

## St Clement's Bible Study Notes: 1 Corinthians

### Context

Corinth was a Roman colony situated on the narrow strip of land between mainland Greece and the Peloponnesian peninsula. This meant that it drew a roaring trade from the sea traffic in both the eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean, and was therefore quite a melting-pot of cultures and religions. The city boasted temples to numerous pagan gods, including Aphrodite, Hera, and Apollo, as well as a Jewish synagogue.

Paul visited Corinth in the early 50s A.D., spending 18 months there (Acts 18:1-11). In this time a church was established, made up of both Jews and Gentiles. Some time after Paul left, he wrote a first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 5:9), but this letter, in God's sovereignty, has been lost. The Corinthians replied to Paul's letter, but demonstrated a serious lack of understanding in certain areas (1 Cor 7:1, 8:1, 12:1, 15:12, 15:31), and so Paul wrote the letter we know as 1 Corinthians in order to address these issues. It dates from somewhere between 53 and 55 A.D., during Paul's 3-year stay in Ephesus (1 Cor 16:6, Acts 19).

1 Corinthians is a wonderfully practical letter, because many of the issues faced by the Corinthians are the same as those facing us today:

- How can we live for Jesus in a pagan world?
- Does sexual purity really matter?
- Why is it so dangerous to be arrogant?
- How should we treat Christians who have different opinions to us?
- What are spiritual gifts and how should we use them?
- Does it matter whether the resurrection really happened or not?

Paul's tone can sometimes be quite pointed, even sarcastic, but he speaks from a heart of love (1 Cor 16:24). We're going to spend 17 weeks, up until May half-term, digging deeply into this letter, getting to know Paul, the Corinthians, ourselves, and most importantly the Lord Jesus better.

### 1 Corinthians 1:1-9: A genuine church

**Main point:** A genuine church exists by God's grace alone.

**Main aim:** Examine whether we recognise that our church, and our faith, exist by God's grace alone.

The letter starts very positively, as Paul gives thanks to God for the fruit he has seen in the Corinthians' lives. But from 1:10 onwards, he launches into rebuke and correction. That's why it's so important to remember these opening verses – the Corinthians are genuine Christians (in spite of all their sinful actions), and so Paul's warnings apply to all of us. We too must take him seriously and search our hearts: 'If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall' (1 Cor 10:12).

### Read Acts 18:1-18a

- **What was Paul's mission strategy in Corinth?**

- He started off by finding some helpers (Priscilla and Aquilla), and set up shop with them to earn some money. In his time off (Saturdays) he went to the synagogue and preached to the Jews (and God-fearing Greeks) who were there.
- Then backup arrives in the form of Silas and Timothy, and presumably they either bring or earn money so that Paul can devote himself to full-time preaching, focusing on the Jews. But they reject him, so he focuses on the Gentiles instead.
- After 18 months, the Jews launch a full-scale attack on Paul, and beat up the synagogue ruler (who's become a Christian). The proconsul isn't bothered either way, and Paul decides to stay longer.
- So basically, he preaches the gospel to anyone who'll listen for as long as possible!
- **What does this passage teach us about Corinth and its church?**
- There's a good deal of hostility to the gospel, mainly from the Jews, and some indifference as well (e.g. Gallio).
- The church is a mixed bunch of Jews and Gentiles, but probably mostly Gentiles (both Romans and Greeks). They've had a good amount of teaching – Paul's been with them for over 18 months – so you'd expect them to be pretty mature in their faith, compared to e.g. the Thessalonians, who'd only had Paul for 2-3 weeks. But as we'll see, this might not be the case...
- **What similarities do you notice between Corinth and 21st Century Manchester?**
- We too live in a melting-pot of cultures and religions. It's easy to get pulled away from the truth...
- We're surrounded by many different attitudes towards the gospel – anger, indifference, ignorance, interest... but mainly hostility.
- Our church is very mixed!
- We've had the privilege of lots of good teaching – but are we mature?

### Read 1 Corinthians 1:1-9

- **How do you recognise a genuine believer? What kind of things might make you suspect someone wasn't a real Christian?**
- This question is just meant to get us thinking, not cause a big debate...!
- A true believer will acknowledge that Jesus is God the Son and live with him as Lord of their life. This will be evidenced by the Holy Spirit being at work in their life.
- If someone claims that Jesus is their Lord, but their behaviour consistently denies this and they show no sign of repentance, then are they really trusting in Him?
- **What do we learn about Paul and the Corinthians in vv.1-3? Why are these things important to remember as we go on in 1 Corinthians?**
- Paul was a genuine apostle, called by God, and so he has authority to say what he says – God is speaking through him by his Spirit. The Corinthians need to listen to him! This is particularly important given the fact that they seem to have drifted away from Paul and his teaching, preferring their own wisdom.
- Sosthenes is with Paul – he's the synagogue ruler from Acts 18:17! We're not sure how he ended up in Ephesus, but the Corinthians know him, and his presence at the writing of the letter gives even greater weight to Paul's words.
- The Corinthians are a genuine church of God! They may have their problems, but at no point do they stop being God's people.

- They are sanctified in Christ, totally by his grace – he has done it by his death on the cross, and so it's real and sure.
- They're called to be saints ('holy ones') – this relates directly to being sanctified ('made holy') in Christ – it's God who has called them to be holy and enabled them to be holy by his grace. But they need to live out this sanctification – which they're not doing in many areas...
- They're united to God's people everywhere – the worldwide church of both Jews and Gentiles – everyone who has been called by God and enabled to call on him in return. This is a gentle nudge towards unity, foreshadowing what's coming next week.
- Jesus is their Lord! Their master, their top priority. This is the essence of the gospel – Jesus Christ is Lord! Only what he thinks matters, and his word is final – they need to remember this instead of going off track with their own ideas.
- God has blessed them, and continues to bless them, with grace and peace.
- So, in summary, Paul is speaking God's truth to the Corinthians in this letter, and they're genuine Christians. We shouldn't expect ourselves or other Christians to be perfect, or be judgemental of them or the Corinthians.
- **Why does Paul give thanks always for them (v.4)?**
- Because God has been gracious to them in Jesus! Paul isn't thanking the Corinthians for all these good things he's about to list, or flattering them – he's thanking God, because every good fruit in our lives is because of God's grace to us.
- **How is this grace seen in their lives (vv.5-9)?**
- They were enriched in all speech and knowledge as they received the gospel (and the empowering Holy Spirit!) (vv.5-6). As we'll see in chapter 12, the Corinthians had a bit of a thing for spiritual gifts, sometimes to the extent that they prized the gifts above the Giver. Many of these gifts (e.g. prophecy, tongues, wisdom – see 12:8-10) fall under the headings of 'speech' or 'knowledge'. So here, Paul is reminding the Corinthians that all of their precious gifts are from God, and cause for thanksgiving rather than pride. These gifts are evidence that they really have become Christians – that the testimony of Christ is confirmed among them.
- The result of receiving these gracious spiritual gifts is that they have *everything* they need to live for Jesus in the present, and to help them to wait for him to come back (v.7). They are rich indeed! But they need to remember that they haven't 'arrived' yet – they won't be perfect until Jesus returns – their spiritual gifts are a sign of God's grace, not necessarily their own maturity.
- By his grace, Jesus will get them to the last day and they'll be guiltless before him by his blood (v.8). These words are striking in the light of the rest of the letter – the Corinthians are very far from guiltless at the moment.
- And for further assurance, see v.9! In v.2 they were called, and now we're reminded that the 'caller' is faithful!
- So, in conclusion, they've received the gospel, and spiritual gifts to help each other to keep going, Jesus is sustaining them, and God is being faithful to his call! It's all by God's grace.
- **Re-read vv.4-9, asking yourself 'Could Paul say this about us?'**
  - **Have we got a firm grasp of the 'testimony about Christ'?**
  - **It is obvious that we're genuine Christians because people can see the work of the Spirit in our lives?**
  - **Are we waiting expectantly for Jesus to return?**

- **Are we relying on God to sustain us and present us guiltless on the last day? Or are we relying on ourselves?**

## **1 Corinthians 1:10-31: The trouble with boasting**

**Main point:** Quarrels and divisions are the result of prideful boasting, and run contrary to our identity in Christ.

**Main aim:** Root out the boastful attitudes in our hearts and replace them with boasting in Christ.

Having begun his letter with thanksgiving for God's grace in the Corinthians' lives, Paul now launches in to the main body of his argument, confronting them with the reports he's received about their quarrelling and divisions. He explains how these have no place in the life of a Christian, because our unity in Christ trumps all other differences. He also exposes the prideful heart attitudes beneath their actions, and challenges the Corinthians to show humility.

- **What are you tempted to boast about?**

**Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-17.**

- **What is the nature of the problem Paul is addressing here (vv.11-12)?**
- The Corinthians are quarrelling amongst themselves. They each seem to be holding up one leader as better than the others, perhaps because of who had baptised them: Paul himself, Apollos (who came to Corinth after Paul – see Acts 18), or Cephas (Peter, who had possibly visited Corinth with his wife – see 1 Cor 9:5).
  - **Why does Paul rebuke those saying 'I follow Christ' along with everyone else?**
  - They're part of the problem too! They're claiming to be above all this petty squabbling, but actually joining in by trying to win 'holy-points'. And they're inadvertently saying that the others aren't Christians at all – how arrogant!
- **Why do we as humans love to split into groups and quarrel with each other? How do we see it in our world, our friendships, our church?**
- We're proud! If we're different, there can be a pecking order! We like to be in the 'best' group, looking down on everyone else, and we need to quarrel in order to prove we're the best! Think about the different groups in the playground at school...
- Don't we love to put people down? Whether openly, or subtly so only we would notice – 'How could you be so stupid! I would never do a thing like that!' 'I told you my way would be quicker!' 'I always make my own stuffing'...
- Maybe we have certain preachers we think are better than others, or certain authors, or certain theological viewpoints or church traditions. We feel comfortable and superior in our belief that we're right and everyone else is wrong...
- **How does Paul suggest the Corinthians deal with the problem (v.10)?**
- He appeals to them in the name of Jesus! It's all about him, not about them and their petty one-up-manship.
- They are to agree, literally 'say the same thing'. How different this is to quarrelling, where we all say opposing things!

- There are to be no divisions among them. They're all on the same team!
- They are to be united in having the same mind and same judgement – the same opinion. There needs to be a shift in their thinking – see below for how Paul helps them with this. But it doesn't mean that they are all to be exactly the same and have no discussions about anything! What Paul has in mind is their heart attitude – they are to be humble and united, rather than prideful and divided.
- **What motivation does Paul give them for these actions (vv.13-17)?**
- Christ is not divided! They are all in Christ, all worshiping Christ, no matter who baptised them or explained the gospel to them.
- It's Jesus who died for them! Not their teachers! How ridiculous to get all fussed about a mere human messenger!
- They were baptised in the name of Jesus! It doesn't matter who did it! Paul's glad that he only baptised a few of them, so his name is only being raised up by a small number of silly people.
- It's not about people and how important or clever they are – it's about the power of the cross (v.17). This undergirds and overwhelms everything else.
- **How can we apply this? What if we don't agree?**
- It's about humbly following Jesus, putting him first in all our discussions and actions. It's ok to think that one preacher or author or style of music or style of church is more helpful than another, so long as you accept that others have a different viewpoint and you're prepared to submit to them out of love.
- Remember that we're united in Christ, who died for us. So long as we are holding on to him, all other differences can be surmounted because we're one family.

**Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-31. We're going to focus on the last part of this passage (vv.26-31) and how it helps with the problem of vv.10-17 this week. Next week we'll revisit vv.18-25 and look at chapter 2 as well, which is closely related.**

- **How do you think the Corinthians would have felt as they read vv.26-28?**
- Very humbled! Paul is reminding them who they really are – nobodies in the eyes of the world, and chosen by God purely because of his grace, not because they deserve it! In fact, you could almost say that God chose them *because* they were so foolish, weak and insignificant, so it would be obvious that any wisdom, strength or influence they have now is from him!
- **What does this teach us about God's way of working? Can you think of any other biblical examples?**
- God's choices are often the opposite of human choices – he sees things very differently. He chose the barren Abraham and Sarah, who were as good as dead, to be the ancestors of his people. He chose David, the youngest brother, the murderer and adulterer, to be king. He chose for his Son to be born in the poverty of a stable, not the luxury of a palace, and die in agony on a cross.
- **What is God's purpose in doing things in this unexpected, topsy-turvy this way (v.29, v.17)?**
- So that no one can boast before God! No one can say 'Look, God, I'm so great, so successful, so good, so important – so you've got to be impressed with me and save me!' It's obvious that he doesn't work that way. It's all of his initiative who gets saved, and so he gets all the glory.
- **How do vv.30-31 add to the argument?**

- It's because of God, and his grace alone, that we are in Christ Jesus – so if you're going to boast about anything, boast about him!
- **How would this help the Corinthians to be united, not divided?**
- Again, it refocuses them on God and what he has done for them in Christ. It makes them grateful instead of petty.
- **Do we view our own faith and our church in the light of these truths? Or are we proud that we've 'made it' to faith? That we're 'right' and others are 'wrong'? How should these verses challenge us?**

## 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:16: True wisdom

**Main point:** The gospel only makes sense when God graciously reveals it by his Spirit.

**Main aim:** Don't be waylaid by human wisdom, but keep relying on God's wisdom by the Spirit.

The Corinthians really valued wisdom. There were a lot of talented philosophers and speakers plying their trade in Corinth, and it was easy to be swayed by them. Even if the Corinthians weren't buying into their message, they were in danger of valuing their lofty style too highly. This was leading them to think that they'd gone beyond what Paul had taught them – the apparently simple truths of the gospel, which even a child could understand. But they're wrong. Paul takes great pains to point out to them that the gospel is God's wisdom, which far surpasses anything mere human beings can come up with. It might seem simple, but this is only because God has revealed it to them by his Spirit. To everyone else, it is a mystery so deep it defies comprehension, appearing as mere foolishness. The Corinthians, and we, should never think that we've outgrown the gospel, or try to improve upon it with human wisdom. That's madness! Instead, we should be incredibly grateful for God's gift of the Spirit of revelation, and pray that he would mercifully grant it to others as well.

**Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-25.**

- **What do non-Christians think about the message of the cross? How have you seen v.18 in action? How does it make you feel when people ridicule your faith?**
- Folly! Ridiculous! God sending his Son to die?! We don't need it, and it has no effect.
- It feels horrible! We hate looking stupid, and try to defend ourselves with whatever arguments we can think of! Or just run in the opposite direction!
- **What reasons does Paul give to explain the two truths of v.18 (vv.19-25)? Why is the message of the cross foolishness to unbelievers but wisdom to believers?**
- Vv.19-21 – God has made it impossible for human wisdom to work out the gospel – it's only through God-inspired preaching and teaching that we can be saved. We can work out *some* things about God from observing creation – that he exists and made everything (see Romans 1:19-20) – but this isn't enough for salvation.
- Vv.22-23 – The signs the Jews wanted were not what God had in mind – a crucified, servant Messiah wasn't their idea of a conquering king. They were ultimately relying on human wisdom instead of God's revealed truth. And so they 'stumbled' over Jesus – they lost their way, and lost their Messiah.

- And a dead God looks like folly to the Greeks/Gentiles/every rational person! How could that be part of an eternal, wise, good plan?
- Vv.24-25 – But if you're called, then God reveals the gospel to you, and the cross is powerful and wise – what looks like a foolish plan makes perfect sense, and the incredibly weak-looking cross is actually stronger than sin, death and the devil. Extraordinary!

