

# The Heart of Paul's Theology

Lesson 4

Paul and the Corinthians

Manuscript



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# The Heart of Paul's Theology

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### Paul and the Corinthians

#### INTRODUCTION

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Many of us are familiar with the fables attributed to an ancient Greek named Aesop. In one of those fables, "The Tortoise and the Hare," a hare constantly boasted that he was the fastest of all the animals. So, tiring of the hare's arrogance, a tortoise challenged him to a foot race. Now, the hare clearly could have won, but because he was so certain of his victory, so full of pride in his great abilities, he took a nap in the middle of the race. And while the hare was sleeping, the tortoise crossed the finish line ahead of him.

In certain ways, many Christians living in the city of Corinth during the first century were like the hare of Aesop's fable. Just as the hare counted himself the winner before the race was over, many in the Corinthian church thought of themselves as winners before the race of their Christian lives was over. Their earthly prosperity, their status in society and their special spiritual gifts deluded them into believing that the Lord had made them superior to everyone else. They thought that God had blessed them with the gifts of his kingdom far more than he had blessed other Christians who had fewer earthly treasures, less social status and less spectacular gifts. And the apostle Paul warned them that they were in danger of losing the race of the Christian life.

This is the fourth lesson in our series, *The Heart of Paul's Theology*. And we've entitled it, "Paul and the Corinthians." In this lesson, we'll see how Paul addressed these proud Christians in his letters, now known as 1 and 2 Corinthians. Although Paul addressed many specific problems in the church at Corinth, he did so by calling attention to the main source of their many problems: the false belief that some of them had already crossed the finish line of the Christian life, while in reality the race was still on.

You'll remember that, earlier in this series, we learned that the heart of Paul's theology was his eschatology. Paul taught that Jesus was Israel's Messiah and that he had brought the latter days, or the last days of God's kingdom on earth. Faithful Jews in Paul's day believed that when the Messiah came, he would fulfill all of God's purposes for his creation by bringing in the fullness of the last days. But Paul followed Jesus' teaching and believed that, in his first advent, Christ had only inaugurated the last days. The last days in Christ would continue throughout the history of the church, and they would finally come to their fullness at the consummation of the kingdom in his second advent.

For the most part, early Christians affirmed that Christ's kingdom would unfold in these three phases, but they were easily confused. How much had Christ already accomplished? How many of God's great blessings in the last days were still in the future? We've seen that the churches of Galatia had underestimated how much Christ had already accomplished in the inauguration of the last days. We've also seen that many in the church of Thessalonica had come to believe that Christ's return was so near that there was no reason to fulfill their daily responsibilities as Christ's followers. In this lesson, we'll learn that the Corinthians were confused in another way. Their church suffered

division and trouble because some Corinthian Christians thought that they had far more of the blessings of the last days than others.

Our study of Paul and the Corinthians will divide into three parts. First, we'll look into the background of Paul's letters to the Corinthians. Second, we'll examine the structure and content of 1 and 2 Corinthians. And third, we'll see how Paul's letters revealed one of his central theological outlooks: his doctrine of the last days — his eschatology. Let's look first at the background of Paul's letters to the Corinthians.

## BACKGROUND

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As we have emphasized throughout this series, the apostle Paul wrote his letters to address particular issues that arose in different churches. So, as we look at 1 and 2 Corinthians, we need to ask some basic questions: What was going on in the Corinthian church? And why did Paul write to them?

We'll answer these questions concerning the background of Paul's letters to the Corinthians in two ways. First, we'll explore how the Corinthian letters were associated with Paul's third missionary journey. And second, we'll delve into some particular problems that developed in the church of Corinth. Let's look first at Paul's third missionary journey.

### THIRD MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Paul's third missionary journey is recorded in Acts 18:23–21:17. In these chapters we learn that Paul largely repeated the itinerary he followed on his second missionary journey. Paul began this trip around the year A.D. 52 or 53. As with his first two missionary journeys, he started in Antioch in Syria. In Acts 18:23, we learn that Paul strengthened the believers throughout Galatia and Phrygia, but we are not told of specific cities he visited in these areas. Probably, he visited at least some of the cities in which he had previously ministered, such as Derbe, Lystra and Iconium in Galatia, and perhaps Antioch in the Phrygian region. Having passed through Galatia and Phrygia, Paul arrived in the coastal city of Ephesus in the Roman province of Asia, or Asia Minor.

Upon his arrival in Ephesus, Paul encountered twelve disciples of John the Baptist, who quickly received the gospel of Christ. At first, Paul evangelized in the synagogue, but within about three months, the Jews became hardened to his message. So, for the next two years he preached the gospel and performed miracles elsewhere in the city. Eventually, however, Paul and his compatriots came into conflict with the artisans who crafted shrines of Artemis, the patron goddess of Ephesus. Evidently, Paul had won so many Gentile converts to Christ that the market for pagan shrines had shrunk considerably. As a result, the artisans nearly rioted, threatening the safety of some of Paul's associates. After these events in Ephesus, Paul and his traveling companions spent several months in Macedonia and Achaia, regions that lie within modern-day Greece.

Luke's record on this part of Paul's journey is scant. Yet, he mentioned that the company started their return to Asia from the city of Philippi. Paul and his companions disembarked at Troas.

Because Paul planned to remain in Troas for only one day, he gathered the believers and spoke to them late into the night. As Paul spoke, a young man named Eutychus fell asleep and fell to his death from a window. However, Paul miraculously revived him. Leaving Troas, Paul and his company traveled to the neighboring city of Assos, where they again took to the sea. They stopped in Mitylene, Chios and Samos, and eventually reached Miletus, where they remained for a brief period. While in Miletus, Paul sent for the elders of the church in the nearby city of Ephesus. He gathered them in Miletus to give them some parting instructions and to bless them.

After this, the company set sail again. Passing through Cos, Rhodes, Patara and past Cyprus, they landed in Tyre, where they ministered for a week. From there they sailed to Ptolemais, then to Caesarea, where the Judean prophet, Agabus warned Paul that he would be arrested in Jerusalem, confirming what Paul already knew to be true. Yet, not dissuaded by Agabus' prophecy, or by the pleading of his friends, Paul continued on to Jerusalem, where he ended his third missionary journey around the year A.D. 57.

Paul wrote his two canonical letters to the Corinthians during this third missionary journey, as well as two additional letters that have not been preserved in the New Testament. First Corinthians was probably written from Ephesus, perhaps in A.D. 55. Shortly after sending this letter, Paul briefly visited Corinth and was grievously offended by a member of the church there. Subsequent to this visit, Paul wrote a letter that is now lost to us, sometimes called his "Sorrowful Letter." Later, after receiving a report from Titus about the positive way his sorrowful letter had been received, Paul wrote 2 Corinthians, probably from Macedonia, and most likely within a year or so of writing 1 Corinthians.

Now that we've seen the background of how Paul's epistles to the Corinthians fit within the context of his third missionary journey, we should look at some specific problems within the church in Corinth. What issues were causing such turmoil in the church that Paul had to write to them so many times?

## PROBLEMS IN CORINTH

As we read in Acts 18, Paul had planted the Corinthian church during a prior missionary journey, and had lived in Corinth for at least a year and a half at that time. But after his departure, the Corinthian Christians forgot some of Paul's teachings and misapplied others. As a result, a number of significant conflicts and problems arose in the church.

As we'll see in this lesson, many of the problems that arose in Corinth stemmed from a misunderstanding of Christian eschatology — especially how Christ had already inaugurated many of the blessings of the age to come, the age of salvation and eternal life. In Paul's absence, many of the Corinthians had taken this true teaching to extremes. They came to believe that some of them were super-Christians, superior to others because

they had received more of the blessings of the age to come than others. And this false belief led to all kinds of serious problems in the church at Corinth.

