the same God by the same Holy Spirit. Whilst there are differences in the manifestations, the important thing is that they work together for the common good of the church (1:12:4-7).

The analogy of a body

Our physical bodies are made up of different “members” – body parts. We have arms, and legs, fingers, toes, ears, eyes, noses etc etc. The body example that Paul uses is one that we all can relate to. We might think that the (seemingly) lesser parts of our bodies aren’t much use at all. What good is a little finger, or little toe? But try hitting one of them with a hammer and see whether or not you think it is important. Right at that moment (and for quite a few moments to follow) it will be the most important member of your body. At least it will seem like it at the time! In exactly the same way, the spiritual body – the church (Eph 1:22-23) works together as a whole when the different functions each effectively contribute their part. It was God who decided what members should have what gift, and His prerogative alone (1:12:18).

The Corinthians had become puffed up about these things (1:4:6). Those who had gifts that appeared to be better than others, (apparently) were saying that the “lesser” gifts weren’t needed “...the eye saying to the hand ... (and) the head to the feet ...I have no need of you...” (1:12:21). In direct contrast, Paul brings them right back to the point that those gifts that seem to be less important are necessary (1:12:22).

The principle has direct application of us. There are different roles that we all have in the church. Some (such as preaching, teaching or song leading) are more prominent than others. But there are other practical roles too – such as praying for the work, praying for others, inviting people to study, or practicing hospitality by inviting visitors for a meal. These roles are every bit as important as the more prominent ones, and they all work together to enable the church to function effectively (compare Eph 4:16).

By application, we should be so much bonded and welded together that we feel the hurt, the sorrow, the grief, and the joy that the other members of the church are feeling. This is a big ask, and one that takes a lifetime to achieve. But it is exactly the achievement of such a bond that prepares us for our relationships with our brethren in the life to come. The gifts were for a purpose. But Paul says that something better – more excellent – was going to come. The gifts were temporal – they only existed for a while until something better could come along.

Love was missing (Chapter 13)

Those who had the gifts (and those with the best ones) were not considerate of those who had none, or had lesser gifts. It was exactly the same with the Lord’s Supper. Love needs to be the binding force. If our love to God is true, then our love to our brethren will follow. Having the gifts doesn’t accomplish anything if we don’t have love for one another. Speaking in tongues without love is just making a noise – “...a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal...” - we make a noise but it doesn’t accomplish anything.

The true character of love is perfectly exemplified in the life of the Lord. That which was lacking was very evident in the behaviour of the Corinthians. The overwhelming superior position of love

is contrasted to the (then present) situation in Corinth. The spiritual gifts are of no comparison to a proper relationship between brethren.

Paul uses several illustrations of the point. The first is partial knowledge, the second is that of a child growing up, and the third is that of a mirror. This is like the spiritual gifts. We can see the picture, but it is not totally clear.

In all of the contrasts, something is going to be better, which Paul describes as “...*that which is perfect...*” (1:13:10). When that comes, then the partial will be done away with (ie it will end). This is clearly the idea that Paul has in discussing the failure of prophecies, the cessation of tongues, and knowledge vanishing away. The partial will be replaced with completeness (“perfection”), the childish things will stop, and will be replaced by adult (mature) things, and what can only be seen dimly will be seen as though we were looking at it straight in the face.

“*The perfect*” is the coming of the complete and perfect revelation of God in the New Testament. It is no coincidence that at the very time that the ability to pass on the spiritual gifts died out (when the apostles died), that the need for them also ended (because the New Testament is our complete and perfect revelation).

The proper place of the gifts (Chapter 14)

Even though the spiritual gifts were temporal, the Corinthians was misusing them. Compared to the gift of prophecy, the gift of tongues comes a long way behind. Paul says that in desiring the spiritual gifts “...*especially the gift of prophecy...*” (1:14:1) is one to be desired. The gift of prophecy allowed a person to reveal to all that heard what was said, and to understand it.

The important thing is edification – to build up – we are built up (or strengthened) by what we hear. Paul uses a comparison with mechanical instruments, such as a harp and a flute. If every note that they put out was the same, then we won’t understand the tune (like me trying to play guitar!). In each of the above examples, the hearers need to understand what was intended. And if they don’t then the sound makes absolutely no sense. If we apply that to speaking in tongues – foreign languages (as Paul does in 1:14:9) – then we may as well just talk into the air, because it does the hearers absolutely no good at all.

The important outcome is our *understanding* of the things that are said and taught (1:14:14).