#### Read 1 Corinthians 1:26-2:5.

- **We studied some of this last week, but it's worth another little look, because it explains *why* God does things the way he does. How does Paul prove 2:5 to the Corinthians? How does he show them that their faith is dependent on God's power, rather than on human wisdom?**
- 1:26-28 – Humanly speaking, most of the Corinthians were nobodies – foolish, weak, despised – if the gospel could be worked out by human wisdom, they certainly weren't going to be the ones to do it! It must have been God.
- 2:1-4 – Paul didn't preach in a flashy, convincing way – he wasn't like the great rhetoricians who toured the region. Instead he was weak, fearful, trembling, and implausible. Yet, the Corinthians believed! It must have been God!
- **Why does God do things this way (1:29, 2:5)?**
- So that he gets the glory! It's all about his power, which is revealed most clearly in the midst of weakness. It's like David and Goliath – Goliath was a huge, experienced warrior with state-of-the-art weapons and armour. David was young, small, had never been in a battle before, had no armour, and only a very simple weapon. If the Israelites had sent their best warrior, who was more of a match for Goliath, then they might have thought they'd won the victory in their own strength. But David's victory shows so clearly that God did it.
- **How does this challenge you as you relate to unbelievers? Do you ever try to hide your weaknesses and present a strong, wise, got-it-together front so that people will attribute any success you have to your own abilities? How could you make it more obvious that God is behind every blessing you have?**
- It's a tough one! We don't want to come across as super-holy, sanctimoniously saying 'Oh, it wasn't me, it was God' every time someone praises us. But we can be more honest with people about the things we're struggling with so that they have the opportunity to see how God changes us and helps us as we rely in him. This might at least make them think.

#### Read 1 Corinthians 2:6-16

- **Paul now resumes the argument he broke off from in 1:26. What is the 'wisdom' he is talking about in vv.6-10?**
- It's the gospel! All of God's plans for the whole of salvation history, centred on the cross of Jesus. It was decreed by God before time began, but he kept secret, hidden (v.7), until God revealed it by his Spirit (v.10).
- Human rulers couldn't get the hang of it at all, as proved by their role in actually crucifying Jesus (v.6, v.8) (though of course God in his sovereignty actually used their foolishness to accomplish his plans).
- The gospel is something no one can see, hear or even imagine unless God reveals it (v.9).
- The result of the gospel is glory not just for God, but for us as his beloved people (v.7, v.9)! It's just so crazy you couldn't make it up – that the one through whom all things were created would

become human, and allow himself to be killed, bearing our punishment for sin, so that we rebels could know eternal joy in his presence. No wonder it sounds like foolishness!

- **What is the role of the Holy Spirit in enabling us to understand the gospel (vv.10-13)?**
- God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit, is God himself, and so comprehends fully all of God's thoughts (v.11). And it's this same Spirit that is in us, enabling us to understand all that God wishes to reveal to us (v.12)! It couldn't happen any other way – there's got to be direct involvement by God's Spirit, otherwise the gospel is just words, and won't make any sense to us.
- **What is the contrast in vv.14-16?**
- It's between the 'natural' person, who finds it impossible to understand the gospel, and the 'spiritual' person, who has the Holy Spirit within them enabling them to understand the gospel.
- The word for 'discern' and 'judge' in vv.14-15 is the same. Hence the 'spiritual' person of v.15 is able to 'discern' all things – is able to see clearly truth from error, wisdom from folly, right from wrong – because God is giving them the ability. This is in contrast to the natural person of v.14, who lacks this spiritual discernment.
- When Paul says that the spiritual person 'is himself to be judged ('discerned') by no one' (v.15), he means that such a person is above mere human judgements, because the Holy Spirit within is wiser than mere human judgements. They have the wisdom on God – access to the very 'mind of Christ' by the Spirit (v.16)! So if these 'natural' people are saying Christians are fools – well, they're wrong. They're just unable to see it, because they lack that spiritual discernment.
- This is an encouragement to the Corinthians, and to us, in a world which laughs in our faces.
- But it's also a challenge – are we genuinely trusting God's wisdom, or relying on human wisdom? Do we think we're wise but we're actually fools?
- **What is there to thank God for from this passage? To say sorry for?**
- He has been so gracious to us! He took the initiative, gave us his Spirit, and revealed the truth of the gospel to us!
- Sometimes we're tempted to get bored of the gospel, of the cross, to look for the next spiritual high or the newest fad. But there is nothing beyond the cross. It is the expression of God's perfect wisdom.
- **How will this passage impact your personal evangelism?**
- We're not going to argue people into believing – they need the Spirit to reveal the truth to them, as he has to us. So we pray!! Of course God uses our conversations too, but it doesn't ultimately depend on us.

### **1 Corinthians 3: Leaders who build on Christ**

After the spiritual high at the end of chapter 2 ('But we have the mind of Christ'), we're back down to earth with a bump as Paul returns to the issues dividing the Corinthian church. As we saw back in 1:10-12, they've formed personality cults around various leaders, and are arguing with each other about whose group is the best. Paul helps them to see just how dangerous this can be, and seeks to help them to focus on God, rather than on their leaders. He also helps them to make wise judgements about the kind of leaders they should be following – there were plenty of false teachers about, preaching that the message of the cross wasn't enough, and advocating human wisdom instead. Paul is super-clear: Christ is the only foundation which will save us.

We make decisions all the time about who to listen to, whether it's going to church, an online sermon, a blog, a book... This passage helps us to recognise whether these preachers and speakers are getting it right. Secondly, it encourages us to keep Christian leaders in their proper place, and avoid the pitfalls of being a superfan. Thirdly, although most of us aren't church leaders, many of us do have a leadership role, perhaps in a small group, a children's group, CU, or in our families. How do we measure up?

**Main point:** Christ is the only true foundation for all people, all churches, and all teaching.

**Main aim:** Be united around Christ and build well on his foundation.

- **Who has influenced you spiritually over the years?**
- Parents, youth leaders, pastors, speakers, authors, friends, family, spouse, children...
- **The Corinthians thought of themselves as mature, influential Christians, priding themselves on their spiritual gifts. How does Paul rebuke them in vv.1-4?**
- He calls them 'infants in Christ'. When he first met them, they weren't ready for solid food, for mature teaching – he had to give them milk. Fair enough. But they're still like that! Still babies! (They'd have been crushed by this appraisal. But it would have made them listen!)
- This is because they're behaving as though they're still 'of the flesh' – still unbelievers – as evidenced by their jealousy and strife.
- They've made hardly any spiritual progress! They, who think themselves so mature, are spiritually stunted because of their prideful disagreements!
- It's what we saw back in chapter 1 – they're all backing a different leader, trying to be the 'best' – like children in the playground fighting about who's favourite teacher/toy/tv programme is the best. They're demonstrating 'merely human' behaviour (v.4) when in fact they have the Holy Spirit in them, and should therefore be super-humanly gracious and united.
- **Do we think of ourselves as spiritual babies or adults? How do we know?**
- Do our actions match up with what we believe? Are we humble and united? Or more concerned with looking good and being 'right'?
- It's easy to think that Christians who know a lot/talk the talk are the mature ones. But do their words and actions match up with their theology? Are they loving, hospitable, gentle, generous, honest, servant-hearted etc.? Are we?
- It's possible for a new Christian, a spiritual baby, to show more fruit and be growing towards maturity much faster than a hard-hearted, proud person who's been a believer for years. Look at the contrast between the Thessalonians, who'd had Paul teach them for only a couple of weeks, and the Corinthians, who'd had him for 18 months (see e.g. 1 Thess 1:2-10)!
- **Paul then goes on to teach the Corinthians why their jealousy and strife over their leaders is so foolish. How does Paul help the Corinthians to see their leaders rightly (vv.5-9)?**
- Paul likens the Corinthian church to a field – he, Apollos and others are the labourers, one planting, one watering, each getting wages from God, but it's God who actually makes the crops grow – turns the barren field into a harvest!
- It's all God's doing – the leaders are only doing what he's equipped them to do – they're just servants. He's the Master. It's ridiculous to get het up about the servant and ignore the Master! Like praising a car for giving you a lift, instead of the person driving it. Or thanking a vegetable for feeding you, instead of the person who cooked it.

- And all the servants are working together, for one goal – for the Master. They have different roles, but one aim. They're not in competition with each other! So it's silly for their followers to be!
- **Who is Paul warning in vv.10-17?**
- Paul is warning subsequent leaders who have come to Corinth, who may be preaching very eloquently and making lots of disciples, but whose message is not grounded in the cross of Jesus.
- **Who are the Christian 'leaders' in our lives (this is basically the same as the first question but now it's in context!)**
- Our pastors, our Bible study leaders, online preachers, Christian writers... but also parents teaching children, or all of us as we reach out with the gospel to unbelieving friends and family. Although this passage is aimed mainly at church leaders, we're all teachers and leaders to some extent, so we need to pay attention to this warning!
- **How does Paul use the building metaphor? Can you think of examples of a church leader building well? Of a church leader building badly?**
- Paul came to Corinth and laid the foundation – which can only be Christ. In other words, he taught the Corinthians the gospel. Without that foundation, it's impossible to be a Christian.
- But it's possible to build on that foundation well – with gold, silver and precious stones (imperishable things) – or badly – with wood, hay, or straw (perishable things). Fire will show which is which – the former will survive, the latter will be burnt up. The teacher will still go to heaven, if Christ is their foundation, but their works will not be deserving of reward (there'll be no 'Well done, good and faithful servant' (Matthew 25:21)).
- Building 'well' on Christ might be things like:
  - Not trying to make yourself look good, but instead pointing to Christ.
  - Speaking the truth (in love) when people don't want to hear it.
  - Caring well for people, self-sacrificially serving them.
  - Living with integrity – practising what you preach.
  - All teaching should be geared towards helping others to be grounded and built up in Christ.
- These things will lead to fruitful, imperishable ministry which is not burnt up, but rewarded.
- Building 'badly' on Christ might be things like:
  - Causing people to focus on yourself rather than on Christ, e.g. a youth group which thrives under a charismatic leader but has little Bible teaching.
  - Making people dependent on you instead of on God, so that when you leave, their faith disintegrates.
  - Telling people only what they want to hear, and so diminishing or altering the gospel.
  - Living a double life – seeming all holy when people are watching, but indulging in sin in private.
  - Focusing on side issues to the detriment of Christ.
- These things will lead to barren, perishable ministry – no lasting fruit, and no reward.
- **What is the warning in vv.16-17?**
- God *really* loves his church, and dwells in it by his Spirit. If a leader is so corrupt as to spiritually destroy the church, grieving the Holy Spirit, then he also will be destroyed. There was a real danger of this happening in Corinth, because the leaders had got so obsessed with 'wisdom' and forgotten the heart of the gospel.

- **How do vv.18-21a help to answer the problem of vv.1-4 in the light of vv.5-17?**
- The problem of vv.1-4 was that the Corinthians *thought* they were mature, i.e. wise, but it was wisdom of ‘this age’ – human wisdom, which is prideful and only causes divisions. They needed to become ‘fools’, i.e. recognise their helplessness and humble themselves before God, in order to be truly ‘wise’ (v.18).
- God is going to expose the foolishness of human wisdom one day (vv.19-20), and anyone who thinks otherwise is deceiving himself (v.18). So it’s no use boasting in men (v.21a)! God will see straight through your petty one-up-man-ship!
- True wisdom will cause you to value God rather than his servants (v.7).
- True wisdom will cause you to build on Christ and only pay attention to teachers who help you to do that (vv.10-11).
- **How do vv.21-23 give further motivation for unity?**
- It’s God who gives us everything we need – he gives us our leaders, and he controls life and death and all of time and space. We belong to him in Christ. Why would we get all caught up in boasting about various leaders and causing divisions? God is SO much bigger than all of that. It’s all about him.
- **How would you summarise Paul’s argument in this chapter?**
- You’re spiritual babies, as demonstrated by your divisions over your leaders (vv.1-4).
- Remember that your leaders are just God’s servants – be more concerned about him, not them (vv.5-9).
- And don’t be led astray by teachers who sound impressive but aren’t building you up in Christ. They’ll have to give an account for their actions (vv.10-17).
- Instead, rely on God, who gives you everything you need (vv.18-23).
- **What has particularly challenged you from this chapter? Do you need to change your view of your leaders/those who spiritually influence you? How can you encourage them? Are you ever tempted to feed divisions caused by different leaders? Are you building well on the foundation of Christ as you lead others (if that’s a relevant question for your group)?**

## 1 Corinthians 4: The danger of arrogance

This chapter will make much more sense to us if we remember the background of what’s been going on in Corinth. Paul planted a church there, stayed for 18 months, and then moved on. Apollos then came along and led them for a while, but it seems he too has moved on. Now there are various leaders vying for position, some of whom have bought into fashionable rhetoric in a big way. The Corinthians are comparing them with what they remember of Paul, and he’s not coming off well, because he spoke simply and focused on the cross, which looks pretty weak. Here is chapter 4, Paul is reminding the Corinthians of his authority as an apostle and admonishing them for their worldly arrogance in thinking they could go beyond the truth he’s taught them.

**Main point:** With God, success is about humble faithfulness, not worldly acclaim.

**Main aim:** Fill your mind with the truth about what God thinks, rather than buying into the arrogant lies of the world.

- **How would you define 'successful' ministry?**
- A growing church, people being converted, lives being changed?
- **How do vv.1-2 relate back to chapter 3? How should we rightly think about our leaders?**
- V.1 relates to 3:5-9. Leaders are nothing more than servants – but nothing less than servants of Christ! It's not about the leader, it's about Christ! And leaders are simply stewards – they have nothing of their own, it all comes from God and is for God. But they're stewards of the mysteries of God – the revealed truths of the gospel.
- V.2 relates to 3:12-15 – leaders will have to give an account of themselves, and be rewarded (or not) accordingly. An unfaithful steward is no use at all!
- So, as we saw last week, leaders have a huge responsibility to build well on the foundation of Christ. We should support them as they do this, but if they're not doing it, if they're unfaithful, we shouldn't blindly follow them just because they're charismatic.
- Paul has shown that he has been building well on the foundation of Christ, and so the Corinthians should respect him as God's faithful servant and steward.
- **Having told the Corinthians what they *should* think of him, Paul he now goes on to explain his own personal attitude towards the Corinthians' poor opinion of him. What is this attitude (vv.3-4)?**
- He doesn't care what they think! He's not aware of any wrong he's done them, but that isn't why he's not bothered – he's not self-justifying ('I do not even judge myself').
- No, the only person whose opinion matters to him is God, because God is in his rightful place as Lord of Paul's life. Paul is *God's* servant, not the Corinthians', and not his own! And he knows that God 'acquits' him, that God is pleased with him, because Jesus has died for all his sins and given him righteousness instead (this isn't in the passage but it's the implication, and it's also where Tim Keller goes with it in his excellent little book *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness*).
- **How would your life be different if you had the same attitude as Paul towards the opinions of others? If you focused on how God sees you through Jesus, rather than on others see you or how you see yourself?**
- Freedom! No more glancing around to see how people are reacting to what you say/do/how you look. No more self-obsessed navel-gazing/feeling sorry for yourself. We'd all just get out there and do what God wants us to do a lot more! We're his servants – not anyone else's, not even our own servant – and so his opinion is the only one that ultimately matters. And his opinion is that we're his beloved children, forgiven and righteous through Jesus!
- **What is Paul's conclusion in v.5?**
- The Corinthians were comparing and judging their various leaders (including Paul and Apollos) in an arrogant and superior way, taking upon themselves something only God is qualified to do! As we saw in chapter 3, only God ultimately knows what our hearts and motives are truly like, and he will reveal all with fire. So the Corinthians, and we, should be very careful and humble when trying to work out if someone is a godly leader or not.
- Paul may not care what they think of him for his sake, but he certainly does care for their sake!
- **What is it that Paul wants the Corinthians to learn in vv.6-7?**
- V.6 – They're puffed up with pride over their various leaders, many of whom aren't building well on Christ – they're making up their own stuff instead, going beyond what God says. Paul has reminded the Corinthians that he and Apollos are examples of faithful stewards, who have

proclaimed to them the message of the cross. That's what's important. And that's what leads to unity.