For our purposes, we'll see how this misunderstanding of Paul's eschatology led to four conspicuous problems in Corinth: first, damaged relationships within the church; second, sexual misconduct; third, abuses in worship; and fourth, a rejection of Paul's apostolic authority. Let's turn first to the problem of damaged relationships.

## Damaged Relationships

Paul addressed several different types of damaged relationships in his letters to the Corinthians, including such things as rival factions within the church, lawsuits between believers, disregard toward the poor in Corinth, and a failure to address the poverty of those in Jerusalem. Let's look first at the problem of rival factions.

**Rival Factions.** Prior to writing 1 Corinthians, Paul received a report that the believers in Corinth had turned against each other by identifying themselves with various teachers. Listen to the way Paul described their attitude in 1 Corinthians 1:12:

One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas [or Peter]"; still another, "I follow Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:12, NIV).

Paul was astounded at the pettiness of these divisions in the Corinthian church. After all, Paul, Apollos, Peter and Jesus all taught the same thing, namely that Jesus was supreme and that apostles and teachers like Peter, Paul and Apollos were his servants. They did not build rival schools of thought, but served together to build up the whole body of Christ. As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 3:5, 11:

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each... [N]o one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 3:5, 11).

As Paul put it here, Peter, Paul, Apollos and other human leaders were servants of Jesus. To divide the church by pitting one teacher against another was contrary to everything these godly leaders desired for the church.

**Lawsuits.** Sadly, the divisions in the church went far beyond these rival factions. They also appeared in the ways that Christians in Corinth engaged in lawsuits against each other. Brothers and sisters in Christ were taking each other to court before unbelievers. Listen to how Paul described the situation in 1 Corinthians 6:7-8:

To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded? But you yourselves wrong and defraud—even your own brothers! (1 Corinthians 6:7-8).

***The Poor.*** In addition to rival factions and lawsuits, Paul also addressed another form of damaged relationships — the treatment of the poor in the Corinthian church. He did this especially by referring to the way the poor were mistreated in the Lord's Supper. Listen to Paul's sharp rebuke in 1 Corinthians 11:21-22:

For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk... do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? (1 Corinthians 11:21-22).

**First Corinthians is the place where we learn a great deal about the Lord's Supper and its place in the life of the church... We are seated at the table of the Father, partaking of the riches of his grace together as the family of God. And to do that worthily, we do it with grateful hearts, with humble hearts, with an acceptance and embrace of one another, which was a real problem in the Corinthian church. And Paul is admonishing them through his teachings in 1 Corinthians 11 about the Lord's Supper, that they come to that table humbly receiving the mercies of Christ, expressing that in their attitude and disposition in conduct towards one another, thereby proclaiming Christ's death on our behalf, looking back to what he has done, looking forward to what he will do, and celebrating his presence with us in the Supper. What an awesome gift we have in the Lord's Supper.**

— Rev. Dan Hendley

***Poverty in Jerusalem.*** Beyond this, such hard-heartedness and self-centeredness in the church at Corinth that had led to rival factions, lawsuits, and mistreatment of the poor in the church, also extended to the Corinthians' failure to relieve the poverty of their fellow believers in Jerusalem. The Corinthians had promised to collect relief funds for needy Christians in Jerusalem at the time. Paul had instructed them to take up this collection even before he wrote 1 Corinthians. They had shown some generosity, but by the time he sent 2 Corinthians to them, they still had not completely fulfilled their promises. Listen to Paul's exhortation to them regarding this matter in 2 Corinthians 8:10-11:

A year ago [you] started not only to do this work but also to desire to do it. So now finish doing it as well, so that your readiness in desiring it may be



matched by your completing it out of what you have (2 Corinthians 8:10-11).

Paul commended the Corinthians for expressing a desire to meet the needs of the saints in Jerusalem, but he had to press the issue throughout 2 Corinthians 8, 9 to get them to follow through with their promises.

In addition to these kinds of damaged relationships within the church, the problems in Corinth also involved sexual misconduct within the Christian community in Corinth.

## Sexual Misconduct

In general, it seems that many Corinthians' views of human sexuality were influenced by the first-century Greco-Roman concept of mind and body dualism — the separation of the mind from the body. This concept led to at least two seemingly-opposite trends.

First, the idea of mind and body dualism led many in Greco-Roman culture to believe that they had license to do whatever they wanted with their bodies. As long as they remained faithful to their spouses in their hearts and minds, they could engage in all sorts of lascivious sexual relations. According to Paul's letters, it appears that some in the Corinthian church had fallen into this type of sexual license. This behavior resulted in a variety of problems, perhaps including homosexuality and prostitution in the church. But Paul emphasized one problem explicitly that was extreme even in Greco-Roman culture: a man was cohabitating with his stepmother. Listen to Paul's rebuke of this situation in 1 Corinthians 5:1-2:

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife (1 Corinthians 5:1-2).

In this context, the Greek term *echo* (ἔχω), here translated "has," means "lives sexually with." The Corinthians were so confused by their misguided notions of what it meant to be spiritual that they actually took pride in tolerating this man's sexual relationship with his stepmother.

Second, some in Greek culture went in the opposite direction. They believed that the desires of the physical body should be rejected in favor of focusing on the spirit or mind. This point of view led to various forms of asceticism or self-denial, including the belief that truly spiritual people would abstain from all sexual relations. It appears that some believers in Corinth had embraced asceticism and sexual abstinence, even within marriage. But Paul rebuked this view as well because it violated the marriage covenant and left both spouses open to great sexual temptation. As he wrote in 1 Corinthians 7:2-5:

Each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband... Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time ... then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control (1 Corinthians 7:2-5).

The Greek word *echo* (ἔχω) appears in this text also, where it is translated “have” in the phrase, “have his own wife.” As we’ve already noted, in this type of context, *echo* means “live sexually with.” Paul exhorted married couples to maintain appropriate, ongoing sexual relations in order that they might fulfill their marriage covenant and protect themselves from the rampant sexual temptations that existed all around them in Corinth.

**If our bodies, our physical bodies are important and will exist eternally, then we need to be very careful what we do with our bodies now. And Paul makes that point very clear to the Corinthians who are not using their bodies in ways that glorify God. And so, one of the things Paul wants to do ... is to describe to them that our raised bodies, the eternal nature of our bodies, means that we need to be careful how we live in our bodies now. Careful in the way we use our bodies sexually in particular. The Corinthians had a problem with that, and Paul admonishes them to use their bodies in responsible ways sexually, according to God’s word.**

— Dr. Frank Thielman

Problems in the Corinthian church were not only apparent in damaged relationships and sexual misconduct. A third major problem in the Corinthian church involved abuses in worship.

## Abuses in Worship

We’ve already mentioned one example of these abuses in the mistreatment of the poor during the Lord’s Supper. But this wasn’t the only matter Paul addressed. Three other abuses in worship also arose in the church at Corinth: problems pertaining to gender roles, the use of spiritual gifts, and meat sacrificed to idols. In the first place, Paul was concerned about gender roles in worship.

***Gender Roles.*** In the Corinthian church, men and women were conducting themselves in ways that dishonored each other and Christ in public worship. For example, one corrective Paul gave pertained to the use of head coverings during prayers. In 1 Corinthians 11:4-5 he wrote:

Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head (1 Corinthians 11:4-5).

Scholars disagree as to whether Paul was speaking of the use of prayer shawls or veils, or whether he was referring to hairstyles. There is also a lack of consensus as to the identity of the “head” that is dishonored. Some think “head” refers to that part of one’s body, while others believe that Paul referred to the man’s head — Christ — and the woman’s head — her husband. But regardless of these details, the underlying issue is clear: Men and women were acting dishonorably in worship, in part by blurring the appropriate distinctions between the genders.

