

Through the Bible Book by Book

New Testament

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FIRST CORINTHIANS

Theme: The Epistle was written for the purpose of correcting disorders that had arisen in the Corinthian church, and of setting before the believers a standard of Christian conduct. We may therefore state its theme as follows: Christian conduct in relation to the church, the home and the world.

Why Written: Paul visited Corinth on his second missionary journey. (Compare Acts Ch. 18.) While at Ephesus, he heard of disorders that had broken out in the Corinthian church, and it is believed that he made a hurried visit to Corinth at that time. (This visit is inferred from the statement in II Corinthians 12:14 that he was about to visit them a third time. The first visit was made during his second missionary journey, and the last, after writing II Corinthians.)

After returning to Ephesus, he wrote them an Epistle (now lost) instructing them as to their attitude toward sinning members of the church I Corinthians 5:9. Later members of a Corinthian family visited Paul and informed him concerning divisions that had broken out in the church. A reply came to Paul's first letter (7:1) making certain inquiries relative to Christian conduct. To correct the disorders that had broken out, and to answer the inquiries, Paul wrote his first Epistle to the Corinthians.

We may thus sum up Paul's purpose in writing this Epistle:

1. To correct the following disorders:

- (1) Divisions.
- (2) Immorality.
- (3) Disputes among saints.
- (4) Disorders during the Lord's Supper.
- (5) Disorders during worship.

2. To answer the following questions:

- (1) Concerning marriage.
- (2) Concerning the eating of meats offered to idols.
- (3) Concerning the gifts of the Spirit.

When Written: At the close of Paul's three years' residence at Ephesus (Acts 20:31; I Corinthians 16:5-8).

Contents:

- I. Correction of Social and Moral Disorders.** Chaps. 1-8.
- II. Apostolic Authority.** Chap. 9.
- III. Church Order.** Chaps. 10-14.
- IV. The Resurrection.** Chap. 15.
- V. Conclusion.** Chap. 16.

I. Correction of Social and Moral Disorders. Chs. 1 to 8.

Under this head we shall study the subjects contained in the following outline:

1. Introduction. 1:1-9.
2. Divisions. 1:10-16.
3. The wisdom of God and the wisdom of man. 1:17 to 2:16.
4. Christian ministers, their relation to each other and to believers. Chs. 3, 4.
5. Immorality. Chap. 5.
6. Saints at law. 6:1-8.
7. The sanctity of the body. 6:9-20.
8. Marriage. Ch. 7.
9. Concerning meats offered to idols. Ch. 8.

Paul denounces the divisions existing among the Corinthians.

The party spirit had well-nigh destroyed Christian love. The Corinthians possessed with an undue admiration for human leadership, had ranked themselves under the names of the different ministers, whom they attempted to set up against one another as rival leaders.

- Some admired the zeal and power of Paul;
- Others saw in the cultured Apollos the ideal preacher;
- Others belonging perhaps to the Judaizing party, held up Peter, the apostle to the Jews, as the model leader;
- Others again, evidently discouraged by these divisions, styled themselves simply followers of Christ (1:12).

Paul devotes quite a large section to a comparison of God's wisdom and man's wisdom, and to a demonstration of the inability of the latter to reveal the things of God (1:17 to 2:1-16).

His rebuke and renunciation of mere human wisdom and philosophy will be understood when we consider the Greeks had a profound admiration for learning and culture, and that there was a danger of their reducing Christianity to a merely intellectual system, and of making it one of the many schools of philosophy that existed in their country.

It was this very love of human wisdom that had led to an undue regard for human leadership, and that, in turn, had resulted in divisions among them.

In chapters 3 and 4 Paul strikes at the root of the matter by clearly showing the ministers' relation to God, to one another and to the people.