- V.7 – Paul is reminding them that they're nothing special! Everything they have is a gift from God. They have nothing at all to boast about! So how can they be puffed up and arrogantly think they're better than others? Better than him?
- **As we'll see in chapter 15, the Corinthians were pretty confused about the resurrection. Some of them thought that there wasn't one (15:12) – that they'd already peaked spiritually, and could enjoy the blessings of the new creation in the here and now. That partly explains why they were so arrogant! To help them to see how ridiculous they're being, Paul sets up an ironic contrast between the apostles and the Corinthians-as-they-see-themselves (vv.8-13). What is this contrast, and what point is Paul making?**
- Corinthians: They have all they want; they're rich, kings, wise, strong, honoured.
- Paul and apostles: They're the most despised spectacle imaginable – like those at the end of a Roman procession who are about to be publicly executed (which many of them were!); they're fools, weak, held in disrepute, hungry, thirsty, poorly dressed, homeless, labouring, reviled, persecuted, slandered, the scum of the world.
- Paul's point is that the Corinthians have got it wrong! If the *apostles* are living like this, and they're the ones whom Jesus appointed to found the church, then surely suffering is to be the norm for Christians? The Corinthians shouldn't be embarrassed by Paul or look down on him because he's suffering. Instead, they should be challenged to be like him – to put the cross of Christ above their comfort, above their reputation, above their flashy new leaders, above all. This will also help them to understand the resurrection and new creation properly! We won't always be suffering – it's the shadows before the glory.
- **If you were to list off the things which characterised your life, would it look more like Paul's list or the Corinthians'? How does this challenge you?**
- **What is Paul's motivation for saying these rather harsh words (vv.14-17, 21)?**
- Love! He's their spiritual father, and he longs for them to flourish. He's not doing it just to make them feel bad!
- It's as though he's trying to startle them out of their comfortable smugness. The situation in Corinth is really bad, and he's had to use shock tactics to get their attention. He begs them to imitate him – and he's held nothing back when explaining what that looks like (vv.8-13)!
- He even sent Timothy to help them, probably at great personal cost. It's all done out of genuine, agonised love.
- **What does Paul hope to prove when he visits Corinth (vv.18-20)?**
- It sounds like there might be a bit of a show-down with some of the dodgy leaders – they talk the talk, but they don't actually have the Spirit's power, and so they'll be unmasked.
- The Kingdom of God isn't about showiness, but God's power at work!
- **Think back to the question we asked at the start. How does God define 'successful' ministry?**
- It's right there in v.2 – faithfulness! That's success in God's eyes. Paul's ministry might have looked weak and pathetic to the Corinthians (vv.8-13), but they shouldn't have been measuring it in terms of how impressive and popular Paul was. What matters is that Paul was a faithful steward of the mysteries of God!
- Faithfulness to the gospel of the cross is more important than eloquence or wisdom or charisma or having a large congregation or a nice building or lots of money. So many Christians church-

hop, looking for a preacher who will wow them – when what they really need is the Bible clearly explained.

- **How does ‘success=fidelity’ encourage you as you seek to minister to those around you?**
- **How does this chapter help you to humbly see yourself aright?**
- Vv.3-4 – only God’s judgement ultimately matters, and he see you as right in Christ.
- V.7 – everything we have is a gift from God, so we have nothing to boast about.
- V.13 – we may be seen as the scum of the world, but we’re in good company – with the apostles, and indeed the Lord Jesus.

## **1 Corinthians 5: The church and sin**

We’re starting a new section of 1 Corinthians today. After 4 chapters of wrangling about wisdom, foolishness, leaders and divisions, Paul now begins to deal with some issues of church discipline. Chapter 5-6 are a unit, and the overarching problem is that the Corinthians have a wrong view of sin. They seem to think that as Christians, we can do whatever we like, because we’re free from the law and saved by grace. It’s the same issue Paul was dealing with in Romans 6! But here the specific manifestation is in the form of sexual sin. More on that next week! For now, we need to focus on why sin is such a big deal for the church, and how it should be dealt with.

**Main point:** Sin is incompatible with our identity as God’s redeemed people and so poisons the church.

**Main aim:** Don’t just take your own sin seriously – take responsibility for watching over your brothers and sisters.

- **Can you think of a time when unrepentant sin has caused big problems for a church? How was it dealt with?**
- It might be someone who went off the rails and caused others to doubt their faith, or someone who committed a crime, or an addiction which got out of control...
- **Read vv.1-2. What sin has the man committed? How have the Corinthians sinfully responded to his sin? What does this tell us about their view of sin?**
- There’s a Christian man having an affair with his step-mother (see Leviticus 18:8). It’s so bad that even the pagans living in Corinth knew it was a no-no – and they permitted just about anything!
- And the Corinthian church responds by tolerating it! They seem to think anything goes. They’re arrogant, as we saw last week – they think they have all the answers. ‘We’re saved by grace, and so it doesn’t matter what we do.’ They might even have been proud of their inclusiveness – ‘Look at us, look how great Christianity is – you can do whatever you want and still be accepted.’
- **How do we see this attitude to sin in the church today?**
- We see it in ourselves first of all! We want an easy life – and it’s much easier to turn a blind eye to sin rather than confront someone. Our prevailing culture is also one where tolerance has been elevated above pretty much everything else, and that filters in to the church.
- **What does Paul tell them to do about this problem (vv.2-5)?**
- Mourn (v.2)! Sin is wrong and grieves God! It’s incompatible with his holiness! The Corinthians need to understand this!
- Remove the man from their fellowship (v.2). Paul then goes on to explain this process...

- They're to gather together in Jesus' name, and pronounce Paul's decision of judgement (vv.3-4). (It's a bit difficult to understand what exactly Paul means here, but it seems that because of Paul's position as spiritual father of the Corinthian church, he had the Holy Spirit's authority to carry out this verdict and sentence.)
- Deliver him to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved (v.5). What does this mean?! It's probably a further explanation of what Paul has already said in v.2 – removing the man from the Spirit-filled fellowship of the church and throwing him out into the world, which is Satan's realm. The destruction of the flesh may be physical – there are examples in the Bible where God immediately judges sin by physically afflicting or killing the person (e.g. Ananias and Sapphira, Acts 5, Herod, Acts 12) – but these are rare. More likely, it's a destruction of the spiritual 'flesh' – the sinful nature. The idea is that the man will be shocked to his senses by being expelled from the fellowship, and recognise his sin for what it is. This will enable him to repent and be able to return to the fellowship.
- **What metaphor does Paul use in vv.6-8? What's his point?**
- It's a Passover illustration (see Exodus 13:3-10). Before Passover, the Jews cleared all the old yeast out of their houses and made unleavened bread for a week. Then they'd start afresh with new yeast after Passover. Paul is saying that Jesus's death inaugurated a fresh start – the old yeast of sin is gone. Why would we let it back in? And if we do, it'll spread like wildfire through the whole church. This man must be removed!
- Sincerity and truth should be what characterise God's people, not the malice and evil (e.g. this sexual immorality) that's evident among the Corinthians. They're acting as though Jesus hasn't died at all!
- **What is Paul's command in vv.9-13? (Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18:15-17 might be helpful here too.)**
- Paul extends the command of vv.1-5 to include all kinds of sins. If anyone claims to be a Christian but is continuing in unrepentant sin, they are to be excluded from the fellowship. That's our responsibility as Christians...! We're not even to eat with them – which may simply mean we're not to have them round for meals in a friendly way, or it might be a reference to eating the Lord's Supper with them, or both.
- In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus explains what an unrepentant sinner looks like. It's someone who won't listen to his brother, won't listen to additional witnesses, and won't listen to the church as a whole. And so the only option is to expel them from the fellowship.
- So it's important to remember that this is the last in a long line of possible sanctions – we shouldn't be throwing people out of church for every little sin! (Apart from anything else, there'd be no-one left!)
- **How do vv.6-8 help to explain why Paul takes this hard line?**
- It sounds terribly harsh! But Paul has made his point with the yeast – sin infects everything so quickly. For the sake of the whole church, it must be purged.
- **What exception does he make? Why?**
- But it's totally fine to associate with unbelievers who are doing these things – Jesus certainly did! We are to be salt and light in the world! How would anyone become a Christian if we could never speak to them?
- Often we're tempted to get this the wrong way round – we're accepting of sin in the church, but judgemental of those outside! Paul reminds us that it should be the other way round! We can't

expect those outside to act in a Christian way! But we should expect it of those who have accepted Jesus as their Passover lamb.

- **What implications does this have for us? Under what circumstances should we removing someone from our fellowship?**
- First of all, we need to examine our own hearts for unrepentant sin!
- This kind of church discipline is for situations where the person knows they are sinning but they're unrepentant, and it's contaminating the whole church. And it's meant to be remedial, not punitive – the idea is that they'll miss the fellowship of being close to God and his people, and so repent and return.
- It involves us as a church making judgements about members of the church family! We don't like this idea, because it's so counter-cultural – tolerance and 'live and let live' are the order of the day. But it's actually the most loving way to respond to the sin of others, because it should turn them back to Christ. (If we see a child running into the road, we try to stop them!)
- The Anglican Communion has sort of done this with The Episcopal Church of America – they've been disciplined for accepting gay marriage (see <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/ens/2016/01/14/majority-of-primates-call-for-temporary-episcopal-church-sanctions/>).
- The trouble is that churches can be so wishy-washy and far from God that people don't miss the fellowship at all, and so don't want to return...

## **1 Corinthians 6: Why not sin?**

Corinth was a pagan city where promiscuousness was viewed as perfectly good and normal – you could sleep with prostitutes, other people's spouses, men, women, anyone you fancied. It would have been really difficult for new converts to get used God's way of living. That's why Paul seems to single sexual immorality out so often in his letters – not because it's a worse sin than others, but because it was so culturally relevant. As it still is today! But sexual immorality was just the tip of the iceberg in Corinth. In this chapter, Paul exposes various different sins which were rife in the church, and shows the Corinthians why their lifestyle matters.

**Main point:** Sin is incompatible with our identity as God's redeemed people.

**Main aim:** Flee *from* sin, *towards* Christ.

**Read 1 Corinthians 6:1-8.**

- **What problem is Paul addressing here?**
- Members of the church have grievances against each other, but instead of sorting it out themselves, as a church community, they are appealing to secular law courts, which were probably corrupt.
- These grievances are probably connected to money and property, as Paul mentions being defrauded in v.7. In other words, they're issues which it is possible to settle 'out of court' – not crimes like murder which require the civil authorities to step in.
- **How do vv.1-3 relate back to what Paul has just said in 5:12? What is the irony in what the Corinthians have been doing?**

- In chapter 5, he was saying how we are to make judgements regarding those inside the church. But it turns out that the Corinthians are so incapable of doing so that they've resorted to secular law courts to resolve their differences. They're getting those who are still walking in darkness to enlighten them! It's pathetic!
- Paul points out that at the last day, the church will be involved in Jesus' final judgement of all things. We don't really know what that means, but surely if we're going to take part in that great judgement, we should be able to manage comparatively trivial cases in the meantime?!
- **How else does Paul help the Corinthians to see how ridiculous they're being (vv.4-8)?**
- Vv.4-6: They're the church, they're believers – i.e. they have God's wisdom – why would they go to those outside the church, who only have human wisdom? It's shameful! They thought they were so mature, so wise, but their actions betray them.
- Vv.7-8: It's bad enough that they're falling out! They could at least deal with it well! Better to suffer wrong than go to a public court against your brother. That's a terrible witness for the church!
- **Why do you think the Corinthians were doing this? Why is it so difficult to resolve differences even/especially with other Christians?**
- They weren't relying on God's word or Spirit, and so weren't acting with integrity. And they suspected the same attitude in everyone else, so they couldn't trust each other.
- They were just in it for what they could get! They weren't putting the needs of others above themselves, or seeking to glorify God in everything they did.
- It's difficult trying to resolve things because it involves compromise and forgiveness, and we might come off badly! And as Christians, self-righteousness can get in the way – 'I'm definitely in the right, it's up to him to admit he's wrong!' And we're tempted to draw other people in and create 'sides', causing the whole thing to blow up!
- **How should we apply Paul's teaching here?**
- When mistreated by another Christian, make every effort to be reconciled to each other 'in house'. This might involve sacrificial forgiveness, taking the hit for the sake of unity. (But if it's a very serious thing, then Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18:15-17 is helpful!)
- We should be helping each other to do this, acting as mediators and pointing each other to God's word.

### **Read 1 Corinthians 6:9-11**

- **How do these verses follow on from v.8? Who are the 'unrighteous'?**
- Paul is warning the Corinthians. They've been wronging and defrauding each other (v.8) – which is unrighteous behaviour (v.9)! Although they've been justified ('declared righteous') by Jesus' blood (v.11), they're not acting like it. They're acting in the same unrighteous way they used to (vv.9-10). This is extremely dangerous. If their behaviour is indistinguishable from the 'unrighteous', then are they true believers at all? The unrighteous won't inherit the Kingdom!
- **How does v.11 motivate us and the Corinthians to say 'no' to unrighteousness?**
- We've been washed – our sin is gone, we are free from guilt, and clean in God's sight.
- We've been sanctified – made holy, acceptable to God, set apart to live for him.
- We've been justified – declared right before God, because Jesus has taken the punishment for our sin.

- This is who we are. Sin is incompatible with this identity. It's like being given a lovely expensive new dress/suit for a wedding and immediately ruining it by rolling in a pig sty. It's useless, wasted, shameful. That's what we're doing when we sin – throwing God's beautiful gift of righteousness back in his face.