***Spiritual Gifts.*** In the second place, Paul also dealt with the abuse of spiritual gifts in worship. Evidently, many Corinthian believers possessed spectacular, even miraculous gifts such as tongues and prophecy. And they exercised them in ways that led to disorder in worship. In 1 Corinthians 14:26-33, Paul addressed the situation this way:

Each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation... If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret... Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent... For God is not a God of confusion but of peace (1 Corinthians 14:26-33).

From Paul’s words here, it would appear that worship services in Corinth were confusing and disorderly because many people spoke at the same time. Paul insisted that unless believers are able to listen to one another, they do not benefit from the words the Spirit has given.

***Idol Food.*** In the third place, we should mention the issue of food sacrificed to idols. In the ancient world, much of the meat sold in the marketplace had previously been sacrificed or devoted to an idol. Often, meals could be obtained directly from pagan temples. Now, Paul insisted that pagan worship practices did not taint the meat, and that Christians could eat this food as long as they did not do it as an act of pagan worship. But he also warned believers to be very careful in how they handled food offered to idols. He addressed this issue in 1 Corinthians 8:7:

Some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled (1 Corinthians 8:7).

Put simply, by eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols, immature Christians with weak understanding were mixing the worship of Christ with the worship of pagan

gods. Paul also pointed out that even mature believers sinned if, by eating this meat, they added to their weaker brothers' confusion. As he wrote in 1 Corinthians 8:10-12:

If anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? ... Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ (1 Corinthians 8:10-12).

By failing to consider their fellow believers in this way, they were partly responsible for their weaker brothers' sins of corrupting the purity of worship.

Not only were damaged relationships, sexual misconduct and abuses in worship causing problems in the church at Corinth, but Paul also forcefully addressed the rejection of Paul's authority as an apostle.

## Rejection of Paul's Authority

As we've already read in 1 Corinthians 1:12, many in Corinth downplayed Paul's authority by choosing rival figureheads for their factions. What we have yet to see is that in both letters Paul also had to defend his apostleship against those who sought to discredit him entirely. For example, in 1 Corinthians 9:1-3, Paul wrote:

Am I not an apostle? ... If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you, for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. This is my defense to those who would examine me (1 Corinthians 9:1-3).

And in 2 Corinthians 12:11-12, he insisted:

I ought to have been commended by you. For I was not at all inferior to these super-apostles ... The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works (2 Corinthians 12:11-12).

Some of the Corinthians had become so full of pride that they actually denied the authority of the very apostle who had brought them the gospel of Christ. And in his place, they looked to so-called "super-apostles" who were really not apostles at all. These counterfeit apostles claimed to have the same or greater authority than Paul and the other legitimate apostles. But they taught a false gospel that was seducing many Corinthians into sinful ways of thinking and living. In 2 Corinthians 11:12-15, Paul criticized these men in the harshest terms:

I will ... undermine the claim of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do. For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of

Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness (2 Corinthians 11:12-15).

Paul refuted these so-called super-apostles in extremely strong language because he knew their lies could have terrible consequences. If the Corinthians believed the false apostles and rejected his teaching, then they would deny both Christ and the true gospel.

**Paul took on a lot of the issues in the Corinthian church in very direct ways, and there were a number of them, but they all, in my estimation, came back to the issue of pride or arrogance. That pride and arrogance manifested itself in a variety of ways. One, by a party-spirit — people aligning themselves with particular Christian teachers and despising those who were fans of others. It then took on or expressed itself by, I guess, an unwillingness to deal appropriately with those who were blatantly violating biblical standards of moral conduct and their unwillingness to recognize and identify that in their midst. And then you have several chapters toward the end of 1 Corinthians that deals with the pride and arrogance that people had relative to their spiritual gifts and exalting *my* personal spiritual gifts over what may be the different gifts in a brother.**

— Rev. Dan Hendley

So, we can see that Paul faced a number of specific problems that led him to write to the Corinthians. And these problems are addressed throughout 1 and 2 Corinthians.

Now that we've seen some of the important issues that form the background to Paul's epistles to the church in Corinth, we're ready to look at the structure and content of these letters. How did the apostle Paul address the troubles in the Corinthian church?

## STRUCTURE & CONTENT

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As we explore the structure and content of the Corinthian letters, it's important to remember that there's evidence of as many as four letters going back and forth between Paul and the Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 5:9, Paul said, "I wrote to you in my letter." So, we know for certain that there was at least one letter prior to what we call 1 Corinthians. The Corinthians also sent Paul a letter, which is mentioned in 1 Corinthians 7:1 where Paul referred to "matters about which you wrote." Keeping these facts in mind helps us grasp the structure and content of the existing letters to the Corinthians that we have in the New Testament.

## 1 CORINTHIANS

We'll take a look at each canonical letter — what we call 1 and 2 Corinthians — and summarize the contents of each letter's major sections, starting with 1 Corinthians. First Corinthians is arranged in four major sections and resembles the basic structure of a number of Paul's other letters:

- first, a salutation in 1:1-3;
- second, a word of thanksgiving in 1:4-9;
- third, the main body of the book in 1:10–16:12, consisting of responses to letters and reports that Paul received;
- and fourth, a closing in 16:13-24.

We'll touch briefly on the short sections at the beginning and end of the book and then give detailed attention to the main body of this epistle. Let's consider first Paul's salutation.

### Salutation (1:1-3)

The salutation in 1:1-3 is fairly standard for Paul. It amounts to a brief statement saying that the letter is from Paul and Sosthenes, whom Paul called “our brother.” We cannot be certain that this is the same Sosthenes in Corinth mentioned in Acts 18, but Paul explicitly states that the church in Corinth is the letter's intended audience. The salutation also includes a short blessing that enhances Paul's greeting.

### Thanksgiving (1:4-9)

The thanksgiving in 1:4-9 is also rather short, expressing Paul's gratitude for the faith and spiritual giftedness of the Corinthians, and confidence in their salvation.

### Closing (16:13-24)

Now, jumping to the end of the letter, the closing in 16:13-24 contains several general exhortations. We also read an endorsement of Stephanas and his household, a final greeting, a blessing, and a note in Paul's own hand verifying the letter's authenticity.

### Main Body (1:10–16:12)

With these rather standard, smaller segments of 1 Corinthians in mind, let's look more closely at the main body of this epistle in 1:10–16:12. The main body of 1

Corinthians divides nicely into two large subsections: first, 1:10–6:20 consists of Paul's responses to reports he had received from Chloe's household. And second, 7:1–16:12 contains Paul's responses to a letter he had received from the Corinthian church. Let's first unpack Paul's responses to reports from Chloe's household.

*Responses to Reports (1:10–6:20).* While Paul was in Ephesus he received reports from the friends or family of a Christian woman named Chloe. This woman is only mentioned here in the New Testament, but Paul took her reports to heart and carefully addressed them. In 1:11, he wrote, "It has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers." And in 5:1, he remarked, "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you." Divisions, quarreling and sexual matters had begun to tear the church in Corinth apart, much like they do in churches today. Paul addressed these issues because he knew how crucial they were. In Paul's responses to the reports from Chloe's household, he focused on three main themes starting with divisions within the church.

As we've mentioned already in this lesson, the Corinthian church had a number of problems that resulted in divisions. They were fragmented by loyalties to particular church leaders. They opposed each other in lawsuits. And they had abused the poor in their own church and in Jerusalem. Paul tackled these problems in a few different ways.

For one, he urged that if they looked to Jesus as their primary leader and regarded the apostles and teachers as Christ's servants, the Corinthians would not clash over their preferences for certain apostles and teachers. By honoring some apostles and teachers of the church too highly and regarding others too lowly, the Corinthians had lost sight of Jesus who far outshined them all. Paul also exposed the detrimental effects of applying the standards of worldly wisdom within the church. Evidently, an influential minority in the Corinthian church was composed of wealthy and educated men and women who were highly respected by Corinthian society. Adopting these worldly values led brothers and sisters in Christ to mistreat each other. This is why Paul wrote these words in 1:19-20:

It is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? (1 Corinthians 1:19-20).