While the Corinthians were glorying in their intellectuality, and were divided over leadership, they were all tolerating in their midst immorality of the basest kind (5:1-2). Paul, using to the full his apostolic authority (see Matthew 16:19; 18:17, 18), excommunicates the offender (that is, cuts him off from communion with the church), and delivers him over as it were, to the chastening hand of Satan (compare Job 1:12; II Corinthians 12:7), in order that he might be brought to repentance (v. 5). From the second Epistle to the Corinthians we learn that this man did repent. II Corinthians 2:6-8.

Some of the Corinthians had been exposing the cause of Christ to reproach because of their going to law with one another before unbelieving judges (6:1-8). Paul tells them plainly that if they are to reign with Christ and judge the world and even angels, they should be able to judge their own cases and settle their own disputes-

The words found in chapter 6:9-20 are directed against a class of people known in church history as Antinomians.

These were professed believers, who, going to the other extreme from legalism, declared themselves free from the law altogether. From certain of Paul's statements to the effect that believers are not under law, and that they are not justified by any external observances, these heretics had falsely inferred that all outward acts were indifferent and one could be criminal. In refuting this error, Paul emphasizes the sanctity of the body.

In chapter 7 Paul answers an enquiry from the Corinthians concerning marriage.

In studying this chapter it should be remembered that all the statements contained therein are not made by way of commandments (7:6), but many of them are the suggestions of a Spirit-guided man, who is viewing marriage in relation to local conditions in Corinth (the prevalence of immorality, 7:1), and in relation to coming persecutions of the church (vv. 26-29).

It should be noted also that this chapter does not contain all of the New Testament teachings on marriage. For a complete study of the question, all the N. T. scriptures on the subject should be investigated.

Chapter 8 deals with the question of Christian liberty.

Some of the Corinthian believers, who had been saved from heathenism, felt free in their conscience to accept invitations to feasts in idol temples, for, reasoned they, "**An idol is nothing in the world, and there is none other God but one**" (8:4).

Paul acknowledged these reasons, but warns the last-named believers that there were weaker Christians who were not acquainted with those facts, and who would be stumbled and fall into sin if they saw an enlightened believer eating in an idol temple.

II. Apostolic Authority. chap. 9.

In this chapter Paul defends himself against a small section of the church who were denying his authority as apostle (9:1-3).

One of their charges was that he was not asking for financial support because he lacked authority to do so. Paul mentions as proof of his apostleship the fact that he had seen the Lord (v. 1), and refers to them as a church as the fruit of his ministry (v. 2). He claims equal authority with other apostles (vv. 4-6). He proves that he, as a minister of the Gospel, has a right to financial support, by a natural illustration (v. 7), by a quotation from the law (vv. 9,10), by an illustration from the temple (v. 13).

Then he tells why he has not availed himself of this right: he did not wish to hinder the Gospel by becoming a burden to the people (v. 12, compare II Thessalonians 3:8, 9); the fact of his preaching the Gospel without price was his reward (v. 18); in preaching the Gospel he considered himself simply an unprofitable servant (v. 16, compare Luke 17:10), for he was but doing his duty (v. 16).

Paul is willing to forego his rights and adapt himself to all conditions, and to all classes of men in order that he might save a few souls (vv. 19-23). He has a good reason for making these sacrifices. For as Greek athletes, during their period of training, denied themselves many pleasures and comforts and subjected themselves to hardship in order to win a crown of leaves, so he was willing to make sacrifices in order to win an imperishable crown. (vv. 24-27).

III. Church Order. Chs. 10 to 14.

Under this heading we shall study the following subjects:

1. A warning against falling from grace. 10: 1-13.
2. Christian liberty and idolatry. 10:14-33.
3. Conduct of women in assemblies. 11:1-16.
4. Disorders during the Lord's Supper. 11:17-34.
5. The gifts of the Spirit, their diversity and distribution. Chap. 12.
6. The spirit that is to regulate the use of these gifts. Ch. 13.
7. The rules for their regulation in assemblies. Ch.14.