### **Read 1 Corinthians 6:12-20.**

- **What problem is Paul addressing here (vv.15-16)?**
- Some of the Corinthians were sleeping with prostitutes, thinking that as Christians, it didn't matter what they did with their bodies. 'Sex is just an appetite, and we should eat when we're hungry...'
- **Why might the Corinthians think it was ok (vv.12-13)? How do we see these attitudes in our society/church?**
- There are two likely reasons behind the Corinthians' attitude. Firstly, as seen in v.12, the Corinthians had a distorted view of the gospel of grace. 'We're saved by faith, not by works, so our actions are irrelevant. We can do whatever we like – it won't affect our salvation.'
- Secondly, as seen in v.13, the Corinthians were surrounded by ideas from Greek philosophy, which taught that the body is bad, and will be destroyed – only the soul matters, because it's eternal and will one day be released from the 'evil' body. (The quotation in v.13 may include 'and God will destroy both one and the other', meaning that all our bodily appetites are ultimately irrelevant because they'll be destroyed.) This means it doesn't matter what you do with your body, because it doesn't affect the soul and has no eternal significance. So sleep with whoever you want!
- There's very much an attitude in society that sex is just an appetite, and so long as it's between consenting adults, anything goes. It doesn't affect your soul or carry deeper significance. And yet we see the brokenness and heartache that sex leaves behind...
- Prostitutes aren't such an issue for the church today, but extra-marital sex certainly is, so we need to pay attention here! Are we too quick to go to grace, and failing to root out sin effectively? 'I'll just do it, God will forgive me afterwards...'
- **How does Paul help them to see their error?**
- V.12: Paul is quoting the Corinthians – perhaps Chloe's people (1:11) had told him what they'd been saying. It's true that we are free from the law, but we are now slaves to Christ! And so if anything is unhelpful, or in danger of enslaving us and drawing us away from Christ, we must reject it! Sex outside of marriage is not only unhelpful – it poisons our relationship with God.
- V.13: Paul is again quoting the Corinthians, who, as we've seen, think of sex purely in terms of a bodily function, like eating. But Paul points out that the body has a much higher purpose than eating or sex – it's for the Lord, and so what we do with it matters.
- V.14: Our bodies are eternal! This is a real newsflash for the Corinthians! The same body we have now will be raised up and live forever! This is what happened to Jesus! His old body wasn't still lying in the tomb after he'd risen – it was that body which was raised. It was changed, but it was the same one. So what we do with our bodies now matters! We're going to spend eternity in them!
- Vv.15-17: As Christians, our bodies are joined to Christ. But in sexual immorality, our bodies are joined to a 'prostitute'. There's an incompatibility there. Christ can't be joined to us if we're joined to a prostitute... This is serious!

- And there's no such thing as casual sex – when two become one flesh, there's a spiritual connection, just as in marriage (which is what it's meant for). Ripping that apart is soul-destroying, whether we realise it or not.
- V.18: Sexual sin goes to the very core of who we are, whether we realise it or not.
- Vv.19-20: Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit! They belong to God – he's bought them with Jesus' blood. It's as if our bodies are on loan from God! Like a really precious library book. We need to treat them well and bring them back to him in as good condition as we can!
- **How does this chapter help us to flee from sin? Which sins do you need to flee from this week?**
- It's reminded us of who we are in relation to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We belong to God the Father, we're joined to Jesus, and we're temples of the Holy Spirit. How could we jeopardise that?
- Sexual sin in particular cannot be negotiated with – we must flee at the first temptation, because our wills are very weak. Is there any relationship, inappropriate friendship, impure thought-life, pornography etc. you need to flee from?

## **1 Corinthians 7: To marry or not to marry?**

We're starting another new section today, in which Paul starts dealing with the issues brought up by the Corinthians' letter. Every time he says 'now, concerning...', he's responding to one of their queries or comments (see 7:1, 7:25, 8:1, 12:1, 16:1, 16:12). The topic for chapter 7 is marriage. It might be a good idea to particularly focus on the parts that are most relevant to your group, but it's important for all of us to understand what Paul says to everyone too, firstly because we might change from one marital status to another, and secondly because it'll help us to support each other. We need to be really sensitive too – there may be issues in our groups that we're not aware of.

Sometimes Paul says things like 'the Lord is saying this, not me' (v.10), and other times 'I'm saying this, not the Lord' (v.12, v.25). What's going on? It's all to do with what Jesus said while he was on earth. He taught about marriage and divorce, as recorded in Matthew 5:32, 19:9, Mark 10:11-12 and Luke 16:18. But he didn't cover everything, e.g. what you do if you become a Christian but your spouse doesn't. So Paul is applying Jesus' principles to the Corinthian context. And it's authoritative, because Paul is a divinely inspired apostle.

In chapters like this, full of instructions, it's easy to get bogged down and forget the reason. So don't overlook the little reminders here and there, e.g. v.7, v.15, v.23, v.31. We were bought at a price, and now we're free to live a life pleasing to God, for his glory. This isn't a list of prohibitions and rules meant to burden us, but a wonderful revelation of God's good will for our lives! So try to make sure you leave time to look at vv.17-24, even if it means leaving out something else, because it ties everything together and teaches us to be content in the life God has given us.

**Main point:** Both marriage and singleness are good gifts from God, but remember that marriage is not eternal.

**Main aim:** Examine whether you are living out your marital status God's way – in faith, contentment, and obedience – rather than idolising marriage.

- **How are marriage and singleness viewed in our society? In the church?**
- Although marriage might not be so important in society nowadays, relationships certainly are – singleness is pitied, seen as weird and sad. There’s a feeling that everyone needs someone else to fulfil them, and marriage is still very much the ideal, the fairy-tale.
- But marriage isn’t seen as a life-long commitment any more. ‘If it works, fine, but if it gets difficult, then you should just get divorced and find someone else.’ I have a teacher friend who’s just got married, and shockingly, many of her colleagues have said things to her like ‘Enjoy it while it lasts, you’ll be filing for divorce before long.’ They speak from bitter experience.
- Can the church be guilty of over-emphasising, even idolising marriage, making single people feel miserable and excluded?

### **Read 1 Corinthians 7:1-7.**

- **What problem is Paul addressing (v.1)?**
- It seems the Corinthians were a bit confused about sex (v.1)! In chapter 6, we saw the idea that the body was evil and only the soul mattered – hence it didn’t matter if you slept around. Here, the idea of the body being evil has led to the opposite extreme – asceticism, where all bodily pleasures are to be avoided because they’ll contaminate the soul. As a result, some of the Corinthians thought the best option for everyone was celibacy, whether married or not.
- This runs totally counter to God’s plan for marriage! But we see it in the church too – sex being viewed as something dirty, a necessary evil, with celibacy hailed as super-spiritual.
- **How does Paul correct their wrong understanding of sex (vv.2-7)?**
- He explains that it’s right and good for married couples to enjoy God’s gift of sex – indeed, it’s an obligation. ‘God is against sex without marriage, but also against marriage without sex.’
- V.2 isn’t saying that everyone should be married! ‘Have’ has sexual connotations – ‘each man should *have* his *own* wife’ – meaning that husbands and wives *should* be having sex with each other, (and with no-one else!)
- Vv.3-4 are pretty controversial in today’s world – as they were in Corinth! Husbands and wives are to put the needs of their spouse above their own. It’s not about ‘how I feel’ but ‘how I can serve?’
- V.5: If married couples stop having sex, Paul warns that the devil will try his best to tempt them to look elsewhere, and so commit adultery (in action or in thought). It’s ok to fast temporarily, but not for long! This may relate back to chapter 6 – a spouse who’d given up on sex might have tempted their partner to seek prostitutes instead.
- V6: The ‘this’ in v.6 is probably referring back to what Paul’s just said about marriage in v.5 – he’s not been commanding people to refrain from sex in order to pray – he’s just been saying that it’s ok if you want to.
- V.7: Paul is acknowledging that it’s normal for people to be married. He thinks singleness is better for him, but singleness is just the gift God has given him. God gives marriage to other people, and that’s good too. (By ‘gift’ he doesn’t mean ‘ability’, but rather a state of being. Married people shouldn’t act as though they have the gift of singleness by being celibate – just as single people shouldn’t act as though they have the gift of marriage by having sex.)
- **If you’re married, how does this section challenge you?**

### Read 1 Corinthians 7:10-16.

- **What is the overriding principle when it comes to divorce (vv.10-11)?**
- As Christians, it's just not an option. Jesus taught this too (e.g. Matthew 19:6), as Paul affirms. Both Paul and Jesus go on to qualify this statement, because they know that life in a fallen world is broken and messy, but marriage is *meant* to be a lasting covenant.
- **What instructions does Paul give for Christians who are married to non-Christians (vv.12-16)?**
- Vv.12-13: Many of the Corinthians had come to faith when they were already married, and so didn't have the option of choosing a believing husband or wife. Some of their spouses hadn't joined them in their new faith, and so they were wondering if they should divorce them – did being married to an unbeliever make them unclean? Was it a sin? Paul's answer is clear – remaining married is the best option, so long as their spouse agrees.
- V.14: Paul isn't saying that non-Christian spouses are saved through their spouse's faith, but rather that they are 'sanctified' – set apart, placed in a 'holy' environment. In the Old Testament, if a holy object or person touched something unclean, it would be contaminated. But here, the Christian has a cleansing effect on the rest of the family, rather than the 'uncleanness' of the non-Christians contaminating the Christian. And by living with a Christian, who is praying for them and loving them sacrificially, they may well come to faith themselves.
- Vv.15-16: However, if the unbelieving spouse wants to separate, then the Christian is to let them go, rather than create strife. They might never become a Christian anyway (v.16), and forcing them to stay in a marriage they don't want probably won't be the best way of helping them.
- Some Christians understand 'the brother or sister is not enslaved' to mean that the Christian is free to marry again if deserted by their (unbelieving?) spouse. They see this as being the same as Jesus' condition in Matt 19:9 that if your spouse commits adultery, you are free to remarry. But Paul may just mean that the brother or sister is not bound to keep the marriage going – he may not be addressing remarriage here at all. What do you think?
- **What are the implications for a Christian who wants to get divorced because their marriage is difficult? Or for a Christian who *has* chosen to get divorced because their marriage was difficult?**
- This is such a tough pastoral issue, and it affects us all in one way or another. Divorce is such an accepted part of life now, so what Jesus and Paul are saying is radical – you mustn't give up on your marriage if it's within your power. If your spouse commits adultery (or abandons you?) then you are free to divorce, but if they still want to be married to you, then you should stay with them, no matter how hard it is. No matter if you fall in love with someone else!
- If you are divorced, the biblical option is to be working towards reconciliation, if neither of you has remarried. It's radical!
- We need to support and protect marriages.
- There is forgiveness! And grace! Divorce isn't an unforgiveable sin, nor is remarriage!

### Read 1 Corinthians 7:8-9, 25-40.

- **What is Paul's view of singleness? How does he counsel those who are single? Why?**
- Paul has an extremely high view of singleness (although he's most definitely not an ascetic!) We've seen that already in v.7 – singleness is a good gift from God, just as marriage is. It may not

be a permanent gift – God may exchange it for marriage – but it should be used and enjoyed as long as it lasts. Very counter-cultural!

- Vv.8-9 are a sort of introduction to the topic, which Paul then expands on in vv.25-40. Basically, he seems to be ranking the options:
  1. contented singleness is the best option
  2. getting married is second best but still a very good gift from God
  3. burning with passion in discontented singleness is a bad option
- The question is what should you do if you're struggling with option 3? Try desperately to move to option 2? What if that just doesn't seem to be happening? What if there's no-one to marry, or you're homosexual, or you have health problems which prevent marriage? How can you move to option 1? It's a massive struggle! But the rest of what Paul says might help us to appreciate the gift of singleness for the blessing it really is.
- V.25: The word 'betrothed' throughout the passage is actually 'virgins', so it seems Paul is talking about single people in general, whether betrothed or not. Jesus didn't give any specific instructions about this but Paul, as an apostle, is qualified to give God's judgement on it (and see Matthew 19:10-12).
- Vv.26-28: Scholars disagree about what 'the present distress' might be. It could be something specifically Corinthian, e.g. a famine, but more likely it's the time we live in now, between Jesus' ascension and his return – a time of persecution and sacrifice (isn't that a challenge to us in the West?!) Because of this distress, Paul counsels the Corinthians to remain in their present state, though it is certainly no sin to marry.
- Vv.28, 32-35: Paul now gives his reasons for why singleness is to be preferred to marriage: marriage brings 'worldly troubles'. It isn't therefore a 'less holy' option, but a man who is married has a duty and a desire to focus his time and energy on loving his wife and family – this is what God calls him to do. A single man, on the other hand, has much more time and energy to devote to e.g. evangelism, disciplining younger Christians, serving the church, studying theology.
- Single people considering marriage should be aware of this and go into marriage with their eyes open!
- Vv.29-31: Paul is using rhetorical language here to make his point: don't live as though this world is all there is – it's passing away! Of course husbands are to love their wives (Eph 5:25), but they are to remember that marriage is temporary, and their relationship with Jesus is the only eternal thing they have.
- Vv.36-38: In light of what he's just said, Paul re-emphasises his application points: it's ok to get married if it'll keep you from sinning, if it'll help you to serve God more fully, but you'll do even better to stay single.
- **What instructions does Paul give for widows (vv.8-9, 39-40)?**
- It's fine for them to remarry, so long as it's a Christian! (This applies to single people seeking marriage too!)
- But it's even better if they remain single!
- **How does this section encourage you/others who are single?**

**Read 1 Corinthians 1:17-24.**

- **What is the general principle here? How does it apply to marriage and singleness?**

- Remember that some of the Corinthians thought that changing their circumstances would make them more spiritual, e.g. refraining from sex within marriage or even getting divorced. But this actually reveals that they were idolising their circumstances, putting all their energy into changing their situation in life instead of focusing on living for God in the circumstances he's given them.
- Paul uses the examples of circumcision and slavery to make his point: it doesn't matter what circumstances you find yourself in – Jew, Gentile, slave, free, married, single – just live for God in them! It's ok to seek change for the right reasons, but don't put your identity in it – your identity is in Christ. You belong to him (v.23)!
- So you're a Christian first, and whether you're single, married, widowed, divorced is way less important. Be content to live the life God has called you to – trust him to know best (v.17)!
- **How would our lives and our priorities change if we really put this chapter into practice?**

## 1 Corinthians 8: Don't cause stumbling!

After last week's mammoth 40 verses, we've got a nice short chapter this week! Paul is dealing with the issue of Christian freedom – those areas where there's not necessarily a 'right' and a 'wrong', and so different Christians have different opinions. The flashpoint in Corinth was meat sacrificed to idols. Pretty much all the meat which was available in the marketplaces had been prepared by pagan priests in the temples. They sacrificed it to their various gods and then sold it to the local butchers. This posed a question for the Christians: was it ok to eat this meat, or did they have to become vegetarians? Paul's answer is wonderfully gospel-centred: love is more important than knowledge.

There are lots and lots of contemporary applications of this passage, and it forces us to dig down to some big heart-attitudes, so it might be a good idea to leave plenty of time for discussion at the end!

**Main point:** Love is more important than knowledge.

**Main aim:** Put the needs of others before your own freedom.

- **How do you feel when someone tells you you're wrong when you think you're right? This was the problem facing two groups in Corinth...**
- It's infuriating! We tend to feel proud, superior, and defensive!
- **What does the quotation from the Corinthians' letter reveal about their attitude towards food offered to idols (v.1)?**
- They're proud of their 'knowledge' – they *know* that this food is harmless (because idols aren't real, see v.4 below). They think they're better than those 'poor deluded souls' who believe it's wrong to eat such food – they're 'puffed up' with pride by their knowledge. They've completely forgotten love – all that matters is being right.
- **What contrast does Paul draw between knowledge and love (vv.1-3)?**
- Knowledge on its own, without love, leads only to pride and hurting others. It's useless – not true knowledge (v.2)!
- But love inevitably leads to knowledge – being known by God (v.3)! Being in true relationship with him, being his adopted child, knowing him as a Father. This is the most precious 'knowledge' anyone can ever have, and the starting point of all other knowledge.