Besides telling the Corinthians they were foolish for thinking like the world, he also let them know that they were spiritually immature and worldly. In 3:1-2 he wrote:

I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready (1 Corinthians 3:1-2).

In other words, while some Corinthians thought themselves superior to others by the standards of worldly wisdom and cultural sophistication, in reality they knew little to nothing about the Christian faith. Their worldly values had blinded them to spiritual truth.

**In the church in Corinth, when Paul writes, there are actually divisions in the church based on Paul and Apollos, and maybe others as well. Apollos, in particular, was a fine public speaker. He had oratory skills that were very developed, something that Paul didn't have. In fact, in 2 Corinthians, Paul will admit that he doesn't have a gift for speaking, but people would attach themselves to him because he was an apostle; he was the one who founded the church. And what Paul says is that we cannot look to those human qualities. Paul isn't placing himself in the forefront. Paul is placing Jesus Christ in the forefront. That's what's central. Along with that, Paul is actually turning on its head the perspective that is prevalent in the church as the church latches on to those capabilities, the oratory skills of Apollos and others. The Corinthians are looking to human gifts. They're looking to things that catch the eye, that are displays of power. But the cross is the opposite of that. And the cross is God's way of bringing about salvation in such a way as to show that it is not man's power that's important, it's his grace.**

— Dr. Donald Cobb

Paul also responded to reports from Chloe's household regarding immorality in the church. We've already mentioned the case of the man who was cohabitating with his stepmother. Paul addressed that issue in 5:1-13. But he wrote more generally about the subject in 6:12-20. In these verses, we learn that the Corinthians had apparently argued against each other by misappropriating the slogan: "All things are lawful for me." We do not know how this slogan was introduced to the Corinthian church, but they had wrongly applied it as they argued over sexual matters. Paul responded directly to this error by qualifying the slogan in verses 12-13:

"All things are lawful for me," but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful for me," but I will not be dominated by anything... The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body (1 Corinthians 6:12-13).

Apparently, some Corinthians thought that nearly any sexual conduct was permitted for Christians, but Paul insisted that this was not the case at all.

**It seems to me that Paul is quoting a very well-known aphorism that was floating around the Corinthian church. Their libertine tendencies and some false teachers had arisen to say, "Well listen, we're forgiven; therefore, everything's permissible." Paul is wanting to say, "It's not really a question of what's permissible but what is profitable." Profitable for what? Profitable for your own faith, your**



**own relationship with Christ, with God through Christ, for your own salvation. If we are truly forgiven, our lives will reflect the reality that we have not just been forgiven, but we have been placed in right relationship with God... So, we find ourselves staying away from those things which we know are displeasing to God and instead pursuing those things that we understand are his will.**

— Dr. Steve Blakemore

Now, elsewhere in chapter 6, Paul mentioned a number of sexual sins that had characterized the Corinthians prior to their coming to Christ, including fornication, adultery, male and female prostitution, and homosexuality. It is possible, though not certain, that his statements were directed toward members of the Corinthian church who still engaged in these activities. In any event, the church's toleration of the man who cohabitated with his stepmother clearly demonstrated their lax sexual morals.

Finally, Paul clarified some instructions he had previously given to the church concerning another controversial issue: Christian associations with others who were not followers of Christ. To be sure, Paul wanted the Christians in Corinth to maintain relationships with unbelievers in order to reach them with the gospel. But he insisted that they distance themselves from flagrant sinners who claimed to be believers, such as the man who lived in a sexual relationship with his stepmother. In such cases, the Corinthian church was to practice proper church discipline, even excommunicating the offenders if necessary. Listen to the way he summarized these matters in 5:9-11:

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people — not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world ... since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler (1 Corinthians 5:9-11).

We've seen Paul's responses to reports from Chloe's household in the first section of the main body of 1 Corinthians. In the second section, in 7:1–16:12, we read Paul's responses to a letter or letters from unnamed parties in the Corinthian church.

*Responses to Letter (7:1–16:12).* Apparently, the Christian community in Corinth was so riddled with controversies that at least one letter had been sent to Paul asking him to settle certain issues. This is why he began this portion of his letter, in 7:1, saying that he was writing, "concerning the matters about which you wrote." Now, some of his answers could be considered more general, but he referred explicitly to questions that had been raised when he wrote, "Now concerning the betrothed," in 7:25; "Now concerning food offered to idols," in 8:1; "Now concerning spiritual gifts," in 12:1; "Now concerning the collection for the saints," in 16:1; and possibly when he wrote, "Now concerning our

brother Apollos,” in 16:12. We can divide Paul's responses to the Corinthians' questions into six main sections.

First, in 7:1-40, Paul responded to issues related to marriage, remarriage and singleness. As we mentioned earlier, some believers in Corinth had adopted asceticism and sexual abstinence even within marriage. The tendency of these believers toward asceticism raised serious questions about sexual behavior within marriage and about the value of marriage itself. In response to this, Paul affirmed both marriage and singleness, and insisted that marriage must include sexual relations between the husband and wife. But he also taught that being single has the advantage of allowing believers to focus more on “the things of the Lord” — that is, on the interests of Christ's kingdom, rather than their families' needs. Some interpreters believe that Paul advocated remaining single over marriage only during situations of crisis, while others equally apply these instructions to all believers at all times.

In 8:1–11:1, Paul addressed the subject of meat that had been sacrificed to idols. We've already spoken of meals served in temples to idols, which is the main topic of chapter 8. But it was common for pagan temples not to serve all of the meat from the animals they butchered. They often sold the remainder to be eaten outside of their temples. At the end of chapter 8, Paul explained that he would not eat this meat if it meant that he might cause other Christians to stumble. Then in chapter 9, he explained that he was free in Christ, but that he was willing to restrict his Christian freedom in service to others and Christ. And in chapter 10, Paul directly addressed eating and serving meat offered to idols that was sold in the marketplace. He defended believers who bought and ate this meat, so long as they did not do so as an act of pagan worship or in violation of their conscience. But he also taught them not to be so arrogant as to eat such foods when eating them was likely to be misunderstood as condoning idol worship.

**In 1 Corinthians 8 ... what was happening in Corinth at that moment? Well, the church was asking questions about whether or not they should eat meat sacrificed to idols. The truth is, the cheapest meat you could find at that time was the meat sacrificed to idols. There was so much of it, and it was so abundant that they could find it for a very low price in the market. And the church was poor. The church could not afford meat at a high price. So, they would go to the market and buy the cheaper meat that had been sacrificed to idols, so they could eat it. But there were some Christians that had an issue with that, and Paul then explained that we should not be a stumbling block. If your conscience doesn't have an issue with it, you can eat it... But you should not be a stumbling block to your brother.**

— Dr. Miguel Núñez, translation

In 11:2-34, Paul turned to two matters relating to worship: gender roles, which he addressed in verses 2-16, and the mistreatment of the poor during the Lord's Supper, which he dealt with in verses 17-34. The same attitude of arrogance and spiritual superiority that had led to factions in the church, to lawsuits, and to causing controversy

over meat sacrificed to idols, had also led believers to disrespect each other in worship. Not surprisingly, Paul's solution was not simply to stop the offending behaviors, but for everyone to change their attitudes toward each other.

In 12:1–14:40, Paul addressed problems related to the use of spiritual gifts. In chapter 12, he explained that the Holy Spirit did not give gifts to enhance the status of those gifted or as a reward to the righteous. Rather, he gifted people to edify others in the church. In chapter 13 — which is often described as the “love chapter” — Paul explained that all spiritual gifts were to be used in love. And he made it clear that if gifts of the Spirit were not used in love for others, they were worthless. Then, in chapter 14, Paul rebuked the Corinthians for their disorderly worship services. He also gave instructions on how they were to restrain their use of gifts in public worship for the sake of others, including unbelievers who visited with them.