Though the Corinthians have been partakers of great spiritual blessings and have been recipients of the grace of God, Paul warns them that there is a possibility of their falling from their high spiritual standing. He proves this by a comparison of them with Israel.

In Chapter 10:14-33 Paul continues the subject dealt with in chapter 8; namely, Christian liberty in relation to the frequenting of heathen feasts.

To those Christians who felt free to attend heathen feasts (compare 8:10), Paul utters a warning against falling into the snare of idolatry.

Though Christians might feel free to indulge in some liberties, they are to consider whether such indulgences make for edification of believers as a whole (v. 24).

When purchasing meat in a market, Christians are not to enquire whether the meat has been offered to idols, in order to avoid any unnecessary disturbance of their conscience (v. 25).

But if a Christian accepts an invitation to dine with a heathen acquaintance, and he is told that the meat served has been offered to idols, he is not to touch it, for to partake of it under those circumstances would make it appear that he was condoning idolatry, and his action would be a stumbling block to many (27-29).

Chapter 11:1-16 deals with conduct of women in assemblies.

On the surface, the verses seem to deal with the question as to whether or not a woman should wear a veil in church. But reading deeper, we discover that they deal with the God-ordained relationship of the woman to the man.

Verse 3 seems to be the key verse to this section.

In Paul's day, women wore a veil as a symbol of their subjection to the man. The Gospel had given women a liberty they had never realized before, abolishing in regard to salvation and standing in grace, the distinction of the sexes. (Galatians 3:28).

It seems that on the ground of this liberty, the Corinthian women claimed equality with the man in every respect, and as an open declaration of this claim, came forward to prophesy and pray without the veil. In so doing, they violated the divine order which is as follows: God is the head of Christ; Christ, of man; and man, of the woman (v. 3).

The remaining verses of this chapter deal with disturbances in the Lord's Supper.

It seems that, before partaking of the Lord's Supper, the believers partook of a common meal together, commonly known as the love feast. During the last mentioned feast many of the Corinthians had yielded to gluttony and drunkenness (vv. 20-22), with the result that they were not in a fit condition to partake of the Sacrament.

After explaining the sacredness and significance of the Lord's Supper (vv. 23-26), Paul warns the Christians against partaking of it unworthily (vv. 27-29), lest they fall under divine chastisement (vv.30-32).

Chapters 12, 13, 14 deal with the subject of spiritual gifts.

- Chapter 12 treats of the diversity and distribution of the gifts;
- Chapter 13, of the spirit that should characterize their use;
- Chapter 14, of the rules regulating their manifestation in the assembly.

IV. The Resurrection. Chap. 15.

Chapter 15 is the great resurrection chapter of the Bible. Paul was compelled to treat the doctrine of the resurrection in a fairly thorough manner, for there had been a denial of this doctrine. Some perhaps, misunderstanding Paul's teaching concerning the spiritual resurrection of the sinner had thought of this as the only resurrection; others possibly, belonging to the antinomian party (see notes of Chap. 6:9-20) did not care to look forward to the resurrection of a body which they had abused by sins of impurity.

V. Conclusion. Chap. 16.

We shall sum up the contents of chapter 16 as follows:

1. Concerning the collection for the needy Jewish saints. vv. 1-4.
2. Concerning Paul's intended visit. vv. 5-9.
3. Concerning Timothy's visit to them. vv. 10-11.
4. Concerning Apollos. v. 12.
5. Exhortations and greetings. vv. 13-24.

In order to impress the contents of I Corinthians on his mind, let the student memorize the following chapter outline:

Chapter

1. Divisions.
2. Wisdom of God and wisdom of man.
- 3, 4. Ministers.
5. Immorality.
6. Saints at law.
7. Marriage.
8. Christian liberty.
9. Apostolic authority.
10. Idolatry.
11. Lord's Supper.
12. Gifts.
13. Love.
14. Disorders in worship.
15. Resurrection.
16. Salutation.

~ end of I Corinthians ~

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