- And love builds others up, rather than putting them down to make yourself look better, which is what the Corinthians were doing.
- **Paul's answer to the problem of food offered to idols is neither 'Yes, it's fine' nor 'No, it's not.' Instead, he draws out the attitudes behind the actions. What point does he make in vv.4-6?**
- He's saying that the Corinthians' 'knowledge' is factually right – agreeing with them, even quoting them.
- Food offered to idols is fine to eat in and of itself, because idols aren't real! God is the only God! Those rituals performed by the pagan priests are empty and pointless.
- **But then comes the big 'however'! What kind of people is Paul talking about in v.7?**
- Those who really believe it's wrong to eat food offered to idols – they don't have the 'knowledge' Paul has just been explaining.
- They've come from pagan backgrounds saturated in idol-worship. For them, eating meat = putting their trust back in their old gods, going back to their old way of life. They're not yet able to disassociate meat from its connotations.
- And so they really believe that eating meat is wrong – which means it actually *is* wrong for them, as Romans 14:14, 23 affirms. Going against our conscience, whether it's factually right or wrong, is always wrong – our conscience becomes 'defiled', and our relationship with God is damaged. (More on this below.)
- **How does v.8 puncture the pride of the meat-eaters?**
- Food has no bearing on our relationship with God (v.8)! They thought they were better than the 'weak' former-idolaters because they knew it was ok to eat everything – but Paul is reminding them that God won't give them any extra brownie-points – it's the heart he cares about, and their behaviour towards their weaker brothers reveals some big problems there...
- **The Corinthians have been flaunting their rights. How is this a stumbling block for the 'weak' (vv.9-11)?**
- If the weaker brothers see other Christians doing the thing they used to do, but which they think is wrong, they may be tempted to join back in anyway, and so sin against their consciences. This leads to 'destruction' – by continually doing something we think is wrong, we dull our consciences, and it's a slippery slope after that. They were being tempted to go back to full-blown idol-worship – destruction indeed.
- It's a bit like a recovering alcoholic being exposed to a room full of friends offering to buy him a drink. He knows it's not a good idea for him, even though he has Christian freedom to do it, but he's persuaded into it, and things just get worse from there.
- **What are the consequences for those who cause their brothers to stumble (v.12)?**
- Not only are they sinning against their brothers – they are sinning against Christ, who died to save these weak brothers! It's a bit complicated – it's not sinful to eat the meat in itself, but it is sinful if it's going to cause trouble for another person.
- **What is Paul's conclusion (v.13)?**
- Love is way more important than knowledge! He cares so much more about his brothers' souls than he does about his own freedom. It's like saying 'I'll never wear revealing clothes if it's going to cause my brother/sister to sin.'

- **What issues cause similar problems for Christians today? How are we in danger of causing others to stumble, or stumbling ourselves?**
- Examples: alcohol, partying, smoking, watching certain films/tv shows, language, shopping on a Sunday, spending lots of money, social media, wearing certain clothes, pushing the line in a boyfriend/girlfriend relationship etc.
- These are all issues where we have different ideas about what's right and wrong, and the Bible doesn't give specifics. It's so easy to be judgemental! But instead of focusing on whose *knowledge* is more accurate, we should be walking in *love*!
- So e.g. someone has struggled with materialism, buying more than they can afford and getting into debt. It would be terribly unloving to flaunt your new phone/car/sofa in front of them!
- Or in a boyfriend/girlfriend relationship, one person is more tempted by physical intimacy than the other – it would be sinful for the former to push the latter too far.
- We need to remember too that it's not about not offending people – it's about not causing people to sin by (though we should avoid offence too if possible!). So if someone thinks the walls of the church hall should be purple, and someone else thinks they should stay yellow, then it's ok to argue your case – it's unlikely that the colour of the walls will cause anyone to sin! The same applies to different styles of music or arrangements of furniture.
- **In what areas do you think you are 'weak' and 'strong'? If you are weak in a particular area, is there anywhere in the Bible which would give you a broader perspective? (Paul's hope, both here and in Romans 14, was that the weak would become strong by reading his letter!)**
- E.g. I used to think alcohol was sinful (that's NI for you!), but even a cursory reading of Scripture shows that it's not – so now I accept that it's fine.
- **If you are strong in a particular area, are you sinning against your brothers in the way you use your freedom? Are you being sensitive to their consciences? How can you love them well?**
- Remember v.8! Your freedom won't commend you to God! He's looking at our hearts...

## **1 Corinthians 9: Give up your rights for the gospel**

In chapter 8, Paul explained that love is more important than knowledge – yes, as Christians we are free to do many things, we have the 'right' to do many things, but if such actions will cause another Christian to sin against their conscience, then we should refrain out of love for them. Here in chapter 9, Paul gives us a worked example using his own situation. As an apostle, he had the right to be paid for his labours – but he made tents instead. He had the right to have a wife – but he stayed single (see chapter 7!). He had the right to eat and drink whatever he liked – but he didn't. And all out of love, so that as many people as possible might be saved.

**Main point:** The gospel is more important than your rights.

**Main aim:** Do whatever you can to reach people with the gospel.

- **What is our society's view of 'rights'?**
- We're a big fan of them! Even children know all about their rights. 'You can't stop me wearing my pyjamas in public, it's my right!' 'It's your fault I slipped over and it's my right to claim compensation!'

- We're also really individualistic – it's all about what's good for me, never mind about how it affects anyone else.

### Read 1 Corinthians 9:1-12a.

- **What is Paul's tone here? What do you think he is responding to?**
- There are 16 questions in vv.1-12! Paul is really building up his argument! It sounds like he's defending himself from those who thought he wasn't a genuine apostle because he behaved differently to some of the others. He's explaining why he's not made use of the rights he has.
- **What rights does Paul claim to have? Why?**
- V.4: He has the right to eat and drink whatever he likes.
- V.5: he has the right to be married.
- V.6: He has the right to refrain from working for a living – in other words, the right to be paid for his gospel work.
  - Because: V.1-2: He has these rights firstly because he is a genuine apostle, like Peter and James and the rest. He's seen Christ! And he's been used by God to spread the gospel – the Corinthians themselves are an example of God's power at work in Paul.
- V.7: This and the following verses relate particularly to Paul's right to be financially compensated for his ministry. His point here is that in everyday human experience, work leads to gain!
  - Because: Vv.8-12: God, through the Old Testament, agrees with this principle! We saw back in chapter 3 that Paul was like a farmer, cultivating the Corinthians towards salvation (though of course it was God who made them grow!) Therefore, he has earned a share of the crop, in the form of the Corinthians' material blessings.
  - Jesus also affirmed this idea (9:14 – see Luke 10:7).

### Read 1 Corinthians 9:12b-23.

- **What has Paul done with his rights? Why?**
- V.12b: He's not used them, because he didn't want to put any obstacle in the way of people becoming Christians. He then goes on to explain what he means by this...
- Vv.15-18: He doesn't want to lose his grounds for boasting, his reward – which, according to v.18, is to preach the gospel free of charge. This seems a bit strange to us, but in Corinth there were lots of visiting preachers of various religions and philosophies, and they charged people for the privilege of hearing them. This was obviously an obstacle to some – how can you trust someone who's getting paid to be as persuasive as possible? Paul wanted to distance himself from this mercenary style of preaching, so that his hearers would know for sure that his heart and soul were in the message.
- It's not enough for him just to preach the gospel – he's got to do that anyway, because he's a steward of it – an apostle – it's almost as though he can't help it! What he *can* help is whether he gets paid for it or not – and by choosing not to, he has something to 'boast' about – in the sense that he is glorifying God even more, by removing any possibly hint of impure motives from his preaching.
- (Paul isn't saying that gospel workers shouldn't ever be paid! In other places, he did accept financial help, e.g. Phil 4:18. But in Corinth, because of the culture, he knew it would be a hindrance to the gospel. Perhaps a modern-day equivalent would be preachers who earn a lot

and drive around in fancy cars. Because of what this means in our culture, they're not being a good witness.)

- Vv.19-23: Here, Paul broadens out his argument to include his other 'rights'. He has the right to eat whatever he likes – but when he's with Jews, he'll go kosher, so as not to put them off the gospel. And when he's with Gentiles, he'll eat whatever they give him, so as not to put them off. And when he's with the weak (see chapter 8), he'll do things their way.
- V.22 encapsulates it well. His guiding principle is the gospel – everything else is movable! This might cause people to accuse him of being inconsistent, or confused, but he's not – he's consistently acting out of love, putting the salvation of others above his personal preferences. And he's never compromising on truth or morality – this is about culture.

### **Read 1 Corinthians 9:24-27.**

- **What is Paul urging the Corinthians to do here? What is he *not* saying?**
- This is nothing to do with physically injuring ourselves as a form of spiritual discipline! Paul is simply saying that it's worth enduring physical hardships, living a different lifestyle to the one we might otherwise choose, for the sake of the gospel.
- We have an imperishable prize! That's worth a bit foregoing our rights here and now! It's like missionaries giving up their rights to a comfortable life at home in order to reach the unreached – they're doing it because they know that their hope isn't in the comforts of this world, and they long for other people to share that hope. That's their 'prize' – they don't want to be disqualified!
- These verses also link to chapter 10, where the topic is idolatry. Paul is urging the Corinthians to be self-controlled in all aspects of life, rather than just giving in to every fleeting desire.
- **How do you need to apply this chapter? Especially vv.19-23? What rights are you clinging on to? Who could you be reaching?**
- The question isn't 'What am I free to do?', but 'What will be most helpful in reaching people with the gospel?'
- How do we use our money? We have the right to spend it on ourselves – but we can also forego that right and give as much of it as possible to gospel work.
- We can be in danger of ghetto-ising ourselves (I am very guilty of this) – socialising mainly with Christians, because it's easy and comfortable – and it's our 'right'. And it's important to build each other up! But how can we expect unbelievers to accept our invitations to things if they barely know us? Do we need to give up a 'Christian' activity in order to spend more time with non-Christians?
- And when we do spend time with unbelievers, how can we make it as easy as possible for them to engage with the gospel? Not by hitting them over the head with it or always going on about church, but by getting to know them – their hopes and fears, their worldview, their idols – and then gently sharing how Jesus speaks into their situation.
- How does St Clement's do a good job of reaching out to our community in right-giving-up ways? Can you think of any ways we could do better?

## 1 Corinthians 10: Take heed lest you fall!

In the last couple of chapters, Paul has been encouraging the Corinthians to use their Christian freedom in a loving, gospel-centred way. They were to be sensitive to those with weak consciences, and give up their rights in order to make the gospel available to all kinds of people. But here in chapter 10, the focus is on the Corinthians' own spiritual health. Paul is concerned that their licentious behaviour is putting their faith in jeopardy. It's the other side of what we looked at last week: yes, we need to get out there amongst people and be accessible to them, but we also need to be careful lest we become so enculturated that we endanger our souls. There are times when it is right to flee (v.14) – run away as fast as you can!

**Main point:** Spiritual health is precious and fragile      **Main aim:** Don't be complacent!

- **Do you ever have moral dilemmas, where you just don't know what to do? E.g. should I watch that, buy that, go there, see that person, say yes to that job?**
- **What blessings did the Israelites of the Exodus generation enjoy (vv.1-4)?**
- God guided them through the desert by a pillar of cloud (which became a pillar of fire by night), which also protected them from the Egyptians the night before they crossed the Red Sea (see Exodus 13:21-22, 14:19-20).
- They crossed through the Red Sea on dry ground (Exodus 14:22)!
- They were effectively 'baptised' i.e. dead to their old way of life, slavery in Egypt, and raised to new life as God's free people. Paul is making a comparison with the Corinthians, who had also been baptised...
- They were given manna and quail from heaven to eat (Exodus 16), and water from the rock to drink (Exodus 17:1-7, Numbers 20:1-13). This is another comparison with the Corinthians, this time in terms of the Lord's Supper – 'spiritual' food which made them think they were safe...
- Christ was with them the whole way! He's the real Rock from whom the living water flows. He was providing for their every need.
- **How do these compare to the blessings we and the Corinthians have as Christians?**
- We are so much more blessed! They saw the shadow, we have the reality! We know who the real Passover Lamb is, the One who redeemed us from slavery to sin and is bringing us to the eternal Promised Land! We have the Holy Spirit within us to guide us and help us to live God's way. We know for sure that God is providing for our every need, because he who did not spare his own Son will also give us all things.
- We are baptised into Christ, and receive his body and blood as our spiritual food.
- **How did the Israelites respond to these blessings, and what was the consequence for them (vv.5-10)?**
- In summary, they desired evil (v.6) and so God was not pleased with them, and they died in the desert (v.5). Time and again they rebelled against God, failed to trust him, and wished to return to slavery in Egypt. The final straw came in Numbers 14, when they freaked out at the spies' report from the Promised Land. It was then that God promised that none of the adults who had experienced the Exodus would live to see the end of the journey – and so they wandered for 40 years until all of that generation were dead.
- V.7: They were idolaters – the golden calf (Exodus 32) is the prime example of this. Although they had experienced God's mighty rescue, and even heard his voice thundering the 10

commandments from the top of the mountain, they failed to trust him, and built a golden calf in a pathetic attempt to control him and 'do worship' after the manner of the surrounding pagan nations.