Chapter 15:1-58 introduces the subject of the resurrection of all believers. All too often, interpreters take this passage as Paul's defense of Christ's resurrection from the dead. But in light of the larger context, we can see that Paul's focus on Christ's resurrection and ascension actually addressed a crucial misunderstanding that led to divisions in the church. Arguments regarding marriage, food dedicated to idols, worship and spiritual gifts were rooted in the Corinthian's arrogance. In their arrogance, some had lost sight of the significance of Christ's resurrection for their daily lives. They had failed to see that Christ's resurrection meant that they, too, must be resurrected before they could be fully glorified. The gifts and blessings that the Corinthians were so proud of were not their final glory, so they should be humble toward each other. Just as Christ was glorified when he was raised from the dead and still waits until the consummation to be fully honored by the Father, believers will only receive their full glory when they are raised up on the last day.

Paul completed his answers to the Corinthians' questions in 16:1-12 by giving them instructions on how to take up the collection for the needy church in Jerusalem, and by making a few comments about Apollos.

As we've seen, in 1 Corinthians Paul dealt with many specific issues that were brought to his attention by reports from Chloe's family or friends and from a letter that the Corinthians had sent to him. But as much as these issues were specific to the church in Corinth, it isn't difficult to see how every church in every generation faces similar problems. What often causes controversy in our churches? Why do we have divisions within the church? Time and time again, it's because, like the Corinthians, we think that social status, strict religious scruples, gifts of the Spirit, superior knowledge, and the like make some of us better than others. And we forget that the greatest Christian virtue is love for each other. This was the heart of the problem in Corinth, and it plagues the church of Christ even today.

## 2 CORINTHIANS

Now that we've looked at the structure and content of 1 Corinthians, we should turn our attention to 2 Corinthians. Paul's second canonical letter can be outlined in a

variety of ways since it's not as tightly structured as 1 Corinthians. For our purposes, we'll present its material under four major headings:

- a salutation in 1:1, 2;
- an introduction in 1:3-11;
- the main body of the letter in 1:12–13:10; and
- a closing in 13:11-14.

As before, we'll touch briefly on the earlier and later portions of 2 Corinthians and then consider the main body of the epistle in more detail. Let's look first at Paul's salutation.

### **Salutation (1:1, 2)**

The salutation in 1:1, 2 states that the letter is from Paul and Timothy. It identifies the church in Corinth and the saints in the surrounding region of Achaia as the intended audience. It also adds a short blessing that serves as a greeting.

### **Introduction (1:3-11)**

The introduction in 1:3-11 is a bit unusual for Paul's letters. It describes the intense suffering that Paul underwent for the sake of his ministry, as well as the comfort he received from God. While it primarily functions to make the Corinthians sympathetic toward Paul's arguments, it also offers great consolation to all believers who suffer for the sake of the gospel, even referring to the Lord himself as "the God of all comfort."

**It's interesting to think about 2 Corinthians because it's the most personal of Paul's books, and he is defending his apostleship against false teachers, false apostles in the city of Corinth, and in doing that, he speaks more about himself there than he does in any of his books. And one of the things that he talks about is his sufferings, and he begins the book of 2 Corinthians by speaking about the fact that God comforts us in our own sufferings, that the comfort that God gives to us, that we are actually able to comfort others with that comfort, and that God comforts us in proportion to the depth of our sufferings. And so, it explains why, for many believers who have suffered much, they have grown much, because God has worked deeply in their life.**

— Dr. Jeff Lowman

### **Closing (13:11-14)**

At the end of this letter, the closing in 13:11-14 is quite brief. It consists of a few general exhortations and a final greeting.

## Main Body (1:12–13:10)

With the first and last portions of 2 Corinthians in mind, let's turn to the letter's main body in 1:12–13:10. These verses make up the bulk of the letter and can be divided into five major sections. The main body begins with a defense of Paul's conduct in 1:12–2:11. This is followed by a defense of Paul's ministry in 2:12–7:1. Paul then gave instructions regarding the collection of funds for Jerusalem in 7:2–9:15. The letter then returns to the defense of Paul's ministry in 10:1–12:13. And it closes with a discussion of Paul's upcoming visit in 12:14–13:10. Let's look first at Paul's defense of his conduct in 1:12–2:11.

***Paul's Conduct (1:12–2:11)***. It's apparent from these verses that Paul felt the need to defend himself against a number of false accusations and misunderstandings. First, he explained why he had not visited Corinth as he had previously planned. And second, he addressed a wrong that had been done to him by one of the Corinthians. Evidently, after Paul had made known his plans to visit Corinth, a conflict had arisen between him and some within the Corinthian church. As a result, Paul knew that if he were to visit the church in Corinth as he had planned, he would have to be confrontational. So, as an act of forbearance on his part, Paul delayed his travel. A number of Christians in Corinth failed to realize that this was an act of mercy, and were quite offended. Some even questioned his credibility.

In what may have been a related matter, Paul also addressed the situation of a particular believer who had wronged him and who had subsequently been disciplined by the church. Paul assured the church that he had forgiven the man, and that the discipline had been sufficient. And he instructed the church to reaffirm their love for the man and to restore him to their fellowship.

***Paul's Ministry (2:12–7:1)***. In 2:12–7:1, Paul addressed a far more serious issue: the legitimacy of Paul's apostolic ministry. It's clear that certain individuals within the Corinthian church doubted Paul's apostleship. As we've already seen, Paul had addressed this issue in 1 Corinthians. But from his words in 2 Corinthians, it's obvious that a number of Christians in Corinth had not changed their view of him. So, Paul provided an extensive defense of the nature of his ministry, proclaiming that his call and the power of his ministry both came from God. In fact, Paul was so strong in defending his ministry that he made it clear that to reject his apostleship had grave consequences. In 2 Corinthians 5:18-20, he went so far as to suggest that those who doubted his apostleship were not reconciled to God.

God ... gave us the ministry of reconciliation ... God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them ... We are ambassadors for Christ ... be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:18-20).

Those who have not been reconciled to God still bear the weight of their own sin. They have not been forgiven. And of course, Jesus himself taught that to reject his ambassador was to reject him as well. As the Lord told his disciples in Luke 10:16:

The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me  
(Luke 10:16).

This subject was so important that Paul spent a great deal of time addressing it. The last thing he wanted was for the Corinthians he loved so dearly to perish because they refused his gospel. And this is a stern warning for many who claim to be Christians even today.

**Collection (7:2–9:15).** The third section of the main body of 2 Corinthians consists of instructions regarding the collection of funds for the poor in Jerusalem in 7:2–9:15. The Christians in Jerusalem were in great need at this time because of a famine in Judea. In response to this crisis, the Corinthian church, along with many other churches, had committed to sending aid to them. But the Corinthians had failed to finish collecting their contribution. So, Paul engaged in a lengthy discussion of the value of sacrifice for the sake of others. He appealed first to the exemplary giving of the Macedonian churches, who gave even more than they could afford to give, and were happy for the honor of serving Christ in this manner. He also appealed to the example of Christ, who gave up his very life that the Corinthians might enjoy abundance. Beyond this, he encouraged the Corinthians that God would bestow great blessings on them if they followed through with their prior intentions.

**Paul's Ministry (10:1–12:13).** In 10:1–12:13, Paul returned to defending his ministry as an apostle of Christ. As we mentioned earlier, the Corinthian Christians highly valued traits that were well respected by the world. But Paul didn't exhibit these traits. So, at least some in the church discounted his teaching and authority. For example, the Corinthians apparently valued trained speakers and expected them to draw a salary for their work. Paul didn't practice sophisticated rhetoric when he preached. He also chose to support himself financially while in Corinth so as not to burden the church. For these and other reasons, Paul was considered inferior.