The use of the gifts within the church

Tongues have a use in demonstrating to unbelievers the power and wonder of God, but when they are applied without restraint, the result is pandemonium. The people wouldn’t understand most of what was said, and will go away without learning anything. All they would say was “...*everyone was mad...*”. By contrast, if everyone prophesied, then they would go away having been edified.

If there is no-one to interpret, then tongues are not to be used. With the gift of prophecy, there are only to be two or three uses during the assembly, and those listening are to judge what is said.

In Corinth, everyone was intent on *having his say*, even though that resulted in confusion and disorder. They were (apparently) saying that ‘*the Spirit has moved me to say this, so I have to say it*’ or they were saying ‘*I am just letting the Spirit speak through me*’. The result was just a state of confusion in the church, and a total lack of orderliness. This is in direct contrast to how things ought to be, because “...*God is not the author of confusion, but of peace...*” (1:14:33 NKJV).

The place of women in the worship service

Some women had the gifts of prophecy (Acts 21:9), and in the church in Corinth, the women were (apparently) demanding their right to exercise their gifts along with the men. Paul says that “...*they are not permitted to speak...but they are to be submissive...and it is shameful for a woman to speak in the church...*” (1:14:32-33). Whilst he applies some restrictions here, they apply to the leadership of the church, and do not imply that woman have no role at all.

The Resurrection (Chapter 15)

The death of Jesus was (and is) certain. There were many witnesses to the event. Some who saw it were used to dealing with death. The disciples took Jesus's body and prepared it for burial. If there had been any sign of life they would have tried to revive Him, not bury Him. Jesus' death proved His humanity. His resurrection proved Him to be the Son of God (Rom 1:4).

The Greek culture regarded "...the body as the prison-house of the soul, and death as a release of the soul from its captivity. The resurrection of the body, therefore, was regarded by them as a calamity rather than a blessing, and so contrary to sound philosophy as to excite ridicule..." This was exactly the reaction that Paul got when he came to Athens (Acts 17:32). This is another case of the culture in Corinth invading the church. Their philosophical position had caused them to dismiss the obvious consequences of their faith. They were in fact throwing out the basis of their faith, and substituting it with philosophy!

Paul provides his own testimony as an eyewitness account of the resurrection. Some of the Corinthians were saying that there is no resurrection from the dead (1:15:13). That conclusion stands in direct contrast to what Paul had preached to them (1:15:3-4). There are a string of consequences that all stand or fall on the resurrection. Christ's resurrection is the firstfruits (1:15:20), and our resurrection is the main harvest (1:15:23). The day of the firstfruits offering (the day after the sabbath of Passover week), was the very day that Christ was resurrected.

A direct comparison is made between Adam (the first man) and Christ (the first resurrected). Adam typified death, but by contrast, Christ typifies life. In closing the arguments about the resurrection, Paul makes the point about why go through all of the suffering and pain? (1:15:30). We may as well live a decadent life if there is nothing after death (1:15:32).

The collection for the saints (Chapter 16)

He has given the same instruction to the churches of Galatia. This was therefore not a local instruction, but a broader one. God has given us the example of how the church is to act, and it is the responsibility of the church to do things only in the way that God has authorised.

The collection was to be made on the first day of the week, which was the regular time of assembly for the church (Acts 20:7). The literal wording is that we are to *thrust into the treasury* on the first of the week. Whilst we could put aside some money once a week, and then get the money out when the need arises, that is the very thing that Paul said not to do.

Travel plans and greetings

He was in Ephesus when he wrote the letter, and planned to stay there until after Pentecost of the year AD 57. Timothy had been sent to Macedonia with Erastus ahead of Paul and he is requesting the Corinthians to accept Timothy without fear. Paul's letter had been written very sternly, and his fear was that the Corinthians would turn bitter against him and those whom he was associating with (in this case Timothy). Paul would soon learn about any such behaviour, for Timothy was to return to Paul with news of the brethren (1:16:11).

Stephanus' household provided an example of behaviour. They were amongst the first converts in Achaia. Their example was one of devotion to ministry, and that was exactly the kind of people that the Corinthians should be, and to observe their example in submission.

Some brethren had come from Corinth and provided the impetus for Paul to write the letter, and "filled in the gaps" of his knowledge of Corinth.

The final comment concerns the tone of the letter. Though it is a strong letter of rebuke, yet it was written out of a total motivation of love. First, and of most importance, love for the Lord, and then by Paul's love for the brethren.