- V.8: They indulged in sexual immorality (see Numbers 25:1-9) – again, related to idolatry and the surrounding nations (and also relevant to the Corinthians!). As a result, a plague swept through the camp, killing about 23,000.
- V.9: They tested God time and time again, failing to believe that he would provide for them. So God sent fiery snakes among them to bite them (Numbers 21:4-9).
- V.10: Their frequent grumbling (often aimed at their leaders, just like the Corinthians) was initially met with grace and forgiveness, but as time wore on and they failed to learn that God was always trustworthy, their grumbling resulted in severe punishment (see Numbers 16:41-50). The Destroyer (i.e. destroying angel) isn't mentioned, but he was the agent of judgement.
- **What point is Paul making for the Corinthians (vv.11-13)?**
- V.11: The things that happened at the time of the Exodus are examples for us! That's why they were written down – to teach us, to show us what God is like, and to warn us against making the same mistakes. (Paul has deliberately picked things that were relevant to the Corinthians – idolatry, sexual immorality, and grumbling against leaders.) We're in such a privileged position now, this side of the cross – how can we ignore these warnings?
- V.12: The Israelites thought they were standing pretty firm – see vv.1-4! They'd experienced God's miraculous saving power first-hand! And yet, look how far they fell (vv.5-10). Eventually, the whole nation dissolved into the surrounding cultures, leaving only the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. The Corinthians also thought they were standing firm – thought they were mature, super-spiritual, special. But in reality, they were arrogant children, and they're in very great danger of falling.
- V.13: It sounds like the Corinthians were making excuses for themselves when they gave in to temptation – 'If I'm so spiritual but yet couldn't resist, then it would have been impossible for anyone to resist!' Paul is saying this is nonsense – God always provides a way of saying 'No!' to temptation. It's the Corinthians who are at fault!
- But this verse is also a great encouragement for the Corinthians, and for us. God is faithful! He's on our side! If we are earnestly seeking to live his way, not just throwing ourselves into temptation's path, then he will give us the ability to resist.
- **Would you say that you are 'standing firm'? Have you ever 'fallen' in a way that surprised and humbled you?**
- With all those blessings we listed above, it's easy to think sometimes that we're standing very firm indeed – invulnerable to sin's attacks, safe from harm, complacent. And then something comes along and throws us completely and we're reminded just how weak we are, and how utterly dependant on God's grace.
- **What does v.13 look like in your situation? What temptations are you struggling with? What 'ways of escape' are you missing?**
- 'Flee' is a good one!
- Sometimes we doubt God's faithfulness in these situations – we think he's got it wrong, and hasn't provided a way out. How can we help each other?
- **Paul then goes on to deal with a specific temptation that the Corinthians were facing – idolatry, specifically joining in with their pagan neighbours in ritualistic meals in the temples.**

**As idolatry had caused the downfall of the Israelites in the desert, so the Corinthians needed to be warned of their precarious position. What analogy does he use to show them how serious it is to participate in idolatrous rituals (vv.14-18)?**

- He uses the sacrament of communion to show them that our actions have a spiritual dimension. In communion, we eat the bread and drink the wine as a sign of our saving faith in the body and blood of Jesus (v.16). And everyone who shares in the meal is declaring this same faith (v.17). It's similar to the Old Testament principle where the priests made the sacrifices, but then the ordinary people who had brought the meat/grain for the sacrifice ate some of it, and so participated in the act of worship (v.18) (see e.g. Leviticus 7).
- Paul's point is that by eating ritualistic meals in pagan temples, the Corinthians are in effect sharing in the idolatry, just as someone who eats communion is saying they agree with what's going on, or someone in the Old Testament who eats of the sacrifice is seen to be seeking fellowship with God. He's not contradicting himself with relation to what he said in chapter 8 about it being ok to eat meat sacrificed to idols – the issue here is participation in the worship of idols, which is completely different.
- **What is the hidden danger of idolatry (vv.19-22)?**
- Demons are very interested in idolatry. They love it when anything other than the true God is being worshipped. And so participating in idolatrous acts is not spiritually neutral. It has a demonic element, which provokes God's jealousy (v.22). It's a horror to think that anyone would participate in Christ, and then turn round and do the same with demons (v.21).
- **How does this apply to us and to our society today?**
- We don't like to think about demons roaming around, but any time we start putting our trust in anything other than God, they are delighted, and out to feed that fire. Success, wealth, comfort, family – whatever it is we're tempted to worship.
- We see people around us totally enslaved to these idols, and not even aware of it.
- We're not enslaved to idols – we are free in Christ, free to worship him alone. We just need to realise that, and make use of the escape-routes he gives us!
- **In what ways are you putting yourself in spiritual danger by becoming too comfortable with the world?**
- This could be similar to what we talked about last week, but the other side of it. Yes, it's ok to watch films and tv shows, and they help us to make connections with unbelievers, but if they're leading you into sinful thought and attitudes, then flee!
- It could be to do with money or material things – they make us feel safe, powerful, successful, superior...
- It could be to do with alcohol, sex or relationships...
- **How do vv.23-33 back up what Paul has been saying in chapters 8-10? How could we summarise these chapters to give us a guide as to what to do in a moral dilemma?**
- How does it affect me spiritually?
- How does it affect others spiritually?
- Can I do it for the glory of God?

## 1 Corinthians 11: Orderly Worship

The first part of this chapter is extremely difficult to understand, mainly because we don't know the precise nature of the cultural norms in Corinth (is a 'head covering' a veil, a scarf, or a hairstyle?) Let's not get too bogged down in the minutiae, but concentrate on the big point – men and women are different, and we should celebrate this in our church family, rather than ignoring or rebelling against it.

The second half of the chapter concerns the manner in which the Corinthians were eating communion. Again, the underlying problem is their relationship with each other – the rich were embarrassing the poor, and so dishonouring the Lord's Supper and the Lord himself. You might want to focus on one half of the chapter more than the other – whatever you think will be most helpful for your group!

**Main point:** God is honoured by considerate corporate worship.

**Main aim:** Think about how you can honour God more at church, specifically in terms of gender relations and the Lord's Supper.

- **How does our society view gender differences?**
- We're generally very confused about gender! Feminism has had a huge impact, and we're so afraid of being un-PC that we tend to pretend there are no differences between men and women at all.
- And yet we're aware that there are huge differences between men and women – our interests, the way we relate to people, our desires, our strengths and weaknesses.
- **In 1st-century Roman society, long hair and a head-covering were the norm for women, and short, uncovered hair was the norm for men. But what had some of the women in the Corinthian church been doing (vv.1-6)? Why did this matter?**
- The women had been taking their head coverings off to prophesy and pray in church. This really doesn't sound like a big deal! But the problem was that it did away with the distinctions between men and women. It dishonoured and disgraced the good, God-given differences between the genders. Women were trying to be men.
- The underlying problem is the same as that found throughout the letter: some of the Corinthians believed that they'd already arrived at their maximum spiritual potential – that there was no resurrection, and so the promises of the new creation were to be enjoyed in the here and now. In their opinion, this meant that gender differences disappeared – they could be 'like the angels' (Matthew 22:30).
- **What differences between men and women does Paul highlight (vv.7-16)? Does his argument still stand today?**
- Vv.7-9: There's an order in creation. God made Adam first, and then he made Eve out of Adam's rib, to be Adam's helper. (Paul isn't saying that women aren't also made in God's image in v.7 – that would be expressly contradicting Genesis 1:27. But as woman was made out of man, her glory reflects glory on man, just as man reflects glory on God because God made him out of the dust.)

- This is the way God made it, and he doesn't get things wrong! We might not like it, but we have to accept it. If we only paid attention to the bits of the Bible we agreed with, then we wouldn't be demonstrating faith at all!
- V.10: This is a weird verse! The most straightforward explanation is that the 'symbol of authority' is simply the head-covering, which shows that the woman is submitting to God's ordering of the genders, and so gaining the approval of the angels which are also present as we worship. But it's a symbol of her *own* authority – her authority to pray and prophesy as a woman, without having to become like a man.
- Vv.11-12: Women and men are equally important and interdependent – they are different in role, but not in significance. And they are equally under God.
- Vv.13-16: Paul reiterates the propriety of maintaining the gender differences, and affirms that the other churches agree with him.
- As Paul's argument is rooted in creation, rather than in the specific Corinthian culture, it must still stand today. Adam was still made first, and then Eve from Adam, so men and women are still inherently different – and we should celebrate those God-given differences, rather than attempting to do away with them.
- But what that looks like in our society has changed somewhat. Women are no longer distinguished from men by their headcoverings (or whatever it was!), but in other ways. So the application is that men should look and act like men, and women should look and act like women. We should be fitting in with cultural norms, insofar as they are respectable and shame-free. This will bring honour to our 'head', Christ.
- **In what ways are we tempted to blur the gender differences in church? How can we affirm them?**
- We're so afraid of offending people!
- Dress and hairstyle? This is a controversial topic, but do we think about the way we look in terms of how it honours God? Not that women should always wear skirts and men can't have long hair, but what are the attitudes behind our choices?
- Relationships can be a big one – men not leading or taking responsibility but stringing girls along.
- Because there are more women in churches in general, they can be tempted to take over and give up waiting for the men to step up, which prevents the men from doing just that.
- It's good to have men's and women's events!
- This might not be the time to get into men's and women's roles in church leadership, but do go for it if your group are keen! 1 Timothy 2:12-14 is helpful, again taking us back to the created order in Genesis. But notice how in our passage today, Paul expects women to be praying and prophesying in church – they are to have an active, responsible role. We see this in our church family with women who pray, read, lead Bible studies, teach in Gospel Kids, do one-to-ones etc. – complementing men in their role as overall leaders.
- **How does communion affect you? How important is it to you? Would you miss it if you didn't take it for a few months?**
- **What is communion like in the Corinthian church (vv.17-22)? What is the underlying problem?**
- It's not really the Lord's Supper, because their attitude is completely wrong! They're divided instead of united. This is different to the divisions of the early chapters – here it's social divisions between rich and poor. The rich use communion as an opportunity to enjoy their own lavish

picnics while the poor go hungry. That's not communion! And it dishonours Christ and his church.

- **How might we be guilty of social discrimination at church?**
- When new people come along who are like us, it's easy to make friends, invite them round, and help them to feel a part of things. But we find it much harder with people who are different in some way. How can we get out of our comfort zones and create a true family? Big Church Lunch is a great way!
- **What is the right way to take communion (vv.23-34)? What happens if we pay no attention to this warning?**
- Vv.23-26: It's a solemn, serious remembrance of what Jesus did for us at the cross. He commanded us to do it!
- And it's more than remembering too – it's about participating in a common act of worship (see 10:16-17). We're uniting together, proclaiming the truth that Jesus died and will one day return for us.
- Vv.27-28: We need to examine ourselves before we take communion, to make sure that our motives are pure and we are right with God. Of course we can never be totally pure this side of the new creation, but if we are doing it just to look good, or as some kind of magical token of being right with God, then we need to take a step back.
- V.29: In particular, we need to pay attention to the 'body' – the church family, and recognise that this is a communal meal for the good of everyone – it's not about pride or one-up-man-ship. ('Body' is probably the church as opposed to Christ's body, because his blood isn't mentioned, and the wider context is that of church unity.)
- This means examining whether we are at odds with any of our Christian brothers or sisters, and taking steps towards reconciliation. It means loving those we don't naturally get on with, putting them first, out of love for Christ.
- Vv.33-34: We need to wait for each other, and eat the meal as an act of worship rather than concentrating on satisfying our hunger.
- Vv.29-32: It seems that some kind of illness was sweeping through the church, and some of its members had died. Paul explains that this is God's judgement on their community for the way they have been abusing the Lord's Supper, and abusing each other. It's probably not a specific 'he sinned, so he got sick' correlation, but rather something which affects the whole church. And God's purpose in it is one of grace – those who die won't be eternally condemned. It's God's way of exposing his people's sin before the whole church goes off the rails.
- So these verses shouldn't cause us to be fearful of taking communion, in case we 'do it wrong' and die! But they should encourage us to take it seriously.
- **How will this affect how you take communion next time?**
- Will you see it as a joining together with your diverse family, united in Christ?
- Will you examine your motives?
- Will you take steps to be at peace with everyone in the family, insofar as it depends on you?

## 1 Corinthians 12: Spiritual gifts are for...

Chapters 12-14 are all about spiritual gifts. It's a controversial topic! But what we need to remember first of all is that these chapters are not a manual for spiritual gifts. They are, as with the rest of the letter, a response to the situation in Corinth. The Corinthians were 'uninformed' (v 1) about spiritual gifts in many ways, and Paul is seeking to correct them. Reading between the lines, it seems that they were putting a huge emphasis on the gift of speaking in tongues, to the extent that those who did not possess this gift were deemed spiritually deficient. Paul firstly reminds them that there are many different spiritual gifts, and all are important for building up the church. Pride and judgementalism run contrary to the whole idea of spiritual gifts. Then, in chapter 13 (which we'll look at next week), he reaches the climax of his argument: love is more important than spiritual gifts. By arguing and posturing over their gifts, the Corinthians had completely missed the point: gifts are about God and others, not ourselves!

Chapter 14 looks in more detail at the gifts of tongues and prophecy, so don't worry too much about getting into deep discussions on those topics this week!

**Main point:** Spiritual gifts are for the good of others, not primarily for ourselves.

**Main aim:** Be encouraged to use our gifts selflessly.

- **Do you ever feel like you're not important/needed at church? What is the result of feeling like this?**
- Either we feel rubbish about ourselves and jealous of others, or we use it as an excuse to do nothing.

**Read 1 Corinthians 12:1-11.**

- **The Corinthians believed that the gift of tongues was vital to being a truly 'Spiritual' (i.e. Spirit-filled) Christian. But what point is Paul making in v 3?**
- If someone is saying 'Jesus is accursed', then they're not a Christian, no matter what 'gifts' they seem to have. They're not doing what they're doing by the power of the Holy Spirit.
- And the only way anyone can say 'Jesus is Lord' is if the Holy Spirit is at work in them!
- In other words, it doesn't ultimately matter if you don't speak in tongues or prophecy or whatever – if you trust Jesus as Saviour and Lord, then you're a genuine, Spirit-filled believer.
- **But Paul isn't negative about spiritual gifts or trying to put the Corinthians off! On the contrary, he wants them to use what God has given them to the full, in a way that glorifies God. So, according to v 4-11, who has spiritual gifts?**
- They're for *everyone* who believes (v 6) – 'each' (v 7, v 11). There's no 2-tiered system where baby Christians have to do a sort of internship, waiting until they're mature to receive these gifts. God gives them straight away! Gifts might change or develop as we grow in our faith, but all Christians have them, whether they've known Jesus for a moment or for decades.
- **What is the purpose of spiritual gifts (v 7)?**
- They're for the good of others. This means they're not primarily for the person with the gift!
- This is actually quite radical! Imagine giving someone a box of chocolates, but then telling them they're not for them to eat, but to give away to other people! It seems cruel and unfair! But then you tell them that you're giving a different box of chocolates to every one of their friends, and

*those* chocolates *are* for them to eat! Instead of having just the one type of chocolate, they get a whole wonderful variety of chocolate! And they get to enjoy sharing and making others happy!

- So, in a church setting, say my gift is welcoming. It's hard work and it might mean I miss the first part of the service, but I'm using what God has given me to serve others, and they are blessed by that. And then I get to benefit from everyone else's gifts – those who are involved in leading the service, the tea and coffee team, those who teach my children (if I have them), those who do the counting and tidying up and hoovering and everything else that goes on. This is what it means to be part of a body – as Paul will go on to say in the next section!
- **What do v 4-11 say to someone who is proud about their particular gift?**
- Ultimately, it's the giver who is important, not the particular gift! All the gifts come from the same Person (v 4-6), who is doling them out for his own glory and the good of his church. In a sense, it doesn't really matter what your gift is, so long as you use it with a grateful, willing, servant heart.
- Note how each member of the Trinity is mentioned – Spirit in v 4, Lord (Jesus) in v 5, and God (the Father) in v 6! As there is unity in diversity within the Trinity, so there is unity in diversity within the church. We're to be united in serving one another, not divided by pride!
- It's God who decides who gets what gift! The Spirit apportions them to whomever he will (v 11) – it's not dependent on us and how great we are!
- They're *gifts*! You can't earn a gift or deserve it – otherwise it becomes a payment. Instead, you say 'thank you'!
- And since these gifts are actually for the good of others, rather than for the person with the gift, they're really very humbling! If I use my gift in such a way as to magnify praise from men, then I am misusing it terribly, because it's for 'me', not for others.
- **From what we've read so far, how would you explain what a spiritual gift is?**
- It's a way that God equips us by his Spirit to serve the church – or, in the words of Vaughan Roberts, 'any God-given ability of a Christian which God uses to bless other believers'.
- It might not be related to natural God-given abilities, but it might be!