In response to this attitude, Paul laid out his qualifications, both by asserting the legitimacy of his ministry and rebuking the Corinthians for holding to improper values. Among other things, he mentioned his tremendous sacrifices for the sake of the gospel and his experience of viewing heaven itself. Moreover, he went on the offensive, attacking and discrediting the false apostles who carried earthly credentials that the Corinthians respected but who also spread lies in Corinth. Of these men, Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 11:13:

Such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ (2 Corinthians 11:13).

Paul made it clear that those who listened to these false apostles did so at their own peril.

*Upcoming Visit (12:14–13:10).* Finally, the main body of 2 Corinthians closes in 12:14–13:10 where Paul discussed his upcoming visit. Paul was still planning to come to Corinth regardless of whether or not it would mean judgment upon the church. Sadly, he feared that he would find false brothers who had been warned about their grievous sins, but who had refused to repent. Paul instructed his readers to examine themselves to make sure that they were in the faith. Listen to his words in 13:5:

Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? — unless indeed you fail to meet the test! (2 Corinthians 13:5).

Paul knew that many who professed faith did not actually trust in Christ for their salvation. So, he earnestly reminded the Corinthians of the gospel of repentance, faith, and salvation in the hopes that they all would become genuine followers of Jesus.

In both of Paul's letters to the Corinthians, Paul corrected a number of false teachings that had made their way into the Corinthian church. It's clear from his letters that Paul cared deeply for the Corinthian believers, so he wrote to warn them to reject these false teachings and to cling to the gospel they had first received.

Having looked briefly at the background and the structure and content of both of Paul's canonical letters to the Corinthians, we should turn our attention to our third major topic in this lesson: how Paul's theological outlooks undergirded everything he wrote in 1 and 2 Corinthians.

## THEOLOGICAL OUTLOOKS

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So far in this lesson, we've reviewed several specific problems that Paul confronted in 1 and 2 Corinthians. And we've also hinted along the way that many of these problems were rooted in the Corinthians' extreme understanding of Christian eschatology. Now we're in a position to look more carefully at the ways Paul's specific teachings here rose out of the heart of his theology. Time and again Paul addressed the problems in Corinth by drawing from what he knew to be true about the unfolding of the last days of God's kingdom in Christ.

As we've repeated throughout these lessons, Paul's eschatology was rooted in common Jewish outlooks on God's design for the goal of history. During the first century, the dominant Jewish understanding was that the Old Testament divided history into two ages: "this age" and "the age to come." "This age" was the present age of sin, judgment and death, while "the age to come" was the future age of righteousness, forgiveness and eternal life for the people of God. The event that marked the transition

between the ages was the coming of the Messiah or Christ. It was widely believed that when the Messiah came, he would end this age and begin the age to come.

Of course, followers of Christ, such as Paul and the other apostles, recognized that history had not unfolded precisely as Jewish theologians had expected. Beyond all doubt, Jesus was the Messiah, and he had inaugurated the age to come. But Paul and the other apostles also understood that the age to come will continue throughout the history of the church, and it will only reach its fullness at the consummation when Christ returns. In short, we live in a time when the coming age of eternal salvation is “already” here in some ways, but “not yet” here in others. Ours is a time when the present age and the age to come exist simultaneously. During this overlap of the ages, although we enjoy many blessings of the age to come, we also must recognize the strife and hardship that continue to exist in the age of sin and death.

**I'm an advocate of what is called “inaugurated eschatology.” It's kind of a *via media*, or if you like, “a middle way” between what is called realized eschatology — the kingdom is already here in its fullness — and futuristic eschatology, which says none of the kingdom is here, and we're still looking for all of it to come in the future. Inaugurated eschatology, I think, is true to the New Testament because it teaches that with the coming of the King, the kingdom has begun, the kingdom has inaugurated. That small mustard seed has been planted. But, we still await the full fruition of the kingdom where the glory of King Jesus is seen cosmically and universally. So, is the kingdom here? Yes. Is it here in all of its fullness? No. It has been inaugurated. It has begun, but its full flowering will only come to realization when Jesus comes again.**

— Dr. Danny Akin

As Paul travelled on his missionary journeys, he learned that this Christian understanding of eschatology created difficulties for the early church. In previous lessons, we saw that some believers took rather extreme positions on this matter. The Galatians underestimated how much the age to come in Christ had changed the world. We labeled their error “under-realized eschatology.” They concluded from this belief that Gentile Christians had to be circumcised to fulfill the law. The Thessalonians developed what we called “overheated eschatology.” They believed that, in the immediate future, Jesus would do away with the present age and consummate the age to come in all its fullness. As a result, they considered life in this age to be largely unimportant.

As we look closely at the problems in Corinth, and at Paul's responses to these problems, we can see that the Corinthians had similar issues. They had overestimated how much of the age to come was already present in this life. Their error was one of “over-realized eschatology.” And because of this overestimation, some felt that they possessed many more of the blessings that were to come than they actually did, making them arrogant. So, as Paul addressed the specific issues in the Corinthian church, he



reminded them over and over how to have a more balanced assessment of their spiritual condition.

Paul reiterated his theological outlooks to the Corinthian church in many ways, but for our purposes we'll focus on three elements of his eschatology that he repeatedly pointed out to the Corinthians: faith, especially with regard to the preeminence of Christ; hope in the future, rather than in the present world; and love as a critical element of Christian living. Let's look first at the ways Paul emphasized the preeminence of Christ to cure the imbalances in the Corinthians' faith.

## FAITH

Paul repeatedly focused on faith to deal with the pride and arrogance that had caused so many problems in the church at Corinth. In large part, this arrogance developed because some of the Corinthians had lost sight of the exaltation of Christ as Lord over all. In addition, many failed to see Christ as Savior of all.

### Christ as Lord

With regard to Christ as Lord, the Corinthians had de-emphasized the revelation of his lordship at the consummation of his kingdom. As odd as it may sound, some Corinthian Christians acted as if Christ had brought the kingdom of God into their lives in nearly all its fullness. They felt as if they were already enjoying many, if not most, of the eternal blessings that God has in mind for believers. They also acted as if Jesus had already appointed them as rulers over his newly-established earthly kingdom. This appears to have been the opinion especially of those Corinthians who wielded authority in the church. They imagined that Christ had given them this power because they were greater and more "spiritual" than the others. And they looked down on those who, in their eyes, had not merited such great rewards.

Listen to the way Paul rebuked them for this kind of thinking in 1 Corinthians 4:7-10:

Who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it? Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you! ... We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute (1 Corinthians 4:7-10).

In this passage Paul mocked the arrogant attitudes of these Corinthians. They believed that they were superior to Paul because he suffered and they did not. They thought they had *merited* status and honor, but in fact it was Christ who had given them these things. They foolishly believed that they were already reigning with Christ on earth,

even though Christ had not yet returned as king. They claimed for themselves wisdom, power and glory that rightly belonged only to Christ. And they disdained other Christians who had not, in their eyes, received such blessings.

In certain respects, these errors are understandable. The Corinthians rightly assessed that believers will be greatly honored and will reign on the new earth after Christ returns in glory. But they foolishly looked at the advantages they had in this life and concluded that they were already experiencing this honor from God. They felt superior, already honored and glorified above others.

But whether or not their errors are understandable, they were not acceptable. In fact, they were wreaking havoc in the church, largely by dishonoring and damaging other believers who were not in positions of influence. So, to correct this problem, Paul emphasized the fact that the age to come had not yet come in all its fullness. No one but Christ himself had begun to reign. Everyone still awaited Christ's return to receive that honor.

**When Paul talks about the heart of Christian ministry, he gives us a wonderful verse like 2 Corinthians 4:5:**

For ... we proclaim ... not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake (2 Corinthians 4:5).