#### **Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-30.**

- **What illustration does Paul use to help the Corinthians to use their gifts correctly? What kind of people is he talking to in v 14-20 and then in v 21-26?**
- It's the illustration of a body, where every part is important and every part is dependent on the other parts to function!
- V 14-20: Here, Paul is encouraging those who feel useless – who view their gifts, and themselves, as inferior. They are an essential part of the whole! The foot might not be able to knit or write, but it's pretty useful for walking! A congregation member who suffers from ill-health might not be able to lead men's football, but they can pray for it to bear fruit!
- V 21-26: Here, Paul is warning those who think their gifts are the be-all and end-all. They are individualistic and feel they don't need anyone else. But they too are part of the body – the eye is a marvellous organ, but on its own it's useless! It's no good having the gift of preaching if there's no one to listen, or the gift of baking if there's no one to eat it!
- **Which of these twin dangers are you more prone to?**

- **Have a look at the lists of gifts in v 8-10 and v 28. What are the similarities and differences? What does this tell us about the variety of spiritual gifts?**
- There are 9 in the first list and 8 in the second, with only 4 in both lists. This indicates that the lists aren't exhaustive – they're just examples of spiritual gifts. Paul gives other lists in Romans 12:4-8 and Ephesians 4:11, as does Peter in 1 Peter 4:10-11.
- Paul is referring to gifts which are particularly prevalent or controversial in the Corinthian church. Therefore, we shouldn't necessarily expect every church to demonstrate all of these gifts! It's difficult to even work out what they all meant! If Paul were writing to our church, he'd probably have a lot to say about musical gifts because we are blessed with so many musicians. But other churches would be wrong if they read that letter and assumed they all needed 6 guitarists! The point is that there are a variety of gifts – the specifics will be different in every place, as God sees fit.
- **What are the 'higher gifts' (v 31)? How should we respond if we pray for these gifts but don't receive them? How should we respond if we *do* have these 'higher' gifts?**
- It seems from v 28 that the 'higher' gifts are those which pertain to teaching and building others up using Scripture.
- It's easy to become discouraged or feel second-rate if we're not doing obvious 'impressive' things at church – but we must trust that God will do right with the gifts he gives. It's not up to us!
- On the other hand, if God has given us these gifts, these verses warn us against relying on ourselves in prideful superiority!
- **Using the definition you came up with earlier, what spiritual gifts do you see in action at St Clement's? What do you think your spiritual gifts might be? How are you using them?**
- We don't want anyone to leave feeling discouraged – this might be a good opportunity to put into practice the body idea! Everyone has been given gifts by God! Sometimes it's about the time and opportunity God gives us rather than the specific skills – pretty much anyone can wash up after tea and coffee, but a parent with young children to look after or an elderly person who can't stand for long will find it much more difficult than someone with more time and health.

## **1 Corinthians 13: Love!**

Last week we saw how the Corinthians were putting a lot of emphasis on spiritual gifts, particularly the gift of tongues. And next week, we'll see why Paul had a particular problem with this: they weren't using it in a way which would build others up, but rather for their own selfish purposes (14:7-11, 18-19). Chapter 13 is the bridge which connects these two chapters. Paul is reminding the Corinthians that love is more important than their spiritual gifts – indeed, without love, their gifts are pointless. And the true mark of their spirituality isn't what gifts they have – it's love.

**Main point:** Love is the heartbeat of Christianity.

**Main aim:** Be encouraged to love others with the love God has given to us.

- **What is love? What different types of love are there?**

- There's the love of friends, there's romantic love, and then there's 'agape' love, which is what Paul is talking about here – love which isn't primarily about feelings or how the other person makes us happy, but about seeking the good of the other person, whether they appreciate it or not.
- Jesus' death for us is the ultimate example of agape love – 1 John 4:10: 'This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.'
- **What does it look like to use spiritual gifts without love (v 1-3)?**
- Tongues (v 1): Without love, it's just meaningless noise! Cymbals and gongs were used in pagan worship ceremonies to summon gods etc. – without love, the cacophony of tongues is just as empty. As we'll see in chapter 14, tongues need to be interpreted so that they can build up the church in a loving way.
- Prophecy and knowledge (v 2): Prophecy was a gift Paul encouraged the Corinthians to particularly seek (12:31), and yet without love it is nothing. It's no use speaking helpful truths into someone's life if you don't love them – your motive will be selfish and the person will not be built up. The same goes with knowledge – it doesn't matter how good your theological answers or your Bible studies are if your heart is cold.
- Faith (v 2): Paul is really driving home his point here! Imagine faith that moved mountains! But if the mountains are moved unlovingly, it's to no avail.
- Give everything away and give up body to be burned (v 3): These are acts of ultimate self-sacrifice – but unless the motive is love, they are in vain.
- **In what ways are you tempted to do the right thing for the wrong reason, i.e. without love?**
- Like Paul said a few weeks ago, our motive for doing the right thing can often be pride or fear instead of love – we're worried about getting in trouble or looking bad if we do something wrong.
- **Think about each characteristic of love listed in v 4-8 (or as many as you have time for!). What does it mean? What is the opposite of each? Which have the Corinthians been struggling with?**
- Patient
- Kind
  - The Corinthians couldn't even wait for each other at the Lord's Supper (11:21)!
- Does not envy
- Does not boast
- Is not proud/arrogant
  - Remember the opening 4 chapters with all the divisions over leaders? They were puffed up with pride, boasting over one another instead of being united around Christ.
- Is not rude
- Does not insist on its own way
- Is not irritable/easily angered
- Is not resentful/keeps no record of wrongs
  - They were selfishly misusing their freedom in Christ at the expense of their weaker brothers (8:10-12). And instead of forgiving each other, they were taking each other to court (6:1)!
- Does not rejoice in wrongdoing

- Rejoices with the truth
  - Some of them were sleeping with prostitutes (6:15) and giving approval to sexual immorality (5:1)!
- Bears all things/always protects
- Believes all things/always trusts
- Hopes all things/always hopes
- Endures all things/always perseveres
- Never ends
  - Instead of thinking the best of others, persevering with them, the Corinthians were cynical and short-sighted, focusing on the here-and-now – they thought they were living the best life possible already, and so anyone who didn't measure up to their standard was a lost cause. Paul was the opposite – he gave up all his 'rights' in order to save as many people as possible (9:20-23).
- **Which of these characteristics of love do you most struggle with?**
- **Where does the ability to love like this come from?**
- See 1 John 4:7-13, 19-21. We can never do this in our own strength! Jesus has loved us, has filled up all our emptiness with his love, and it's out of that full tank of love that we can give love to others. Without Jesus' love, our tank is running only on the fumes of love we get back from other people – and that's not enough for us to be able to love like this.
- The Holy Spirit empowers us with this love – the first fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23 is love!
- **Why will prophecies, tongues and knowledge pass away, but love won't (v 8-12)?**
- Prophecies, tongues and knowledge aren't going to be needed in the new creation. When we see God clearly, fully, 'face to face' as it were, we will know him fully, and communicate with him perfectly. You don't speak to someone on the phone when they're right in front of you!
- Love is the only thing that will remain – the joy of perfect love, the waiting over – the bride and groom united at last.
- **Why is love even greater than faith and hope (v 13)? How does this encourage you?**
- Even faith and hope will one day pass away – faith will become sight, and hope will become present reality.
- **Think about people you struggle to love, or times when you struggle to be loving. How will this chapter change you?**
- Are you living off the 'fumes' of love you get back from others, or drinking deeply from the love of Christ?
- **Why not memorise v 4-8? Remember this is who Jesus is!**

## **1 Corinthians 14: How not to worship**

In this chapter Paul completes his 3-chapter argument around spiritual gifts and how we should be using them. In chapter 12 he explained how spiritual gifts are not primarily for ourselves but for others, and in chapter 13 he reminded us that a heart of love is a pre-requisite when using spiritual gifts. Now, he ties the two together by explaining what it looks like to use our spiritual gifts in an other-centred, loving way – and what it doesn't look like! The Corinthian church desperately needed

to change their priorities as individuals and introduce some order as a church so that everyone could benefit.

What prophecy means here is disputed among Christians. Try not to get bogged down in this – all Bible-believing Christians can agree on the sufficiency of scripture, that the Bible is complete and sufficient and any new prophecy cannot add to or take away from God's word as it contains all we need to know God and live a life that pleases him. But in case it comes up or if it's helpful for your group to focus on it here's some more handy detail from Vaughan Roberts:

- 2 Peter 1:21: Prophecy in the Old Testament 'never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit'.
- 1 Peter 1:11: 'The Spirit of Christ' enabled them to predict 'the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow'. Now Christ has come we can expect no more of this kind of prophecy.
- Hebrews 1:1-2: Jesus, God's full and final revelation of Himself, set apart the apostles to give us the authoritative record of his revelation. He promised them that the Holy Spirit would both remind them of what he had taught them on earth (John 14:26) and also lead them into all truth (John 16:12-15). The New Testament is the fulfilment of that promise. Paul speaks of the apostles and possibly a wider group of other 'prophets' as the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2:20). He says that this gospel 'was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets' (Ephesians 3:5).

Now that the gospel has been revealed and the foundation has been laid there will be no more apostles and prophets of this kind (Large 'P' prophecy). God's revelation of Himself is complete in the Old and New Testaments. We are not to look for a new message but preserve the one we have been given (2 Timothy 1:13-14, Jude 3).

The Corinthians did not have a completed new Testament at the time of Paul's writing so it is possible these prophecies Paul is talking about were doing that job (14:3, 19, 24-25 all seem to be the work of the gospel so it may have been the gospel they were prophesying in a way that isn't needed now we have it written down).

But today, we have the building up of one another with our words through the Holy Spirit's agency as prophecy – in community groups, in a sermon, in friendship one on one etc. (Small 'p' prophecy).

**Main Point:** Spiritual gifts which build up the church are more desirable than those which just build up an individual.

**Main aim:** Seek and use spiritual gifts in a way which builds up believers and reaches out to unbelievers.

### **Read 1 Corinthians 14:1-19**

- **From these verses, what are the gifts of tongues and prophecy?**
- Tongues are a private communication between the speaker and God prompted by the Spirit (v16). It's helpful for the speaker and Paul says he does it often (v18). But the speaker doesn't actually understand what he's saying (v14) and neither does anyone else (v9).

- Prophecy is more difficult to work out! But v3 shows that it's speaking to others for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort, and v19 highlights instruction, and the whole passage is about building others up. So it's about communicating gospel truths into people's lives in a way which will help them to grow. Precisely what that looks like is up for debate – is it a spontaneous 'I have a message for you from God right now'? Or something more measured? Or both? From later on in the passage (v29-33), it sounds a bit more like the former, but note that Paul is calling for more order, rather than a free-for-all.
- **Why does Paul say that prophecy is superior to speaking in tongues?**
- All gifts have an important part to play, but some have a bigger impact on building up the church than others. Paul uses the example of tongues (which was most highly prized in Corinth) and compares it prophecy, which was actually more helpful for people and so should be desired more. Verse 4 key in this section.
- Tongues are only valuable for the individual and not for others as they can't understand it (v2). As the church meeting is designed not for members to show off their gifts but rather as a means of mutual edification, the Corinthians should refrain from speaking in tongues in that context. The way of love means trying to excel in ways that build up the church (v12) and that means a preference for prophecy over tongues as people can understand it! It's pretty straightforward really! What use is it to anyone to go and hear a foreign language service (v10-11)?
- **Under what circumstances is it ok to speak in tongues during a church meeting?**
- If there's someone to interpret (v5, v13)! Then it seems to be on a par with prophecy.

#### **Read 1 Corinthians 14:20-25**

- **What effect do tongues have on unbelievers? How does this compare to prophecy?**
- This is a little bit confusing! The key is that Paul quotes from Isaiah 28:11, where God's people were hearing foreign languages as a sign of God's judgement on them – foreign invasion had come. Signs aren't always good things! When unbelievers come across people speaking in tongues, they have no comprehension of it at all so just think the people are mad – it puts them right off (v23).
- We've already seen that prophecy is a good sort of sign for believers, but it's also a means by which God communicates with unbelievers (v24-25). Revelation 19:10 says 'the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy' and so we are prophesying whenever we tell anyone about him.
- **How does this apply to us? In what ways are our services unbeliever-friendly? What is the balance between building up the church and being accessible to visitors? (Hard question!)**

#### **Read 1 Corinthians 14:26-40**

- **Reading between the lines, what impression do you get of Corinthian church meetings?**
- They were chaotic, with lots of people trying to speak at once so no one benefited. Paul is reminding them 'God is not a God of disorder but of peace' (v33) which means their meetings were disorderly!
- **How does Paul instruct them to use the gift of tongues (v27-28)?**
- One at a time, and no more than 2 or 3 altogether, and always someone to interpret.
- **How does Paul instruct them to use the gift of prophecy (v29-35)?**
- This is a bit less straightforward! But Don Carson has written a very helpful article here: <http://document.desiringgod.org/recovering-biblical-manhood-and-womanhood->

[en.pdf?1446647999](#) (p.133-147, esp. p.142-143). He sees v30-33 as an explanation of v29a (2 or 3 prophets should speak one at a time), and v34-35 as an explanation of v29b (others, i.e. men, should weigh what is said). If Paul really meant that women shouldn't speak at all in church under any circumstances, then he's completely contradicted what he's already said in 11:1-16, where he expects women to be prophesying! So it seems much more likely that he's referring to the specific task of weighing prophecies here. The 'Law' he mentions is probably the created order of Genesis 2, in other words male headship, which he tackled back in 11:7-12. Men are the ones in overall authority in the church, so they should be the ones deciding if the prophecies which have been heard are in keeping with the gospel. It's all about order – church shouldn't be a manic free-for-all, because this will benefit no-one!

- **What final problem is Paul addressing in v36-40?**
- The Corinthians were content to look only to their own experience and collective judgement, according to which they concluded they were authentically spiritual and where the apostle Paul differed to them HE was not. Paul calls on them to submit to the twin authorities of scripture and tradition. These two, especially scripture, should be the litmus test of spirituality.
- 'Tradition' may be defined as the commonly accepted practice of believers down the ages and throughout the world. Paul had a high view of tradition and chides the Corinthians for their willingness to depart from it (11:16, 14:33). Proceed with caution before adopting any form of teaching or behaviour that diverges from the commonly accepted norm among Bible-believing Christians. But scripture is the supreme authority. Nothing is spiritual if it contradicts the Bible. Those who are truly spiritual will not resist Paul's teaching (14:37).
- **How does this chapter apply to us? How many times does the idea of 'building others up' appear? How could this be more of a focus for you at church?**
- These verses not a blueprint to be applied to all Christian meetings – as always in this letter, Paul is speaking into a specific situation. It's the principles which are important, not necessarily the details.
- We need to seek to ensure our meetings are done in an orderly way giving maximum benefit to the greatest number so that everyone is being built up! It's the way of love (v1)!
- This might mean not getting our own way, if it will benefit others more! E.g. by doing children's work on a Sunday morning, you miss out on being built up by the sermon – but all those parents get to benefit! (And there's always the evening service! And children's work can be very upbuilding too!)

## **1 Corinthians 15: Why does the resurrection matter?**

After spending 3 chapters dealing with the Corinthians' issues with spiritual gifts, Paul now looks to another problem he'd heard about: their faulty beliefs about the resurrection. Some in Corinth did not understand the implications of the gospel for the Christian's future and were even saying that 'there is no resurrection of the dead' (15:12). As we've seen before, they had a low view of the body, thinking that God is only interested in the soul or spirit. They believed they had already been 'raised' and were enjoying the fullness of salvation in their spiritual lives, as witnessed, so they thought, by their ability to speak heavenly languages. So they focused entirely on the present, thinking there was nothing significant to come on top of what they already had – death was followed a shadowy, disembodied half-life, or maybe nothing at all. We've already seen some of the consequences:

sexual immorality as people believed what they did with their bodies didn't matter anymore, and complete asceticism as people turned away from bodily functions entirely. It also made them selfish, judgemental, proud, and terribly unloving.