**He speaks about the fact that the message, the proclamation that he had for the Corinthians was of the lordship of Jesus Christ. Jesus is all. We want to preach about his lordship. But he recognized the temptation of each one of us to have ourselves as the center of the world. It is a natural instinct. And it's very easy, actually, and particularly perhaps a problem amongst the Corinthians, that the ministry ended up being all about them. It was all about what could they get now in this life, how could they be the center, as it were, of God's world, whereas actually, our prime goal of preaching is to preach Jesus Christ as Lord in all things and to work out those implications of what it means to live under his lordship.**

— Rev. Dr. Simon Vibert

Paul also emphasized faith because the Corinthians had not only lost sight of Christ as Lord, but they had also failed to exalt Christ as Savior. Specifically, they had overlooked the fact that it was only through union with Christ that believers receive any blessings of the age to come, including spiritual gifts and honor.

## **Christ as Savior**

As we've seen, Paul believed that it was only through union with Christ that, believers share in Christ's identity and merit in the eyes of God. And it's only because of this union that God looks upon them as if they are Christ himself, so that he grants them

the status, honor and gifts they enjoy in the church. But in the minds of many Corinthians, gifts and honor were earned by individual believers. They thought that if a Christian had influence and status, it was because that person deserved these things. And if a believer lacked such earthly prominence, it was because he or she was an inferior Christian. So, Paul responded to their error by emphasizing another aspect of his eschatology that highlighted the importance of Christ, namely the doctrine of the union between Christ and believers. Listen to the way Paul made his case in 2 Corinthians 5:15-17:

[Christ] died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh... [I]f anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:15-17).

Paul insisted that believers should no longer evaluate themselves or others according to fleshly or worldly standards, as they once did. Rather, he wanted them to view all believers as people who are united to Christ and as participants in the new creation in Christ. And for this reason, they were to show one another the honor and love that they would show to the Lord himself. In fact, Paul brought up this line of reasoning again and again in his letters to the Corinthians. Listen to his counsel on this matter in 1 Corinthians 8:11-12:

By your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ (1 Corinthians 8:11-12).

Paul taught that because believers are united to Christ, to sin against a believer is to sin against Christ. He raised a similar argument in 1 Corinthians 11:24-27 when he instructed the privileged not to shame the poor during the Lord's Supper. Paul wrote:

[Jesus] said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me... This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this ... in remembrance of me." ... Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord (1 Corinthians 11:24-27).

In this passage, Paul reminded the Corinthians that Jesus had given himself for all of them, not just for the wealthy and powerful. And he reminded them that it was only through Christ, whom all believers possess equally, that they received the blessings of the age to come. For this reason, to participate in the Supper in an unworthy manner, by mistreating the poor or other believers during the Supper, was to sin against Jesus himself.

Throughout his letters to the Corinthians, Paul continually pointed to union with Christ as a basis for honoring, valuing and ministering to other believers. He did this in 1 Corinthians 12:12 when he wrote that believers rely on one another in the same way that parts of the human body do. He did it again in 2 Corinthians 1:5 when he encouraged believers that they would all share in Christ's comfort. We don't have enough time to mention every way that Paul expounded upon these ideas in his letters to the church in Corinth, so we'll have to be content with summarizing his thinking in this way: Believers participate in the blessings of the age to come only through union with Christ. When we recognize this truth, we can give proper glory to Christ and avoid arrogance toward others.

Paul's theological outlooks not only emphasized faith, but Paul also corrected the Corinthians' misguided views by reminding them that their hope was in the future consummation of God's kingdom, not in their current blessings.

## HOPE

Even though many of the Corinthians were already enjoying some of the blessings of the age to come, the present age of sin and death had not yet ended. As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 7:31, "The present form of this world is passing away." In other words, the age to come had been inaugurated, but this age was still in the process of "passing away." He made a similar statement in 1 Corinthians 2:6 when he wrote, "The rulers of this age ... are doomed to pass away." They had not already come to an end.

In 1 Corinthians 15:50, Paul added, "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God." Of course, the Corinthians knew that they were still flesh and blood, so this statement indicated that they had not, in their current state of existence, received their full eternal rewards. They had to continue to hope for what was coming when Christ returned. Similarly, you'll recall that Paul argued, in 1 Corinthians 4:8, that the Corinthians had not yet begun to reign with Christ. Reigning with Christ would be another aspect of life in the fullness of the age to come.

Perhaps the longest argument Paul made that applies directly to the doctrine of hope can be found in 1 Corinthians 15. There, Paul refuted those who denied the significance of the future bodily resurrection of all believers. At least some within the Corinthian church believed that they were already enjoying far more benefits of the age to come than they actually were. And as a result, they had lost sight of the importance of the glory that would come in the future resurrection of believers. But in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul made it very clear that some huge events must still occur, and some incredibly significant changes must still take place, before they received the fullness of the blessings of the age to come.

Paul summarized these significant changes in 1 Corinthians 15:22-24:

*In Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the*

end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power (1 Corinthians 15:22-24).

Believers must be raised from the dead, just as Christ had been, but their resurrection will not take place until Christ returns. Then, they will receive their glorified bodies, just as Christ received his glorified body in his resurrection.

**One of the great things that we Christians have to look forward to is the resurrection of the body. That's kind of the biblical hope... And our ultimate resurrection is grounded in and guaranteed by the resurrection of Christ. This is the great argument Paul makes in 1 Corinthians 15. He says that Christ's resurrection is the firstfruits. The image here is not only of Christ's resurrection being the first in a sequence, but also being that which guarantees everything else to come. Because he has been raised, we will definitely be raised in and with him, giving us an absolutely incredibly certain hope for the future.**

— Dr. Douglas Moo

Christ's return and the believers' resurrection will signal the end of the present age with its rule, authority and power. Since Christ had not yet returned, and the resurrection had not yet taken place, the Corinthians — despite what they thought — were not yet living in glory. As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:19:

If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied (1 Corinthians 15:19).

By speaking plainly of the provisional nature of the present world, Paul hoped to give the Corinthians a realistic perspective on their lives at this time. And he hoped that this realistic perspective would cause them to repent of the arrogance that had led to so many troubles within the church.

Having considered faith and hope, the last of Paul's theological outlooks on eschatology that we'll mention is the importance of love.

## LOVE

Generally, we think of love as the summary of the whole law of God, but not as an element of eschatology. Nevertheless, while it is true that love is just as important in the present age as it is in the age to come, it's also true that, for Paul, love was what we might call an "eschatological" virtue. That is to say, it was a key element in his theology of the last days.

Consider Paul's argument about the abiding value of love in 1 Corinthians 13, his famous "love chapter." In verses 8-13, he wrote these well-known words:

Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away... So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love (1 Corinthians 13:8-13).

As this passage indicates, many aspects of life in the present age will not continue when the age to come arrives in all of its fullness. Neither prophecy nor gifts of knowledge will be of any use when the things of which they speak are right in front of our faces. In the same way, even high Christian virtues like faith and hope will have no real place in the fullness of the age to come.

During the present age, faith in what we do not see is crucial to every believer. But once Christ has returned to be present with us physically, once he has raised us from the dead and brought the consummation of his kingdom, we'll no longer have to maintain faith. The reality will be all around us. In much the same way, hope is vital to the Christian life now. While we now struggle with discouragement, we are to hope for the wondrous blessings that will be ours in the age to come. But once we receive those blessings when Christ returns, we'll no longer need to hope for them. Rather, we'll enjoy them forever.

Of all the spiritual gifts and Christian virtues that Paul mentions in this chapter, only love will continue to be manifested and treasured in the fullness of the age to come. We love now, and we'll love then. We are loved now, and we'll be loved then. Christian love now is our greatest participation in the blessings of the age to come. Actually, it is the chief expression of those blessings. But how did Paul apply the eschatological virtue of love to the problems in Corinth? Well, we've already seen a number of the ways he did this. For example, he encouraged those believers with greater knowledge to abstain from eating the food from idols' temples. In this way, they showed love to the weak Christians who might be encouraged by this behavior to engage in idolatry. Listen to what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 8:1:

Concerning food offered to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." This "knowledge" puffs up, but love builds up (1 Corinthians 8:1).