Paul decides to tackle this issue by reminding them of the wonderful central truths of the gospel, and also takes the opportunity to sing a hymn of praise at Christ's victory.

Many of the dangers the Corinthians faced are faced by us today. We've all heard the argument that 'God's not interested in what we do with our bodies in our home', or been guilty of trying to maximise our spiritual experience in the present at the expense of the selfless and sacrificial living which comes with looking to the future hope. Teaching which promises 'spiritual prosperity' is more popular than one which focuses on present self-discipline and suffering. In a generation that lives for the moment and expects instant gratification, this chapter is very relevant.

It's a really long chapter but not as dense as some – just enjoy reading it!

**Main point:** The physical resurrection is real and gives us future hope

**Main aim:** To believe and live in light of the future resurrection

- **Have you ever come across teaching that says 'Of course Jesus didn't *actually* rise from the dead, that's just a fairytale – it's the *idea* of it all that's important, not the facts.'? Or thought this yourself? How would you respond (briefly – this is what we're going to find out as we read this chapter!)**
- It can be hardest when it's coming from people who call themselves Christians! But as Paul shows us in this chapter, if Jesus didn't physically rise from the dead, then the whole gospel falls apart – it's all meaningless, pointless nonsense. The stakes are that high!

#### **Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-19**

- **What is Paul reminding the Corinthians about in v1-11? How would this have helped them?**
- He's seeking to re-establish common ground by reminding them of the gospel message he'd brought to them, in particular the facts of the resurrection. Look how many witnesses there are! And most of them are still around to be questioned! The Corinthians accepted this at the start – how could they move away from it now?
- **What are the consequences of disbelieving in a bodily resurrection (v12-19)?**
- The fact of Christ's resurrection is the basis of the belief that all who trust in him will be raised. Paul points out the massive consequence of not believing in the resurrection (v13-14). Without the foundational belief of the resurrection the whole edifice of Christianity falls down!
- If there is no bodily resurrection, the Christian gospel is a nonsense, robbed of both its content and the comfort it offers – there is no faith, forgiveness, or future (v15-18), and we are 'of all people most to be pitied' (v19).

#### **Read 1 Corinthians 15:20-34**

- **V20 comes as a huge relief! What does Paul mean when he calls Jesus the 'first-fruits'? And why does he compare Christ and Adam (v21-22)?**

- The 'first-fruits' means the first pickings which point to the coming of the full harvest. Jesus was the first to get his resurrection body, opening up the way for us to follow. Death for Christians can be compared to sleep, because we will be awoken from it into a resurrection body, just like Christ.
- Christ, like Adam, represents the head and first of a new kind of humanity in the sense that what he does has repercussions for all future generations of humanity (v21-22). Just as we were all in Adam in our sin and death, so we are in Jesus in our hope of a resurrection.
- **What is the sequence of events in v23-28?**
- V23: Jesus was raised first, then he'll come back and all Christians will be raised as well.
- V24: Then this world will end! Paul is pointing here to the broader truth of the future, not only *our* physical resurrection but a sort of resurrection for the world when the sin and decay that originated with Adam's sin will be ended with a new creation. Though the victory was won at the cross (like D-Day), the enemy refuses to give up and continues to fight a rear-guard action. But one day Jesus will finally destroy everything which is opposed to the Kingdom of God.
- V25-26: As part of this process, Jesus will reign over everything, ultimately destroying even death itself. No more death!!
- V27-28: This is a bit confusing – there are a lot of 'hims'! Basically, everything will be subjected to Jesus as King of the universe. And then Jesus will give it all to God the Father as the authority within the Godhead.
- So we can see that the resurrection is part of a great universal picture that the Corinthians have been denying. Without the resurrection, there's no new creation, no final victory over sin, death and the devil, no glory for God!
- **How does Paul show the Corinthians that the way they live, and the way he lives, are inconsistent with there being no resurrection (v29-34)?**
- We don't know that 'being baptised on behalf of the dead' is all about. It could be that people were undergoing vicarious baptisms for Christians who had died before being baptised. But the Bible is clear that we're saved by faith, not by baptism! So it's definitely not something we should be emulating. Paul mentions it as something the Corinthians were doing, but that doesn't mean he approves of it. Rather, his purpose here seems to be to point out the inconsistency in the Corinthians' beliefs – if they don't believe in a bodily resurrection, then it doesn't matter what happens to dead bodies and there's certainly no point in being baptised for them! The fact that they are doing this weird baptism thing shows that they are very muddled indeed!
- Without hope of a bodily resurrection the way Paul lives would have been foolish indeed (v30-32). He would have been better to live selfishly and in comfort seeking the maximum of pleasure now. This is the call of the world, and if the Corinthians follow the theology of those who deny the resurrection they too will descend into hedonism, even if in a more 'spiritual' form, and avoid the cost of discipleship. They needed to avoid people who followed this (v33-34).
- **What difference should the truth of the resurrection make to our lives now?**

#### Read 1 Corinthians 15:35-58

- **How will our resurrection bodies be different to our earthly bodies (v35-50)? Why is this necessary?**

- It seems that some of the Corinthians were arrogantly saying ‘This is preposterous Paul! Everyone knows that when you’re dead you’re dead! Our bodies grow old and weak and decay – how could they possibly go on for ever?’ (v35). Paul’s answer is that God is perfectly capable of changing our mortal bodies into immortal ones, fit for their new environment. He lines up lots of evidence in support of the physical resurrection:
- V36-38: If people will only open their eyes and look at what God does in nature, they will not be surprised at the resurrection. When a seed is planted in the ground, it essentially dies and is raised with a new kind of body! Why can’t God do that with us?
- V39-41: And when we see all the different types of ‘body’ that exist, is it so hard to imagine that God can make two kinds of human body?
- V42-44: Now we get into a bit more detail about how our resurrection bodies will be different: from perishable to imperishable, from dishonour to glory, from weakness to power, from natural to spiritual! What a wonderful future awaits! (By ‘spiritual’ Paul doesn’t mean that we’ll just be floaty ghostly ‘spirits’, but that our new bodies will be alive spiritually in a complete and full way – freed from sin, perfectly able and willing to obey God all the time.)
- V45-49: As we saw in v21-22, Adam was the prototype for our ‘natural’ bodies, and Jesus is the prototype for our ‘spiritual’ bodies. The natural comes first, followed by the spiritual. We are ‘natural’ first, like Adam, and then we will become ‘spiritual’, like Jesus. Straightforward?!
- This means that our resurrection bodies will be like Jesus’ resurrection body. We’ll be able to eat and touch and recognise each other etc.
- V50: Here’s the ‘why’ at last – all of this change has *got* to happen, because with our bodies as they are now, it’s impossible for us to enter the new creation! They’re just not fit for it! It would be like a sunflower seed trying to enter a sunflower competition – it wouldn’t survive!
- **What will happen to believers when Jesus returns (v51-57)?**
- V51-53: All believers, whether dead or alive at the time, will be changed into their spiritual bodies in the twinkling of an eye. That’s quick! If we’re alive at the time, presumably this ‘change’ involves a sort of death, the mortal putting on immortality, but it’s a wonderful thing, not to be feared – look what it leads to!
- V54-57: After all, Jesus has taken the sting (sin) out of death. Though we will still face it, God has ensured us the victory over it through Jesus. Death isn’t final – it’s just the beginning of our perfect, glorious eternity with our Lord.
- If you’ve read it, you might like to mention the end of C.S. Lewis’ *The Last Battle*, where the children find themselves in a perfect land which seems reminiscent of the old Narnia, only infinitely more glorious. They’re overjoyed to meet Aslan there, and when he gently explains to them that they’ve just died in a train crash, they feel no fear or sorrow at all – the ‘new creation’ is beyond their wildest dreams, and they have no regrets whatsoever at leaving behind their old life in the ‘shadowlands’. In the twinkling of an eye, without them even realising it, they have begun the greatest adventure ever.
- **How has this chapter changed your views on death?**
- **How should we live now in the light of this chapter (v58)?**
- On this triumphant note we must stand firm and not allow our faith to be moved or the gospel to be corrupted or watered down (58a). We must walk the way of the cross, battling sin, serving others, and not being self-indulgent.

## 1 Corinthians 16: Stay Connected!

At first reading, this chapter seems like a bit of a mish-mash of random stuff which Paul hadn't managed to fit in to the rest of his letter. And in a way that's what it is – it's a real letter, to real people, and we shouldn't expect it to read like a novel! (That's also why I struggled to come up with a main point and aim this week...!) But the overarching theme throughout is once again church unity – the Corinthians aren't a church unto themselves, separate from their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. They are part of something bigger. We also get useful little reminders of some of the main themes of the letter – love, submission to leaders, and the centrality of the gospel.

You might want to use this week as an opportunity to reconsider the letter as a whole, asking people to pick out what has most affected them and encouraging them to put this into practice.

**Main point:** Unity and love within and between churches is essential to their health and fruitfulness.

**Main aim:** 'Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.' (16:13-14)

- **Why are they Corinthians to collect money (v1-4)? How does Paul suggest they go about it? What impact would it have on the Corinthians?**
- The Corinthian church are to set aside money for Paul to collect to give to the poor in the Jerusalem church. According to Acts 11:27-30, there was a famine at the time, and the Christians in Judea were particularly vulnerable, being persecuted by both Jews and Romans.
- See also Gal 2:9-10 – part of the agreement between Paul and the other apostles was that as part of his ministry Paul was to 'continue to remember the poor'. This was a big part of his third missionary journey.
- Paul knows that if people set aside money weekly, there will be more collected than if he does a one-off collection when he comes. Also, if they are setting it aside every week, then they will be constantly reminded that they are part of something bigger and being a Christian isn't just about themselves.
- Similarly, if representatives of the church go with the gifts to Jerusalem then they will be able to experience the church as a whole and encourage a sense of global church unity with their giving and with their return home (v3). This also authenticates Paul on behalf of the other Corinthians.
- Paul doesn't go into this here though, and the practical focus of these verses and the fact he starts with 'now concerning' suggests that this is Paul following up on a previous discussion regarding this.
- **How does this challenge your giving? Direct debits are great, but they do make it harder to remember to pray for the things we're giving to!**
- **What are Paul's future plans (v5-11)? Given the tone of this letter, do these verses surprise you?**
- He's in Ephesus at time of writing, and plans to stay there until Pentecost, because there are lots of great gospel opportunities and also lots of adversaries who could unsettle the church.
- Then he plans to go through Macedonia and reach Corinth, maybe spending the winter there. He really wants to spend some quality time with them! In spite of all the problems and their difficult relationship, Paul loves the Corinthians and cares deeply for their spiritual growth.

- But even before he himself comes, he is sending Timothy to them (v10-11). The fact that he needs to tell them to treat Timothy well suggests the tensions bubbling beneath the surface...
- What actually happened was a lot more complicated! We have to piece it together from Acts and 2 Corinthians. It seems that when Timothy arrived in Corinth, he found the church in turmoil, and so Paul decided to come immediately, instead of stopping off at Macedonia first (2 Cor 1:15). But it was a terribly painful visit (2 Cor 2:1, 5-8), because the Corinthians were openly opposing Paul, and so he left again without confronting them, thinking it best to send another letter via Titus (2 Cor 7:8-13). This letter has been lost. However, to Paul's joy, it had the desired effect, and many of Corinthians repented (2 Cor 7:5-9). He wrote 2 Corinthians in response to this, to encourage the believers and also warn those who still remained unrepentant.
- Paul made a final visit to Corinth in Acts 20:1-3 (Corinth was located in Greece, so although it's not mentioned by name, it's probably where he stayed). The visit didn't end too well – after 3 months, Paul was chased out of town by the Jews – but he did eventually make it to Jerusalem with the money that the Corinthians and the other churches had collected (see Acts 21).
- **Why do you think Paul wanted Apollos to visit the Corinthians (v12)?**
- Remember 1:10-17? Apollos had come to Corinth after Paul, and there were serious divisions in the church over whose group was 'better'.
- By starting v12 with 'now concerning', it seems that Paul is again responding to something in the Corinthians' letter – probably, they had requested that Apollos come and see them again. Paul thinks this is a great idea, because it will show that he and Apollos are on the same page – these divisions are ridiculous! The fact that Paul calls him 'our brother' shows this unity.
- Apollos not wanting to go probably shows that he wants to avoid the controversy. And given the fracas that ensued when Paul himself went, maybe that was God's sovereign goodness! What a complicated state this church was in!
- **Which of the letter's main themes does Paul pick up on in v13-24?**
- V13 seems to come from nowhere, but is an example of Paul's usual way of concluding his letters with a final exhortation. His words, like 15:58, relate to the previous arguments Paul has made for the Corinthians to 'be watchful' of things that draw them away from Christ, and 'stand firm' in the true gospel they received from Paul. 'Act like men' is battle-language – they are to be soldiers for Christ, strong and courageous in their fight against sin, the world and the devil.
- V14 is a summary of chapter 13 – love is more important than spiritual gifts (ch 12-14), more important than being 'right' (ch 8-10), and love is essential to cut through all the divisions and incorrect teaching.
- V15-18: Stephanas seems to be a leader of the Corinthian church who has stayed loyal to Paul's teaching. The tensions within the church mean that Paul needs to reinforce his authority and the authority of all those who are his 'fellow workers and labourers' for the sake of overall unity. Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus are probably the three who carry Paul's letter. Their visit has refreshed Paul's spirit, showing again the blessing of fellowship between churches.
- V19-20a are another way that Paul uses to make churches aware of each other and connect them by building a bond. Acts 18 tells us that Aquila and Prisca were originally from Corinth and so their 'warm greetings' would be as old friends. V20b is a standard form of greeting that Paul mentions regularly in his letters, common at the time but now adapted for Christians as a promoter of unity and peace. Could bitter enemies greet one another with a holy kiss?!

- V21 is Paul's autographic conclusion. Vs21-24 are written by Paul himself (rather than dictated like the rest of the letter) as a proof of authenticity and authority. The remarkable curse in v22 is made more so by the fact Paul writes it himself deliberately right near the end of the letter during the greetings. The word 'cursed' here is 'anathema' in Greek, meaning 'something dedicated to evil and so accursed'. Paul is so concerned that he feels the need to fire one last shot at those deviating from the gospel and causing division in the church. By 'if anyone has no love for the Lord', Paul sums up his whole letter – he's talking again about those who disagree with him and the gospel and are not walking in love because they are walking for themselves.
- His calling for 'the Lord to come' is a reminder of chapter 15: Jesus will come whether they like it or not, and they should be waiting and living accordingly.
- V23 is how Paul normally ends his letters. And in 1 Corinthians he starts (1:3) and ends with a call for the grace of the Lord to be with them, emphasising the central importance of grace. V24 is an extra, probably a softener to v22 and a reminder that what Paul says is out of a real love for them and wish for them not to fall into error so that they will be saved. His love is in Christ Jesus, who will unite them and fill them with love for each other.
- **Could you give a brief summary of 1 Corinthians?**
- Ch1-4: Church unity, not pride
- Ch5-7: Sexual immorality, marriage and singleness – live as you are called
- Ch8-10: The weak and the strong – walk in love
- Ch11: Reverence in worship – gender differences, the Lord's Supper
- Ch12-14: The relationship between love and spiritual gifts
- Ch15: The centrality of the resurrection
- Ch16: Concluding remarks and reminders
- **What has most challenged you as you've read this letter? How are you putting it into practice?**
- **How has studying this letter helped you to love Jesus more?**