As we see in this passage, Paul's instructions about not eating idol food were firmly rooted in the virtue of Christian love. Paul also spoke strongly of love when defending his apostleship. For instance, in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15, when explaining why he ministered as he did, he wrote:

The love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who

live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised (2 Corinthians 5:14-15).

In other words, love compelled Paul to minister in ways that did not resemble those of the trained speakers and professional prophets. His desire, of course, was that all believers would come to love each other as much as they loved Christ.

One of the most striking examples of Paul's application of the virtue of love to the situation in Corinth was in his instructions regarding spiritual gifts. Although the Holy Spirit had gifted the Corinthians in tremendous ways, the pride of those with more spectacular gifts, such as tongues, prophecy, knowledge and miracle-working, led them to devalue many who had less dramatic gifts. And one of the ways Paul hoped to remedy this situation was by pointing out that all gifts — spectacular and otherwise — are useless and annoying if they are not exercised in love.

**When it comes to the role of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the church, the apostle Paul insisted that the gifts of the Holy Spirit should be used for building up the church. We can see in various parts of the New Testament that we are told that the gifts of the Holy Spirit were not given for personal benefit, but they were given to edify the church... They should never view spiritual gifts as a mark of superiority over other believers. In 1 Corinthians 12, the apostle Paul corrected a situation that was reported among the Corinthians. They were all trying to have the more spectacular gifts of the Spirit. However, he tells them that there is a more excellent way, and that is the way of love. In other words, it is useless to have spectacular gifts if they are not exercised in love to serve the church, so that the church can grow in maturity through the exercise of these gifts that the Holy Spirit gave precisely for that very purpose.**

— Dr. David Correa, translation

As he wrote in 1 Corinthians 13:1-2:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing (1 Corinthians 13:1-2).

Prophecy, tongues, supernatural knowledge and miracle-working faith all seem impressive when evaluated from a worldly point of view. But in reality, they are given for the spiritual benefit of believers, not for their worldly value or experiential pleasure. Unless they are used lovingly, spiritual gifts do not confer spiritual blessings. Here, again, we see how Paul's emphasis on love was a practical application of his eschatology. The many spiritual gifts in the church demonstrated that the age to come had begun. But

only when these gifts were used in love did they mitigate the suffering of the present age by enabling the church to participate in the blessings of the age to come.

## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson, we've seen how Paul responded to the problems that arose in the church of Corinth. We've reviewed the background of his relationship with the Corinthian Christians, as well as the structure and content of his canonical letters to them. Finally, we've seen how Paul applied the heart of his theological outlooks to their problems by calling on them to correct their over-realized eschatology, and thereby to repent, to practice humility toward each other, and to love one another as they longed for the consummation of the age to come.

As we consider how Paul handled problems in the Corinthian church, we realize how his teachings should instruct us today. Many Christians today think more highly of themselves than they ought to think. They are filled with pride toward others as they consider themselves by the standards of the world. Churches all around the world today continually struggle with divisions and factions. Some even treat Christ's prophets and apostles, such as Paul, with disregard or even contempt. But Christ was not crucified and raised to new life for us so that we might take pride in what we have in this present age. As we listen to how Paul applied the heart of his theology to the Corinthians, he exhorts us, just as he did the Corinthians, to love one another, and to live today with our hearts focused on what Christ will bring when he returns at the consummation of the ages.



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# The Heart of Paul's Theology

## Lesson Four

### Paul and the Corinthians

#### GLOSSARY

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**Achaia** – Ancient Roman province in what is now southern Greece, which included the cities of Corinth and Athens; region where Paul spent several years during his missionary journeys

**Agabus** – Prophet who warned Paul that he would be put in chains in Jerusalem

**already and not yet** – View of the end times known as "inaugurated eschatology" which asserts that the coming age of eternal salvation is "already" here in some ways, but "not yet" here in its fullness

**Apollos** – Eloquent Jewish speaker and teacher who worked with the apostle Paul to grow the early church, especially in Ephesus and Corinth

**apostle** – Special New Testament office held by someone who had been taught by Jesus, had seen the risen Lord, and had been chosen for the office by the Lord himself; from a Greek word meaning "one who is sent"

**Artemis** – Greek goddess, the daughter of Zeus and Leto; goddess of the wilderness and childbirth; the patron goddess of Ephesus

**asceticism** – The improper avoidance of physical pleasure

**Asia Minor** – A geographical area that is now part of western Turkey where Paul did the majority of his missionary work

**canonical** – Adjective used to describe writings that are accepted as inspired and therefore belonging to the Bible

**Cephas** – Aramaic name meaning "rock"; name given to Simon Peter by Jesus

**consummation** – Third and final stage of inaugurated eschatology when Christ will return and fulfill God's ultimate purpose for all of history

**Corinth** – Prosperous trade center in south-central Greece that had a reputation for sexual promiscuity; city where Paul planted a church on his second missionary journey and lived for 18 months

**doctrine** – A synthesis and explanation of biblical teachings on a theological topic

**Ephesus** – City in Asia Minor; visited by Paul on his third missionary journey; place where John probably wrote the fourth gospel; said to have lost their "first love" in Revelation

**eschatology** – The study or doctrine of the last days

**Eutychus** – Young man who dozed off and fell to his death while Paul was preaching in Troas; miraculously revived by Paul

**Galatia** – Roman province in Asia Minor where Paul planted a number of churches on his first missionary journey

**Gentile** – Non-Jewish person

**inauguration** – First stage in inaugurated eschatology; refers to Christ's first coming and the ministries of his apostles and prophets

**John the Baptist** – New Testament prophet who called for true repentance and proclaimed that the arrival of God's kingdom was near; identified Jesus as the Messiah and prepared the way for Jesus' public ministry

**latter days** – Expression used by Old Testament prophets to describe the period after the exile and by New Testament writers to describe the New Testament period; also "the last days" or the final culmination of history

**Lord's Supper** – Christian sacrament or ordinance using bread and wine to symbolically commemorate Jesus' sacrifice on the cross until his promised return

**Macedonia** – Name of an ancient Roman province located in and to the north of present-day Greece; region where Paul was told in a vision to go and share the gospel during his second missionary journey

**Messiah** – Hebrew word meaning "anointed one"; the great King from David's royal line who would bring about the transition from this age to the age to come; translated "Christos" in Greek

**over-realized eschatology** – View of the end times that overestimated how much of the age to come was already present in this age

**overheated eschatology** – Misguided belief that the consummation of the age to come was imminent, or even that Christ had already returned, leading to the view that life in this age was largely unimportant

**Peter** – One of Jesus' twelve apostles; also called Simon; a leader in the early Christian church; preached on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2; according to church historians, Mark relied on Peter's accounts of Christ's life to write his gospel

**synagogue** – Place where Jews assembled for worship and instruction

**the age to come** – Phrase used by rabbis and leaders in Israel to describe the future age of righteousness, love, joy and peace that would follow the exile; time when all of God's purposes for history would be fulfilled

**this age** – Phrase used by rabbis and leaders in Israel to describe the present age of sin, suffering and death

**Timothy** – Paul's young protégé and companion on his second missionary journey who brought Paul news from the church in Thessalonica; mentioned, along with Silas, as coauthor of Paul's letters to the Thessalonians

**Titus** – Gentile Christian and Paul's trusted associate who went with Paul on several missionary journeys and later served as Paul's representative to the churches in Crete

**under-realized eschatology** – View of the end times that diminished the significance of Christ's first coming and underestimated how much Christ had already brought the kingdom of God to earth